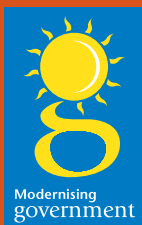


# Consultation on Young Runaways

Background paper by the  
Social Exclusion Unit





**CABINET  
OFFICE**

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March 2001



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# Background and next steps

- 1 The Prime Minister asked the Social Exclusion Unit (SEU) to look into the problems of young runaways as a potential topic for future work. It has now been decided that the SEU will lead a project on young runaways working closely with other Government departments and outside organisations.
- 2 The Government will be consulting on how to develop a National Service Framework for young runaways. The remit is to:
  - develop recommendations on how to make running away less likely and ensure runaways' short and long term needs are safely met.
- 3 The project will report in the autumn to the sub-committee of the Cabinet Committee on Children and Young People's Services, chaired by Paul Boateng. Implementation responsibility will be decided as part of this process. An early priority for the inter-departmental working group, being set up as part of the follow-up to this report, will be to consider the content and timing of forthcoming Department of Health guidance on young runaways alongside the broader issues raised in this report.
- 4 This report is a background paper setting out the current research, issues and ideas for consultation. The SEU's remit covers only England and references within the report to 'national' initiatives relate only to England.
- 5 There are two ways of feeding in your views up until the closing date of 22 June:
  - in writing to:

Ana Cavilla  
Social Exclusion Unit  
Room 1.3  
35 Great Smith Street  
London SW1P 3BQ
  - OR
  - by e-mail to:

Ana.Cavilla@cabinet-office.x.gsi.gov.uk
- 6 If you would like additional copies of this report, please ring 020 7276 2077 (which will be operational until the end of the consultation period) or write to or e-mail Ana Cavilla at the above address. Copies of the report are also available on the SEU website:  
[www.cabinet-office.gov.uk/seu/index.htm](http://www.cabinet-office.gov.uk/seu/index.htm)



# Summary

## The problem and why it matters (Ch1)

- 1 By the age of 16, one in nine young people run away for at least one night. Over the course of a year there are 129,000 runaway incidents, involving 77,000 young people under 16 running away. In 1997 there were over 21,000 runaway incidents in London and over 10,000 in Manchester.<sup>1</sup>
- 2 Most young people who run away do so only once or twice and stay away only briefly. But a quarter sleep rough, and one in fourteen runaways survive through stealing, begging, drug dealing and prostitution. Running away increases the risk of entering care and ending up homeless as an adult.

## Why it happens (Ch1)

- 3 The main trigger for running away is family problems, which 80 per cent cite as a reason for running away. School problems including bullying and personal problems such as drug and alcohol use can also lead to running away.

## How do services respond? (Ch2)

- 4 There is no national policy on runaways so practice varies widely. Most runaways return home or are returned but receive little help in sorting out the problems they ran from.
- 5 Runaways can consume significant amounts of police resources with each missing person taking up an average of 5 hours of police time. The principal focus of the police is on missing people whose lives may be endangered, while social services are focused on runaways who have run away from care or who are at risk of entering care. Therefore, for young people who have run away from home with problems that are not serious enough to worry the police or social services, there are few services responsible for helping them.
- 6 Other problems include the lack of mental health and other specialist services for young people, the lack of emergency accommodation for under 16 year olds, poor access to benefits and housing for 16 and 17 year olds, and the inadequate collection and sharing of information between the agencies concerned.

## Towards an effective system for dealing with runaways (Ch3)

- 7 The report sets out the elements of an effective system for dealing with runaways. This is based on the few existing models of good practice, in particular, the ASTRA project in Gloucester, which police estimate has cut the number of repeat runaways by 61 per cent, saved 75 working days dealing with missing persons cases, and reduced the number of runaways who have been arrested by 21 per cent, and Coventry Police who have halved the number of runaways from care. It then asks what more needs to be done, building on current and forthcoming policies, to develop this framework.



8 Some of the potential ideas for consultation include:

- Personal Social and Health Education and Connexions Personal Advisers could cover the dangers of running away, where to find confidential advice, and issues relating to family problems.
- Connexions Personal Advisers where established could provide each runaway with a follow up interview, and referral to specialist services if needed. This is based on the ASTRA project in Gloucester.
- A network of refuges could be established – so that young people can have a safe place to stay and reintegration support if an immediate return to their family would be harmful. There are three potential types of refuge provision: refuge in fixed premises, dedicated refuge staff who could stay with the runaway in temporary accommodation, and specially trained refuge foster carers.
- Each area would have a named person in charge of coordinating services for runaways similar to the model developed by Coventry Police. Each local authority could have a stronger focus on planning and reviewing services for runaways, possibly through Children’s Services Plans.
- In the long term, runaway incidents could be logged on the Connexions tracking database to ensure that repeat runaways are prioritised. This could provide a clear national picture of runaway rates, with particular patterns of running away being identified (e.g. particular care homes).
- There could be a National Service Framework for running away to ensure better joint working and resourcing. This could set out what local services should be developed to respond to runaways, establish a national information system to ensure young runaways who run across boundaries or who have moved home or care placement receive an effective response, and create a national network of services to which national helplines could refer young runaways.

# Chapter 1: What is the problem and why does it happen?

This chapter shows that one in nine young people run away from home or care by the age of 16. Most do not come to serious harm, but of these a quarter sleep rough. Eight per cent are sexually assaulted. Family arguments, physical abuse and problems with siblings usually trigger running away. Other reasons include school bullying and personal issues including alcohol and drug use. Young people in care are much more likely to run away than any other group. Running away in turn increases the likelihood of entering care and becoming homeless later in life.

## How many young people run away?

### WHAT DO WE MEAN BY 'RUNAWAYS'?

Runaways are young people under 18 who either absent themselves from home or substitute care, without the permission of parents or legal guardians, or who are forced to leave their home. This paper uses figures for runaways who stay away overnight. The focus of this report is under 16 year olds – for whom provision is weakest.

- 1.1** By the age of 16, one in nine young people 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 olds.<sup>2</sup>
- 1.2** Most young people under 16 who run away do so only once or twice, and spend just a night away from home, but around 15 per cent are repeat runaways who run away more than three times. One in seven are long stay runaways who spend a week or more away from home.<sup>3</sup>
- 1.3** The number of 16 to 17 year olds running away from home is not known. But of the young runaways who called ChildLine in 1998–99, 13 per cent were 16 or older.<sup>4</sup> Many homeless organisations have reported a growing number of 16 and 17 year olds running away, and ending up homeless. Those aged 16 and 17 who run away tend to stay away for longer periods of time.

