



**1 in 9 – The Scottish Coalition for  
Young Runaways**

**A SCOPING STUDY OF SERVICES  
FOR YOUNG RUNAWAYS**

**SUMMARY REPORT**

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# A SCOPING STUDY OF SERVICES FOR YOUNG RUNAWAYS

## *Summary*

### ***Background and policy context***

The study was undertaken to examine responses to young people in Scotland who run away from home or substitute care. Commissioned by the 1 in 9, the Scottish Coalition for Young Runaways, the study originated from concerns about the experiences of young people who run away or are forced to leave where they live and to find out more about what responses are in place to address the needs of these young people.

The Scottish Executive (2003:1) defined a young runaway as:

*“a child or young person under the age of 18 who spends one night or more away from the family home or substitute care without permission or who has been forced to leave by their parents or carers”.*

This scoping study defines a young runaway as any child or young person under the age of 16 who spends at least one night away from the family home without the permission of their parent or carer, and under the age of 18 who runs from substitute care. This definition is shared outside Scotland (for example, Social Exclusion Unit, 2001).

In 2003, the Scottish Executive published a Guidance Pack on Vulnerable Children and Young People (Scottish Executive, 2003) developed by a multi-agency Working Group. The introduction to the pack noted that some young people were at risk from “damaging behaviour and negative outcomes such as self-harm, substance misuse, sexual exploitation through prostitution and running away”. The Guidance Pack (Scottish Executive, 2003) described the arrangements that Area Child Protection Committees were expected to make to organise and co-ordinate services in their local areas for vulnerable children and young people, specifically young runaways, and those at risk of sexual exploitation. The Guidance noted that legislation already existed to provide refuge for young runaways but did not appear to be utilised.

The Scottish Executive (2003b) noted that different forms of provision were required to meet the needs of young runaways and indicated that a range of services might be appropriate. Areas highlighted for development included:

- Planning and development of services for young runaways to be taken forward within the wider children’s services planning process;
- Development of local protocols to support young runaways and to identify and agree the roles of different agencies;
- Progress reports on protocol development, monitoring and evaluation to be considered as part of the child protection reform programme.

### ***Research aims and methods***

The aim of the study was to examine the provision of services to young runaways by local authorities and Area Child Protection Committees (CPC). The Scottish Coalition for Young Runaways identified the objectives of the study as being to:

- explore the level of awareness of young runaways among local authorities and to review the extent to which they have identified young runaways in their Children Services Plans;
- establish how many local authorities have (a) adopted protocols for responding to runaways in line with the Executive guidance and (b) to identify how commissioners, managers and providers are utilising these protocols;
- consider the extent to which protocols, where they exist, meet their objectives and in particular, address the needs of the young people;
- identify what action has been taken to provide services for young runaways;
- explore any existing plans to identify gaps and develop services.

The following methods were used:

- A documentary review of each local authority Integrated Children's Services Plans (32 in total);
- Existing studies, both general (examining the incidence of running away and experiences of young runaways) and specific (evaluations of specialist provision), were reviewed;
- The study was outlined and discussed at the quarterly Child Protection Chairs Committee meeting, following which each Chair and Lead Officer of all the Committees were asked to complete a questionnaire outlining CPC responses to young runaways, or to nominate a representative to do so;
- Each CPC was asked to provide protocols, or any guidelines issued to staff at local level; these were examined in order to identify the form such protocols took and to consider their practical application;
- Statistical and monitoring data was collected from police, local authorities and voluntary services wherever possible to ascertain the numbers of young runaways seeking assistance;
- Case studies outlining young people's experiences were provided by The Young Runaways Project in Aberdeen and the Running - Other Choices (ROC) Project in Glasgow;

### ***Information provided***

Twenty-eight completed questionnaires were received from CPCs, 25 from local authority representatives and three questionnaires which had been completed by police representatives. The data collection was a complex process and our request for information was regularly passed on within organisations and to other relevant organisations as individuals did their best to provide a complete picture of service provision. Only one local authority did not respond to our request for information.

The research team was regularly informed that this process raised the issue of young runaways and in doing so, highlighted issues for development in particular local authority areas.

### *Professional interviews*

Interviews (formal and informal) were carried out with a range of professionals across the country to gather more information or clarify that provided; explore awareness and knowledge of the issues; use of agreed protocols; and/or views about existing or future services. This included interviews with representatives from the police (6), social workers and social work managers (10), residential and secure accommodation managers and workers (5), workers in voluntary organisations (6).

### *Interviews with young people*

Interviews were carried out with young people (five young women and one young man) to discuss their experiences of running away and to explore their views about the kind of provision that would meet their needs. One young person submitted a letter to the study. The young people ranged in age from 14 to 16 years. All the young people had social work involvement in their lives, and five had been or were currently 'accommodated by the local authority', although all had initially run from home. Three of the young people lived in a rural area and four were from towns and cities within the central belt; one of the young people was in secure accommodation at the time of the interview.