## Why the concern?

### 1.4 Running away is a sign of underlying problems:

- runaways under 16 are five times more likely to have problems with drugs and three times more likely to be in trouble with the police than their peers;
- 30 per cent of those who regularly truant run away overnight, compared with just 6 per cent of those who never truant;<sup>5</sup>

**1.5 Runaways may face immediate danger:** Most runaways find temporary accommodation with family or friends. But 25 per cent of runaways sleep rough intermittently, 13 per cent are physically hurt, and 8 per cent are sexually assaulted.<sup>6</sup>

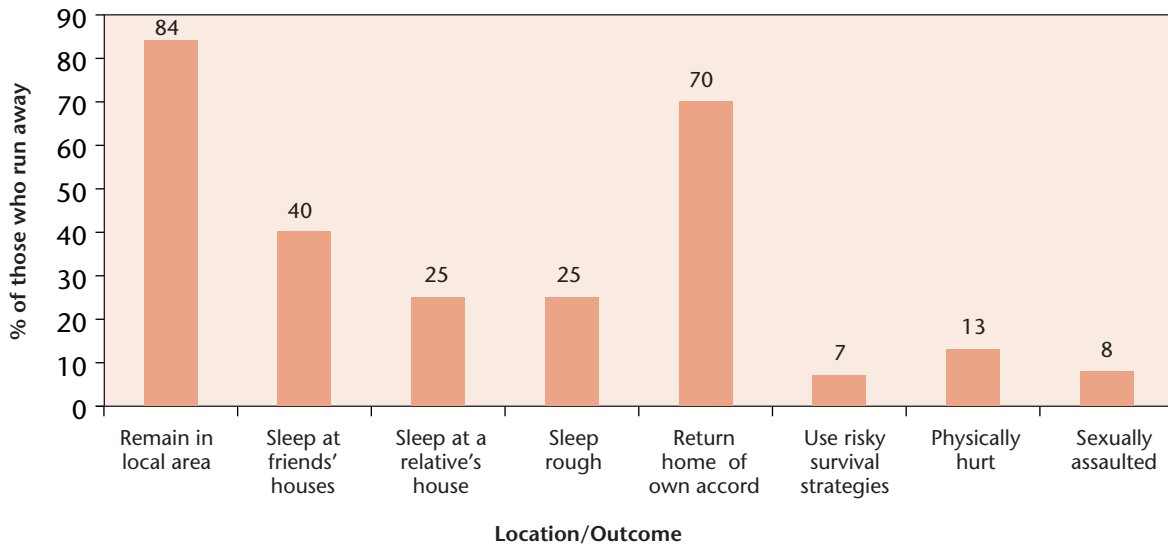
**1.6 Runaways face long term danger:**

- a recent study of young people missing from care found that nearly half had first run away from home prior to admission to care;<sup>7</sup> and
- homelessness studies suggest that running away at a young age is a strong predictor of later homelessness.<sup>8</sup>

**1.7 Running away impacts on public services:**

- each missing person on average takes up five hours of police time;<sup>9</sup>
- in Greater Manchester 78 per cent of missing persons were under 18 and 67.3 per cent in London;<sup>10</sup>
- Greater Manchester had 10,821 runaway incidents and London had 21,747 in 1997;<sup>11</sup>
- police may also deal with the one in fourteen runaways who survive through stealing, begging, drug dealing and prostitution;
- runaways may also be in contact with other services, including social workers, education welfare officers and youth justice teams.

**Figure 1. Where young runaways stay and what happens to them<sup>12</sup>**

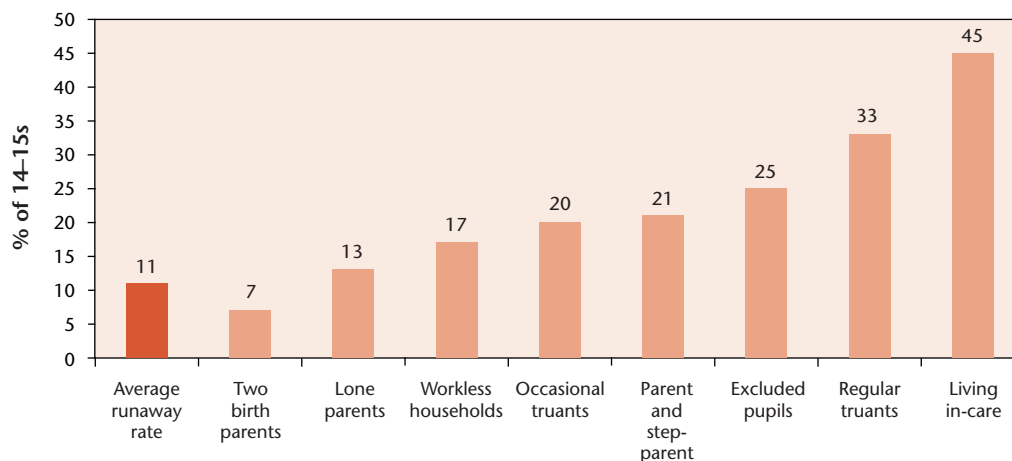


## Who runs away?

### 1.8 Young runaways come from a variety of backgrounds:

- **Age:** the majority of runaways under 16 are aged between 13 and 15, but a quarter first run away before the age of 11. Evidence suggests that those who first go missing at an early age are more likely to run away more often.<sup>13</sup>
- **Gender:** Girls are more likely to run away than boys, but boys first run away at an earlier age and run away more often.<sup>14</sup>
- **Ethnic origin:** The most recent research suggests that levels of running away are similar across minority ethnic groups, contradicting previous research. But 41 per cent of African Caribbean and 34 per cent of Asian children who had run away had stayed away for a week or more on the most recent occasion compared with 18 per cent of white children.<sup>15</sup>

**Figure 2. Factors which have an impact upon likelihood of running away<sup>16</sup>**



- **Poverty:** Young people from poor backgrounds are more likely to run away, with 17 per cent of young people living in a workless household running away overnight at least once by the time they are 16. However, research suggests that this is more to do with the link between poverty and living in a single parent family or step-family.<sup>17</sup> Once family type is taken into account, the link between economic disadvantage and running away is removed.
- **Care:** 45 per cent of young people living in care have run away compared with 9.5 per cent of young people not living in care. They are also more likely to run away repeatedly, with one study finding that a third of the young people had gone missing ten or more times in the past.<sup>18</sup>
- **Family background** is an important factor in increasing the risk of running away. As Figure 2 shows, 21 per cent of young people living in step-families and 13 per cent of those living with a lone parent run away, compared with 7 per cent of young people living in families with two birth parents.<sup>19</sup>
- There is also a strong link between **detachment from school** and running away. Nearly a third of young people who truanted often and a fifth of those who sometimes truanted had run away overnight, compared with 6 per cent of those who had never truanted. Similarly young people who had been excluded from school were also more likely to run away, with a quarter doing so overnight on at least once occasion.