## FINDINGS

### *Children's Services Plans*

Generally, local authorities refer to the most vulnerable children and young people as defined in the Children (Scotland) Act 1995 as 'children in need', although a range of other terms are also used, such as 'vulnerable children'. While these terms could often include young runaways, of the 32 Children's Services Plans examined for the purpose of this study, only eight refer specifically to 'young runaways', with five doing so in the context of 'children in need'. Three of the Plans provide details of services provided or outline specific areas for development.

### *Data and statistics*

Respondents were asked to indicate what figures were collated in their area on incidences of running away. The available information was very limited and different agencies, where statistics were collected, held different figures often based on different definitions. While respondents referred to police missing person's statistics or available figures on young people who had run from residential units, there was less awareness of figures for the number of young people running from home. Given the differences in definitions used and data collected, it is not surprising that where figures were provided they were limited and variable in content. From the data recorded by the voluntary sector, it would appear that a significant number of young people who run away do not come to the attention of the statutory services.

### *Key points:*

- *There is no agreed definition of 'runaway' in use across CPC areas*
- *The Scottish Executive definition is not used routinely or frequently by all agencies*
- *Different data is collected by different agencies but is not centrally collated and is not comprehensive*

- *Statutory agencies appear to have a partial picture of the number of young people who would constitute 'young runaways' as defined by the Scottish Executive*
- *Young people who are looked after and accommodated are over-represented in official statistics*
- *Young people who run from home are under-represented and rarely come to the attention of statutory services*
- *A significant proportion of young people who runaway from home are not reported missing to the police or other statutory services*
- *Other than the research published by the Aberlour Child Care Trust (Wade, 2001) based on self-reports by young people in school, we have no accurate national picture of the extent of running away in Scotland.*

### ***Inter-agency protocols***

In terms of protocol content, the *Guidance for Professionals Working with Young Runaways* (Scottish Executive, 2003b) set out a number of requirements which covered the development of local protocols and indicated that protocol content should address issues of prevention, immediate safety and support. Respondents were asked if their CPC had a protocol/s in place and to indicate whether this applied to young people who were accommodated and/or young people who ran from home.

#### *Looked after and accommodated young people protocol*

- Twenty four of the local authority respondents reported having a protocol in place for children who are looked after or accommodated (although they sometimes referred to procedures or policies that existed rather than to inter-agency or joint protocols); one respondent referred specifically to police operational procedures;
- Three respondents said their area did not have a protocol in place;
- Two respondents indicated their CPC was in the process of developing a protocol;
- No information was available for one CPC; while one respondent did not know if a protocol was in place in their area.

#### *Young people running from home protocol*

- Four respondents reported having a protocol for children running away from home in their area;
- Four respondents reported that this was being developed;
- The other 23 respondents indicated that their was no protocol in place in their area or it was not known if they had one;
- One local authority respondent indicated that their protocol on young people experiencing sexual exploitation covered the issue of young runaways and this was referred to by two other respondents in discussion. However it is important to note that these groups of young people (young runaways and young people at risk of sexual exploitation) are considered separately in the *Guidance* (Scottish Executive, 2003).

#### *Key points:*

- *Protocols were more likely to be in place for children and young people who were looked after and accommodated*

- *Few protocols were developed for children running from home and none explicitly for this group of young people*
- *Where protocols existed, they had generally, although not always, been established through joint working*
- *Joint training was considered crucial to the operation of protocols, particularly in the opinion of police respondents*
- *There was concern that limited resources and lack of training impacted on the extent to which social work services were taking responsibility for enacting protocols*
- *Improved communication between agencies was considered to have resulted from the implementation of protocols in some areas*
- *While a young person's access to an independent worker and referrals to other services was included in protocols this was not uniform and actual practice could vary depending on circumstances*
- *Initial aims of the protocols were not always realised due to pressure on resources*
- *While protocols effectively reduced the number of young people being referred to the police from children's units, work had to be ongoing to avoid increasing number of priority reports rising over time*
- *It was not clear how a reduction in the number of young people reported missing to the police would necessarily improve services to young people unless additional supports were put in place.*

### ***Young people's experiences of running away***

All the young people interviewed in this scoping study indicated that they had started running away between the ages of twelve and fourteen, with the exception of the only young man interviewed who started to run from the age of six years old. The reasons young people gave for running away were primarily concerned with family relationships or problems at home. Young people cited instances when they were frightened or felt unsafe when running away, especially at night. They also described times when they were hungry, cold or missed members of their family. Most were able to recognise, in retrospect, ways in which they had potentially been in danger or at risk.

Young people discussed their ideas about what services would be helpful for those who were already 'on the run'. The form of help most mentioned was a safe place to go and stay; in addition, an understanding person to talk to; and a telephone helpline were suggested. All the young people without exception said they would advise other young people not to run away but to try to find alternatives.