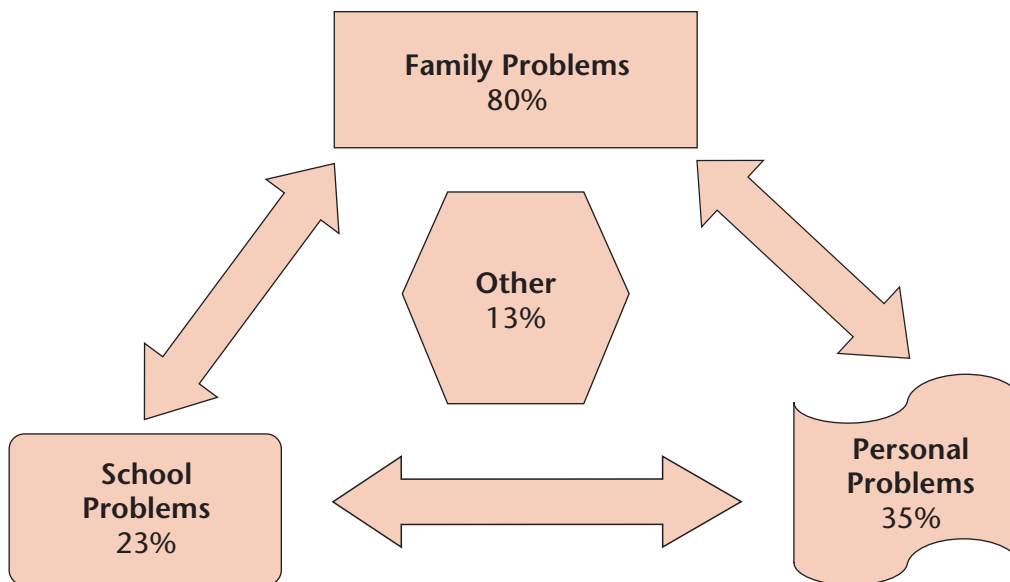
- For young people who go missing from care, the average number of unauthorised absences was 1.9 for those attending school all the time, 8.6 for those attending school sometimes, and 17.9 for those who never attended school.<sup>20</sup>

## What are the triggers for running away?

### Running from home

- 1.9** The triggers for running away, as Figure 3 shows below, fall into three main categories: family problems, school problems and personal problems. Many young people cited more than one problem; and problems in one area, such as school or trouble with the police, often fed into another, such as arguments with parents.

Figure 3. The reasons young people cite for running away<sup>21</sup>



(More than one response was possible so figures add up to more than 100 per cent)

- 1.10** Four out of five runaways cite **problems at home** including:

- physical, sexual and emotional abuse;
- conflict between parents;
- disagreements over rules and discipline;
- sibling problems; and
- problems with a parent’s alcohol use.

A fifth of runaways say they were forced to leave home rather than running away.<sup>22</sup>

- 1.11** After family problems, **personal problems** were the next most commonly cited reason for running away. As Figure 4 shows,<sup>23</sup> young people who run away are more likely to:

- have problems with alcohol and drugs;
- get in trouble with the police;
- have problems with boyfriends and girlfriends;
- feel lonely, fed up and depressed.

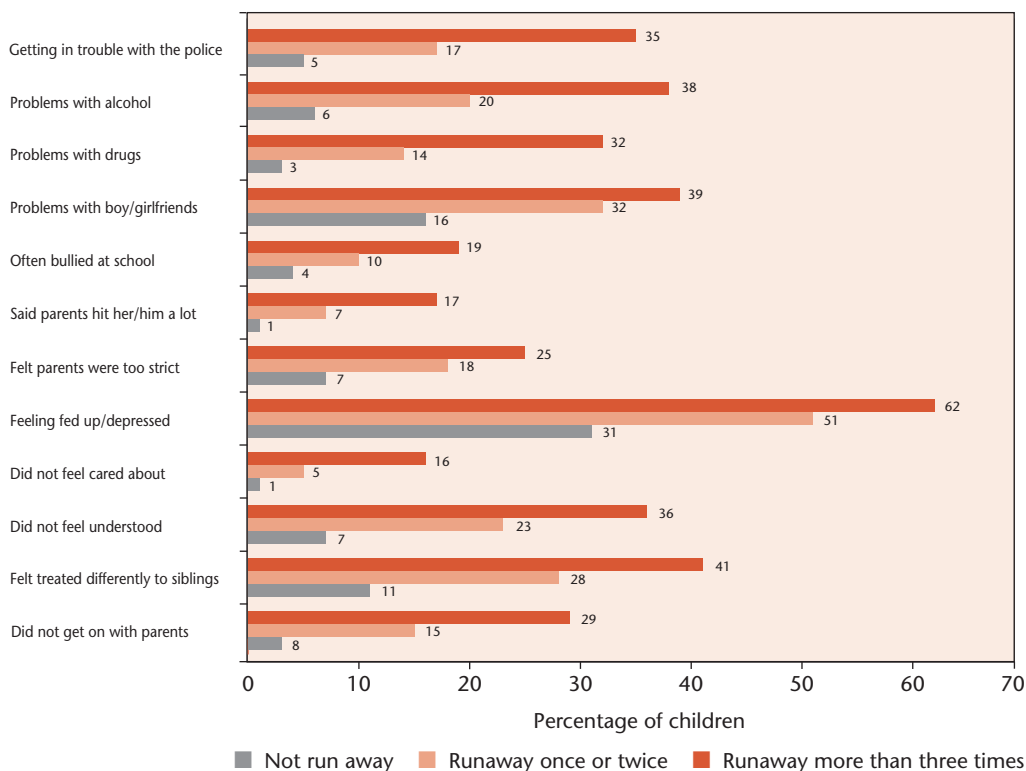
These triggers may lead to young people running away, perhaps because of parental reactions to the young person’s behaviour.<sup>24</sup>

**1.12** Nearly a quarter of young people highlighted **school problems** as contributing to their running away. This was usually in conjunction with problems at home – with parents reacting to school problems such as truancy. The key school problems highlighted by young people include:<sup>25</sup>

- bullying;
- not wanting to go to school;
- feeling lonely in school; and
- being shouted at by teachers.

Runaways were more likely to express negative views of school, with 36 per cent saying they dislike school, compared with 17 per cent of non-runaways.

**Figure 4. Comparison of key home, school and personal indicators by experience of running away<sup>26</sup>**



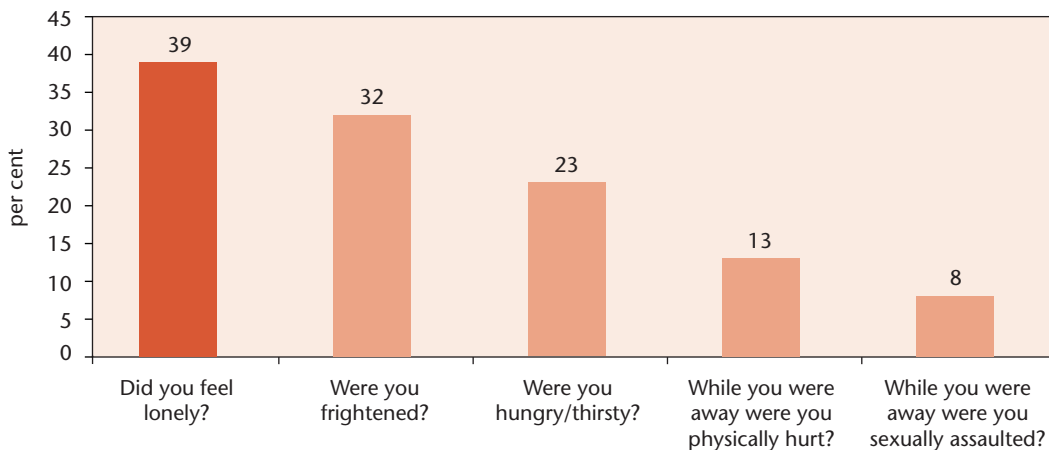
## Running from care

- 1.13** Over half of the young people who go missing from care first ran away from the family home. Patterns of running away therefore pre-date experience of care.<sup>27</sup>
- 1.14** Over half the runaways from care leave in order to return to the parental home or to be with friends. This is often because they are distressed by family separation, feel torn between loyalty to parents and foster carers or cannot adjust to firmer rules of behaviour set by foster carers.<sup>28</sup>
- 1.15** Other key reasons for going missing from care are being involved in peer groups characterised by bullying, a culture of non-attendance at school and involvement in offending. Some young people run away from bullying, while others participate in 'group escapes' to gain acceptance by the dominant group. Two fifths of runaways from care run away with a friend.<sup>29</sup>
- 1.16** Running away from care is strongly associated with not having a stable care placement. One survey showed that, where a person had made no more than one move during their time in care, the average number of absences was four, but for those who had moved ten times or more, the average number of unauthorised absences was 21.<sup>30</sup>
- 1.17** Research also shows the wide variations between runaway rates in different children's homes. These ranged from 25 and 26 per cent in two local authorities to 65 and 71 per cent in two others.<sup>31</sup> Of 32 children's homes that were surveyed, seven homes accounted for two thirds of incidents.

## What is running away like?

- 1.18** Although some young people find that running away can provide relief from pressure, a large minority of young people found themselves lonely, hungry and frightened.

**Figure 5. Percentages of young runaways responding 'Yes' to the questions below<sup>32</sup>**



### What young people said about running away

"I didn't take anything with me not even a coat... I didn't have much money and I couldn't afford to buy any food. So I couldn't even sit inside a cafe to get warm."<sup>33</sup>

"I don't know what you mean about choice. If I stay I get smacked around: if I run off then I might get beaten up or robbed; but at least I might not. At home I know for sure that I will... What choice is that?"<sup>34</sup>

"I had no money, I was upset constantly. I was in bad health and I became a thief and a prostitute."<sup>35</sup>

"Nowhere to sleep, no food, have to shoplift, being cold. You get into a lot of trouble if you're not careful."<sup>36</sup>

"I didn't know at first that help existed. You need advertising to let young people know what's available."<sup>37</sup>

| Why the young person ran away  | What happened in the end <sup>38</sup>  |
|--|---|
| Because I hate my mum. She always hits me and gives me verbal abuse.   | Police found me and took me home.   |
| Dad was drunk and wanted to beat me up because I was behaving badly.   | I went home unfortunately.  |
| Because I had problems with my brother, he used to hit me all the time, he was really violent but he doesn't live with me anymore, he lives with my dad now. | I went up Dad's then I went home. I told my mum how I felt and things got a lot better. I'm happy with my life at the moment. |
| Because I was sick of my dad and his girlfriend hitting me.  | My dad said sorry! But he didn't mean it.   |
| My dad kept on beating me up.  | I found someone that loved me and went to live with them.   |

- 1.19** As some of the young people's statements highlight, many young people felt that they did not know where to turn to for help. Chapter 2 looks at how current services deal with runaways, and why this is inadequate in meeting young runaways' needs.



## Chapter 2: What is the current system for dealing with young runaways?

There is no national policy on runaways so practice varies widely. Most runaways return home or are returned but receive little help in sorting out the problems they ran from. The police tend to focus on missing people whose lives may be endangered, while social services are focused on runaways who may enter care or be child protection cases. For young people not in crisis, there is little provision.

The closure of three of the four 'safe houses' in the UK has left young people with few options: either return home, stay with friends, or sleep rough. For over 16 year olds who may run away for longer periods, access to benefits and accommodation can be difficult. Runaways take up a large proportion of police time, with the average missing person's report requiring five hours of police time.