### ***Services and young people's experiences of them***

The Scottish Executive Guidance (2003) set out a number of areas where services were needed to respond to young runaways, specifically: preventing running away; providing immediate safety for a young person who has run away; and the provision of support. Respondents were asked to outline the services available in their area for young runaways. Clearly, respondents interpreted the questions in different ways and in some cases may not have acknowledged services that were not specifically for young runaways.

Respondents were asked if emergency accommodation was provided for young runaways. Twelve respondents stated that there were no dedicated places available for this group of young people, while eleven respondents replied that accommodation could be accessed as necessary (nine respondents did not know or did not provide information). Examples of available accommodation included a self-contained bed-sit within a children's unit which was used as crisis/emergency care, foster placements, referral to homeless services and the Aberlour ROC Refuge.

### ***Models of practice***

The study identified and outlined four models of practice which set out examples of responses for: young people running away from a residential setting; general statutory provision; the Young Runaways Service which operates in Aberdeen; and the Aberlour ROC Outreach and Refuge provision. The models presented highlight some of the challenges of providing services to young runaways but also set out areas of good practice and effective interagency work.

### ***Strategic development and monitoring***

- Five of the local authority respondents reported having a lead officer or named manager with responsibility for young people who runaway;
- Thirteen respondents indicated that a senior manager had identified responsibility for monitoring the effectiveness of missing from care protocols or procedures. All police respondents indicated a lead officer was in place to oversee joint working and adherence to existing protocols;
- Twenty respondents indicated that risk assessments were routinely carried out for looked after and accommodated young people identified as being at risk of running away, six respondents indicated that these assessments are currently being developed. Only nine areas routinely carry out initial assessments of risk for young people who run away from home, four reported being in the process of developing them.

In order to maintain an overview of current services, respondents indicated a number of mechanisms and forums in place to monitor existing services and to identify the need for change or the development of new services. Respondents also identified the establishment of multi-agency sub-groups to undertake this monitoring and referred to sub-groups formed to examine issues around vulnerable children and young people, and in one area, on missing children and families.

A number of respondents indicated that they were in the process of developing policies and procedures for vulnerable young people, which would include young runaways, while others noted that they were developing joint work in this area, generally around the needs of young people who are looked after and accommodated. Local authority and police respondents who made use of services in the voluntary sector gave examples of ways in which joint working was underway to improve responses to young runaways, notably with Barnardo's services and Aberlour ROC. Other services referred to included Streetwork, Includem and NCH.

### ***Conclusions and Key Points***

The study highlighted confusion and lack of clarity over definitions and availability of accurate statistical data to assess the incidence of actual running away. The data

collection process for this study has itself gone some way to highlighting some of the complex issues facing statutory agencies. One respondent who struggled to provide information for the study commented: “*it has highlighted for me the need to strengthen and develop this area of work*”. Two others indicated that they would ensure that the needs of young runaways were referred to in future Children’s Service Plans.

#### *Definitions and data collection*

- There does not appear to be any shared definition of what constitutes ‘running away’
- Lack of accurate information to identify the scale of this problem
- Lack of awareness of the problems facing young people and service providers as a result of this lack of data
- Different issues need to be addressed when responding to young people running from home and those running from local authority accommodation
- Runaways from home receive a limited service and do not always come to the attention of service providers; yet there is apparent compliance with guidance because attention is focused on young people missing from care
- Young people who run away are often situated within wider groups (i.e. children in need) and not defined specifically as runaways
- Statistics and services are often ‘hidden’ within other categories.

#### *Joint work and operational protocols and practices*

- There are a range of responses in place but lack of clarity over definitions and levels of risk can lead to confusion in responding to young people
- The importance of effective joint work supported by adequate resources and ongoing training is highlighted
- When young people who are looked after and accommodated runaway there is more likelihood of a co-ordinated inter-agency response including information sharing
- Lack of assessment for young people who run from home would suggest their needs may not be identified
- Systems which reduce the number of young people reported to the police as missing may not improve the situation for young people unless additional services are put in place
- The implementation of protocols could lead to the identification of young people’s needs but additional resources were not always available to address these needs.

#### *Service provision*

- The availability of refuge provision or suitable emergency accommodation is important in keeping young people safe and providing an environment where young people’s needs can be identified and assessed
- Some resources, e.g. refuge and helpline would not be sustainable on a single local authority basis and may benefit from cross-boundary co-operation
- Where specialist services were in place for young runaways, all agencies appeared to have a greater awareness of the issues facing these young

people and there was evidence of effective joint practice in some local areas

- A National Missing Persons Helpline would be useful for the police, especially in cases where young runaways are not reported to the police.

*Overall considerations*

- Given the range of policies and procedures which are currently in place, it may be useful to consider a strategic approach – rather than the development of additional strategies
- If data about frequency of running away is not collected there is a danger that resources will be diverted into areas that are ‘measured’ and have ‘targets’.