- 2.1** There is no clear policy on how local agencies should respond to the problems of young runaways. Guidance to local services is in preparation but there is as yet no national framework. This has several drawbacks.
- Local areas do not have to develop any specific services in relation to runaways or develop joint protocols between agencies.
  - Runaways who run across boundaries, or who have moved home or care placement since previous incidents, often receive a poor response.
  - National helplines find it hard to refer to local services because there is no national network of services.
- 2.2** Services have therefore rarely been organised around what runaways may need. So runaways receive services depending on whether they fit into a particular category such as 'missing person' for the police, 'child in need' for social services, or 'person estranged from parents' for the benefits agency.
- 2.3** Different service providers have different priorities.
- The police are primarily concerned that a missing person may be the victim of serious crime.
  - Social services are responsible for services to children in need, but often have to focus on dealing with child protection cases, children in care, and others in severe crisis.
- 2.4** Therefore, for young people who have run away from home with problems that are not serious enough to worry the police or social services, there are few services responsible for helping them.
- 2.5** This chapter looks at:
- how services tend to respond to young runaways; and
  - what young people think of these services.

### How do services tend to respond to runaways?

#### Police

- 2.6** Young people who run away from home will often come to the attention of the police as missing persons. The box below highlights how the police may typically respond to a runaway.

- 2.7** The police's main focus is on young people who go missing and whose lives may be in serious danger. This may include young people who have been abducted and young people involved in prostitution and drugs.

## THE POLICE RESPONSE

The parent may report the child as missing. The police will then assess the priority of this case, depending on a range of factors. Because most runaways return home relatively quickly, often the police will wait several hours before taking any action.<sup>39</sup>

### Scenario 1: the runaway returns or is returned home

The runaway will often turn up either at relatives or with friends, or may be picked up by the police. The police have to confirm that the young person is actually back at home and safe. This will mean visiting the home, and checking that the young person is there. Standard police policy is to conduct a welfare interview in the presence of a responsible adult, such as the child's parents, although in practice, the police may interview the child alone. This can often mean 'a chat in the back of the car', and sometimes, the police may not interview all runaways.<sup>40</sup> Unless the police are seriously concerned for the welfare of the child, they will not notify social services or other agencies.

### Scenario 2: the runaway stays missing

The police will have to mount a missing persons investigation. This may involve interviewing the informant about the nature of the disappearance, obtaining a recent photograph, contacting friends, frequented places and local hospitals, checking whether the runaway is on the child protection register or known to be 'at risk', checking police records on whether the person is an offender, victim or vulnerable witness, checking the missing person's index for previous incidents of a similar nature, and circulating the description to police patrols.

An appeal may also be made to the public, for instance through supplying details to the National Missing Persons Helpline. If the missing person is classified as 'vulnerable' and is outstanding for more than 14 days, the person is entered onto the National Missing Persons Bureau database.<sup>41</sup>

### Scenario 3: the young person runs away repeatedly

Where a person runs away repeatedly, the police may delay their response to the runaway, believing that the absence is only temporary. Research has found some examples where this was viewed as 'simply an administrative exercise'.<sup>42</sup>

### Scenario 4: the runaway is located but refuses to return home or to care

Where the individual reported missing is found, the missing persons procedure is then stopped. The police can then refer the case to social services or other agencies to deal with, as their role is completed.

## Social services

- 2.8** A majority of young people who run away do not come to the attention of social services. Social services will only become involved following a referral (usually from the police, parents or the school), or if the child is running away from care.
- 2.9** If the young person is referred to social services, they will follow the standard procedures for assessing children in need or investigating child protection issues. This may involve making an appointment for an interview, which may take several days to arrange if there is no pressing immediate need.
- 2.10** Wherever possible, social services will try to ensure that the young person returns and remains within the family home. However, if returning the child to the family home would endanger the child, the ideal is that social services should provide emergency access to foster or residential care, although anecdotal evidence suggests that this may not always happen. They may also have to arrange a new placement where a child has run away from a foster or residential home and will not return to the same placement.
- 2.11** At the moment there are no reliable national figures on the numbers of unauthorised absences from care placements, and individual social workers, carers or local authorities may not know whether a person has run away before, as records may not have been passed on from previous incidents. However, from April 2000 local authorities in England are required to record absences of more than 24 hours from agreed placements for a sample of one third of their looked after children. This data will provide the first national estimate of the incidence of running away from care. The Department of Health are also sponsoring the Missing from Care Project which involves collating detailed information from six local authorities (see Chapter 3). But neither of these initiatives amount to a national information or follow-up system for all those who run away.
- 2.12** Overall, social services tend to focus on young runaways with very severe family problems, such as sexual and physical abuse, young people who may be at risk of entering care, and young people already in the care system. The vast majority of runaways will therefore not receive any support from social services.

## Housing departments, hostels and outreach teams

- 2.13** Under 16 year olds cannot be provided with supported or independent housing, and cannot stay in foyers or hostels, due to the laws on 'harbouring'. For 16 and 17 year olds, there is a wider range of temporary accommodation including foyers and direct access hostels, usually run by or in partnership with voluntary organisations.

### The 'Harbouring' Law

The law on harbouring only applies to children under the age of 16. If a child under this age stays with a person (other than a person with parental responsibility or a relative) for 28 days or more, the person providing the care must notify the local authority that they are privately fostering the child under the Children Act 1989.

Anyone who 'takes or detains' a runaway aged under 16 without lawful authority may be prosecuted under Section 2 of the Child Abduction Act 1984. However, the enforcement of this law can be problematic if the child has chosen to stay with another adult of his or her own free will. In practice, though, under 16s who have run away are likely to be returned to those who have parental responsibility for them, unless to do so would be placing them at risk of harm.<sup>43</sup>

**2.14** For 16 and 17 year olds requiring more permanent accommodation, accessing housing can be difficult. 16 and 17 year olds are not classified under the priority need categories of homeless people although as Chapter 3 states, changes coming into force shortly will address this. Many 16 and 17 year olds find themselves staying with friends, unable to access housing, or in some cases being evicted from foyers or other accommodation because of financial or behavioural reasons. In the past young people have often been passed between housing and social services, with each agency arguing that the other should have responsibility for housing the young person.<sup>44</sup>

### Benefits Agency

**2.15** Because some young runaways use very risky strategies to survive, including begging, crime and prostitution, the issue of access to financial support, even for short periods, is important.

**2.16** Only over 16s can access social security benefits in their own right, and benefits for 16 and 17 year olds only apply in specific circumstances. Consultation with young people has highlighted the difficulty many 16 and 17 year olds face in getting benefits. They often do not know what they may be entitled to. They may have to prove estrangement from their parents to access benefits, and may find negotiating with benefits staff difficult.<sup>45</sup>

### Other services

**2.17** Many young people do not contact social services or the police, but do contact telephone helplines or turn up at drop in centres for young people. These can play a vital role in providing information, counselling, and referral to other services. For instance, in 1999, ChildLine took 3,000 calls from runaways. These services provide high levels of confidentiality. They will only contact the police and trace a call where the child is in severe danger. However, helplines told us that a key difficulty is the lack of services to whom helplines can refer young people. Even where local provision exists, national helplines may not always have the necessary contact details of local services.

**2.18** Other public services may also come into contact with young people who are thinking about running away or leaving home altogether. For instance, Greenwich housing department staff and youth outreach workers say that they receive calls from teachers and education welfare officers about particular pupils who are thinking of leaving home. These agencies believe that the housing department may be able to help young people make the transition out of the parental home, unlike social services, who may not treat the case as a priority.

**2.19** Voluntary sector organisations, such as Centrepoin, the Children's Society and the NSPCC have to a certain extent filled the gap in public service provision, notably through the provision of refuges, foyers, drop in centres and family support services.

### What young runaways think of these services

**2.20** Research and consultation shows that young runaways often have the following views:

- they **lack information** on where to seek out confidential advice, before and after running away;<sup>46</sup>
- they have **low trust** in many services, including social services and the police.<sup>47</sup> They are more likely to go to services that offer them something positive, such as housing and benefits, than services that they perceive may punish them or their families;
- they feel that services **do not listen** to their views and that they are not involved enough in the decisions that affect their lives;<sup>48</sup>
- many young runaways comment on the **lack of a safe place to stay**.<sup>49</sup> They do not like the fact that when they run away from home, services will almost always return them to the home they ran from, rather than provide them with a 'safe house' for a short period of time;

- many young people would like more help sorting out the problems which caused them to run away, be they personal problems, or a problem with family or school.

**2.21** Overall, a young person is likely to run away rather than seek out help beforehand. They are likely to stay with friends or relatives, but a quarter may sleep on the streets rather than seek out help. Once a child returns home or is returned, they are usually given little follow up support to sort out the problems they ran from. Even if particular needs are identified, such as family conflict, drugs or mental health problems, there are usually long waiting lists for specialist services.

**2.22** For young people who do not want to return immediately to the family home, there are very few options. There is now only one 'safe house' in the UK – the London refuge – where a child can spend a night or more with trained supervisors. This is particularly important given the vulnerability of the under 16 year olds who sleep rough. It is only in exceptional circumstances, such as where there is evidence that a young person may come to severe harm if placed back in the home, that young runaways are placed in care.

## Chapter 3: Towards an effective system for dealing with runaways

This chapter looks at the lessons of effective practice, and examines what forthcoming policy and funding could contribute to a more effective system. The chapter then examines what an effective system for tackling running away would look like, and poses some questions about how policies and services meet this question.

Specific measures would involve providing a follow up interview and ongoing support to runaways, securing specialist services, including family mediation, using information to identify problems and solutions, and providing refuge and reintegration support for young people who cannot return home immediately.

- 3.1** As the previous chapter highlighted, there is no clear national policy on young runaways. Practice therefore varies widely across the country, with some areas having clear procedures for handling runaways, while in other areas practices are more fragile.
- 3.2** However, there are grounds for optimism which suggest an effective system is within reach:
- first, there are examples of good practice which have highlighted how some of the elements of an effective model can be developed; and
  - second, a range of new policies and funding relating to young people should impact on the problem of runaways.

### Examples of effective practice

- 3.3** Several projects have demonstrated how services can make an impact on the problem.

#### Engaging young people's trust

Young runaways often turn to telephone helplines that provide high levels of confidentiality, such as **ChildLine**, **Message Home**, and **Get Connected**, or they may turn to drop in centres such as **The Hub** in Bristol for help.

These services can provide advice and counselling, and can help link a person up with other services. For instance, ChildLine can arrange for a worker from the London Refuge to pick a child up while the child is on the phone, if that is what the child wants. The National Runaways Switchboard in the USA, which takes over 250,000 calls a year, also operates a 'Home Free' programme, in partnership with Greyhound Bus Lines, to help runaways return home to their families.

Some of the key features of the success of these services are:

- **publicity and marketing**, for instance in telephone boxes and schools. Message Home reported that as soon as their cards went into telephone boxes, the call rate increased sharply;
- **the offer of confidential advice**: young people are more likely to get in touch with helplines, housing departments and benefit offices than the police or social services because **they can offer young people something they value, rather than take them into care or punish their parents.**

### Detached street work

**Safe in the City** is both a street work and advocacy project that contacts young people under 17 on the streets of Manchester. Detached workers tend to cater for the runaways' material needs like the provision of food, warm clothes and to deal with immediate health concerns. They also provide a sympathetic ear. **Safe in the City** has two aims: first, to stop the children from having to use risky survival strategies, such as prostitution and drug dealing, and second to give them the opportunity to interact with a concerned adult who can give them support and information. The responses of the young people themselves involved with these services tend to be very positive.<sup>50</sup>

### Following up all runaways

**ASTRA** (Alternative Solutions To Running Away) in Gloucester follows up all young people who run away and are reported to the police, and takes referrals from other services, and from parents and runaways themselves.

ASTRA is operated by just three part-time staff, and is open until 10.00 p.m. each night. Last year they worked with over 60 young people, visiting them and, where necessary, providing ongoing support. This may include referring them to other services, or helping them sort out problems at school or with parents. A Personal Contract is often used to agree tasks and a timetable for delivering them. Support is typically reviewed on a six weekly cycle.

**Police estimate that ASTRA has produced a 61 per cent reduction in the number of repeat runaways**, saving the police 75 working days dealing with missing persons cases. It is also estimated that ASTRA has produced a 21 per cent reduction in the number of runaways who have been arrested.

### Refuges

There is now only one refuge in the country, following the closure of three others outside London. The London refuge can provide accommodation for up to 14 days for young people under 16, although most young people often use the refuge for much shorter periods of time. It has trained supervisors who try to help young people sort out their problems and reintegrate them back into the family.

The refuge model has proved expensive and there is now strong concern among homeless organisations and young people over the lack of refuge spaces. There is therefore interest in developing a more cost effective 'flexible refuge model'. This could involve employing a few trained staff who can check into temporary accommodation with a young runaway and turn it into a temporary refuge, or it could involve employing specially trained foster carers.

### Family support

Many young runaways need more sustained family support, through services such as family mediation and family group conferencing. Family support services are offered by social services, but the focus is often on younger children's families, or those on the verge of entering care. Many people working with young runaways highlight the potential value of dedicated family support services, working flexibly to sort out the causes of family conflicts. These services may often be funded by social services but contracted out to voluntary organisations. A strong feature of practice in the USA is the use of family school partnerships with dedicated family support staff assigned to schools.

### Clear responsibility

Coventry has been extremely successful in reducing the rate of running away from care. The numbers of runaways from care has come down from over 1000 in 1993 to just 471 in 1996.

A key factor in Coventry's success has been the appointment of a Missing Person's Officer dedicated specifically to this problem. In the past, police officers had tended to spend less time with runaways from care than other missing persons. Police relationships were adversarial and young people showed little regard for the police. Because no single officer was in charge, a range of staff may deal with a single case, with no ownership of any one missing persons report.

The new officer has changed police relationships with young people by taking a more informal approach, including dressing casually. The officer has also ensured that information spread across the three sub-divisions of Coventry is shared so that the division has a record of each individual's runaway history.<sup>51</sup>



### **Using information effectively**

The Missing from Care Project, funded by the Department of Health Social Care group, is a pilot run by the National Missing Persons Helpline, which involves collating information from six local authorities. Once it is fully operational, it will provide a comprehensive database on runaway incidents in these areas. It will have detailed information on each runaway, so it can spot particular individuals who run away repeatedly and identify particular runaway patterns, including specific foster or residential carers. The project will prevent information being lost when young people move placement or social workers. By using computerised records rather than paper filing systems, the information will be easier to access and analyse.

### **Joining up local services: Gloucestershire, Lancashire**

Many agencies do not have clear protocols on what each agency should do with young runaways, how information will be passed on, and what should be done when the child is returned. Some areas, including Gloucestershire and Lancashire, now have missing persons or missing from care protocols in place, which clarify responsibilities and ensure agencies work together effectively. This prevents services dealing with runaways in an inconsistent and haphazard manner.

## New policies and funding relevant to young runaways

**3.4** There are a range of new resources and opportunities which should improve the situation, and these could potentially be built on to improve the response to runaways. These include:

- **Children’s Fund:** £450 million targeted primarily on preventive work with children in the 5–13 age group and their families, helping them before they hit crisis and with an emphasis on involving local voluntary groups. This is being run by the new **Children and Young People’s Unit**. The Children’s Fund represents a potential new source of funding for local areas to prevent and address running away. The Children’s Fund proposals will be built from the bottom up, responding to local needs. Children’s Fund Guidance makes it clear that services which provide support for runaways may be part of these strategies;
- **Connexions Service:** the new Connexions Service will provide advice, guidance, support and, where needed, personal development for 13–19 year olds. Its central aim is to provide all teenagers with the help and support they need to participate fully in learning and to prepare for the transition to adult life;
- **Leaving Care Act:** its measures include extending local authorities’ responsibilities to provide accommodation to 17 and 18 year olds who have been in care for 13 weeks in the two years before their 16th birthday; extending local authorities’ responsibilities to support young people in education up to 21 and beyond; providing all care leavers with a Young Person’s Adviser and a Pathway Plan;
- **Quality Protects:** an £885 million programme over 5 years aiming to improve the stability of care placements and therefore strengthen young people’s attachments to carers, raise educational attainment, and ensure that young people are involved in the decisions that affect them and are given greater choice over care placements;
- **Measures to increase the number of adoptions from care:** these involve attracting more adopters by offering additional support to the families and streamlining the adoption process;
- **Housing for 16 and 17 year olds:** extends the priority need categories of homeless people to include 16 and 17 year olds, care leavers aged 18–21 and applicants who are vulnerable as a result of an institutionalised background.

**3.5** Other forthcoming measures include:

- **Statutory guidance on young runaways,** currently being prepared by the Department of Health. An early priority of the inter-departmental working group being set up as part of the follow up to this report will be to consider the content and timing of guidance alongside the issues raised in this paper.

## What more needs to be done?

**3.6** An effective system for preventing and responding to running away would tackle the weaknesses of provision, build on the models of good practice identified earlier, and utilise opportunities created by new policies and funding highlighted above.

**3.7** The goal of an effective system would be to:

- make running away less likely;
- for those who do run, ensure there is a safe short-term solution that prevents immediate danger; and
- a long-term solution that tackles the causes of running away and prevents further incidents.

**3.8** The boxes below set out some potential ideas for improving services for runaways:

|  | What happens now  | What could happen   |
|--|---|---|
| <p><b>Before the child runs</b> – child is thinking of running away and has problems at home or school</p> | <p>Child is not <b>aware</b> of the dangers of running away or who can help them sort out problems.</p> <p>They lack <b>trust</b> in many agencies and many feel that their views are not listened to.</p> <p>Family support services may not always be <b>available</b> or clearly <b>signposted</b>.</p>  | <p><b>Personal Social and Health Education</b> could cover the dangers of running away, where to find confidential advice, and confront issues relating to family problems and leaving home.</p> <p>Where the Connexions Service is in operation (eventually this will cover the whole of England) <b>Connexions Personal Advisers</b> could inform young people of where they can access help, help them to address some of their problems at home and at school and connect them to counselling and family support services where appropriate.</p> <p>There could be more services which help young people and their families work through their problems. These could include: school counsellors, peer support schemes, family mediation, and family support workers attached to schools.</p> |
| <p><b>Young person runs</b></p>  | <p>No standard way of <b>assessing risk</b> and prioritising the most vulnerable.</p> <p>Police may be notified of a missing person, but unless they are concerned will not tell any other agency that a child is away. Many areas do not have protocols on how to handle runaways.</p> <p>A quarter of under 16 year old runaways <b>sleep rough</b> intermittently – they say that there are no safe places to stay and they do not want to go into care.</p> | <p>There could be <b>clear guidance on how risk should be assessed</b> and what information needs to be collected.</p> <p>When a child runs away, police could notify Connexions. This would go onto <b>Connexions tracking database</b>. This would ensure that if a child is known to several agencies, such as social services and youth justice, their case may be prioritised. This could include triggering child protection procedures.</p> <p>Young people would be able to access a <b>refuge service</b>. There are three potential types of refuge provision: refuge in fixed premises, dedicated refuge staff who could stay with the runaway in temporary accommodation, or specially trained foster carers.</p>   |

|   | What happens now   | What could happen  |
|---|--|--|
| <b>Young person runs (cont)</b>                 | Over 16 year olds who may run away for longer periods, or leave home altogether, can find accessing housing and benefits very difficult.   | New changes should improve this. These include giving 16 and 17 year olds a Connexions Personal Adviser who can advocate on their behalf in order to access benefits and secure accommodation. Measures under the Children (Leaving Care) Act 2000 and Homes Bill will ensure that 16 and 17 year olds are given priority status for housing, and that local authorities' responsibilities for care leavers are extended.        |
| <b>Young person returns or is returned home</b> | <p>Child will usually receive a 'welfare interview' from the police to verify that the child is back home safely. If the police have serious concerns, they will notify social services.</p> <p>Home Office research found that "not all missing persons are interviewed", many police found that an interview was "a significant drain on resources and was often a fruitless task" with runaways not wanting to talk to the police.</p>        | <p><b>Connexions</b> could provide welfare interviews and follow up support instead of the police. They could then help children sort out problems at home or school, or refer them to specialist services.</p> <p>Personal Advisers are trained to work with young people and are more likely to be trusted. This measure would free up considerable police time and resources.</p>   |
| <b>Young person runs away again</b>             | <p>Police tend to make repeat runaways a lower priority. ACPO (Association of Chief Police Officers) guidance on children missing from care stated that a person missing more than once should gain a low score in risk assessment.</p> <p>The police may not immediately know whether a child has run away before, unless paper files are checked. If a child has moved house, the police are unlikely to have any records of running away.</p> | <p>The immediate safety of repeat runaways may not be in serious risk, but their long term futures clearly are. Risk assessment would reflect this – they would be a priority for follow up support.</p> <p>All runaway incidents would be recorded and shared with Connexions. As the Connexions database develops this will provide a clear picture nationally of running away and particular patterns will be identified.</p> |

|  | What happens now   | What could happen   |
|--|--|---|
| <b>Local co-ordination</b>                 | <p>Local authorities do not have a picture of local runaway rates and do not audit the need for services for runaways.</p> <p>However, guidance on Children’s Services Plans states that local authorities are expected to demonstrate inter-agency planning to meet the needs of young runaways.</p> <p>Few areas have developed protocols between police and social services on how runaway incidents are handled.</p> | <p>Each local authority would review services for runaways, possibly as part of their Children’s Services Plans or other local planning arrangements. This would include analysing runaway rates and consulting young people.</p> <p>To ensure this is implemented, there could be better monitoring of local authority services to runaways.</p> <p>In each local area, there would be a <b>named person in charge</b> of co-ordinating services for runaways.</p>   |
| <b>National policy &amp; co-ordination</b> | <p><b>There are no reliable figures on</b> runaway rates. The forthcoming guidance on runaways is the first time local authorities have been charged with specific responsibilities.</p>   | <p><b>A National Service Framework</b> would be developed. This could:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>■ set out what services should be developed to respond to runaways;</li> <li>■ establish a national information system to ensure young runaways who run across boundaries or have moved home or care placement receive an effective response;</li> <li>■ create a national network of services to which national helplines could refer young runaways.</li> </ul> <p>Under a National Service Framework, local practice would be evaluated, good practice would be shared and under-performing areas tackled.</p> <p>A <b>clear lead department</b> would need to be established and funding would need to be found from within existing departmental programmes for the period of the current spending review, up to 2004. Decisions about funding beyond this date would be made as part of the next spending review.</p> |

## The Consultation

**3.9** This report has highlighted the scale and importance of running away from home and some ideas for improving the services. The Government will be consulting on how to develop a National Service Framework for runaways over the next three months. The remit of this project will be:

- to develop recommendations on how to make running away less likely and ensure runaways' short and long term needs are safely met.

**3.10** The overall questions are:

- are the ideas under discussion right?
- are there any gaps? If so, what more needs to be done?

### Specific questions include:

- 1 What is the role of Personal Social & Health Education and Connexions in providing information about the risks and danger of running away and where to find help and advice?
- 2 What measures are needed to ensure that young people feel that their views are listened to and that they have greater influence over the decisions that affect them?
- 3 What further preventive measures (e.g. peer support, school counsellors, family support workers) are needed to tackle the causes of running away? What are the most effective interventions for runaways with family problems?
- 4 What is the role of helplines in preventing and addressing running away? What further improvements are needed?
- 5 How far will Quality Protects and other measures tackle the wide disparities in the number of unauthorised absences from care homes?
- 6 Which agency should be responsible for providing young runaways with an interview and follow up support – is it Connexions? What are the resource and cost implications of ensuring that this support can be carried out? What links would be needed between Connexions and the police in this instance to make sure this happens?
- 7 Can the burden on police time be reduced by ensuring that other agencies provide a welfare interview?
- 8 How can information use and sharing be improved? Should information on whether a child has run away be part of the Connexions' tracking database? What are the implications for police missing persons reporting procedures?
- 9 Should a network of refuge provision be developed? If so, how should it be funded and organised? What is the role of flexible refuges?
- 10 Are any further measures needed to improve 16 and 17 year olds' access to housing and benefits?
- 11 What extra funding would be needed to deliver an effective system? What money would preventive measures save?

- 12 How best should local services for runaways be planned? Would an audit of current ways of planning services for runaways help?
- 13 Is there a need for a National Service Framework for runaways to ensure better joint working and resourcing? Who should lead it?
- 14 Is there any relevant research or good practice either in this country or overseas?
- 15 Are there any other issues or ideas that need to be considered in relation to preventing and addressing young runaways?

# Notes

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- <sup>39</sup> G. Newiss, op cit., 1999.
- <sup>40</sup> Ibid.
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<sup>42</sup> Ibid.

<sup>43</sup> Supplied by Department of Health, 2001.

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<sup>48</sup> R. Green, *Taking the Initiative, Northern Ireland Report Carnegie Young People Initiative*, 2001.

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