CHILDREN WHO GO MISSING; RESEARCH, POLICY AND PRACTICE

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Foreword

In 1997, in his report *People Like Us: The Review Of The Safeguards For Children Living Away From Home,* Sir William Utting, highlighted the need to be concerned about children who go missing. He emphasised that services for missing children should be planned for and the reasons that children go missing should be identified, so that they can be properly safeguarded.

In response to this review the Government committed itself to develop guidance on the action to be taken when a child goes missing from home and care. The Department of Health commissioned this research from the University of York to provide an evidence base on which to develop further guidance for local authorities, the police and their partner agencies.

The Prime Minister also asked the Social Exclusion Unit to lead on a project about the issues raised by young runaways to develop recommendations about reducing running away by young people and about how to meet young runaways' short and long term needs. The SEU have now issued their report on young runaways with recommendations for the future development of *Young Runaways* services.[1]

[1] *Young Runaways,* Social Exclusion Unit (2002) - available from the SEU - Tel: 0207 276 2055 or download from www.socialexclusionunit.gov.uk

Introduction

For the purposes of this report the term "running away" is used to refer to children and young people who spend time away from where they ought to usually live, without the consent of parents or carers, or because they have been forced to leave by parents or carers. Some young people will be extremely vulnerable even if their whereabouts are unknown for a comparatively brief period (refer to Section 3). This report incorporates an overview of recent research findings in relation to both these groups of young people and highlights the implications that derive from this work for appropriate policy and practice responses.

The report draws upon a survey of all English local authorities and voluntary agencies that work with runaways to identify current policy and practice initiatives with these vulnerable groups of young people. Responses to the survey are incorporated into the text and used to provide illustrations of positive initiatives.

The report draws heavily on two recent major studies. The first, *Still Running,* involved a UK wide study of young people who run away or are forced to leave home. It incorporated a self-report schools survey with over 13,000 young people aged 14 and 15, in depth interviews with over 200 young people who had run away or been forced to leave home and with 400 professionals from agencies that work with them. It had a primary focus on young people away from the family home and the sheer scale of the study has enabled it to generate the most reliable estimates yet of the prevalence of running away. For the purposes of this study, *running away* was defined as young people under 16 (family home) or under 18 (care/accommodation) "who spend time away from home or substitute care either without permission ('running away') or having been forced to leave by their parents or carers" *(Safe on the Streets* 1999, p.4).

The second study, *Going Missing,* involved an exploration of going missing amongst looked after young people in four local authorities in England. Two surveys were undertaken - a main survey of 210 young people who had recently gone missing and a supplementary survey of 32 children's homes to establish more reliable estimates of going missing from residential care, which collected data on over 2000 incidents. In depth interviews were also undertaken with 36 young people drawn from two of the authorities and with the professionals who were working with them. The study explored all types of unauthorised absence (absences overnight or daytime absences reported to the police), not simply those where young people were thought to have run away *(Wade et al* 1998).

In relation to the survey of current policy and practice, responses were received from 60 local authorities and from 6 voluntary agencies that provide or are developing services for under 16s away from home. Some local authorities have produced only formal procedures, some have accompanied these with a document giving fuller practice guidance, while others have sought to integrate formal procedures with practice guidance in a single document. A few give some guidance on responding to young people who go missing from home.

The development of specialist services that are designed to prevent young people running away or to support them when they do are, at present, mostly experimental. This may be especially so for focused preventive initiatives. To date, there have been very few independent evaluation studies that can provide documented evidence of their effectiveness in reducing running away rates. However, there is much that can be learnt from the insights afforded by research in this area and from existing policy and practice initiatives to help some of the most vulnerable young members of our society.

Section 1 provides an overview of the relevant research literature in this area and Section 2 covers law and policy as it relates to young people missing from home and substitute care/accommodation. Detailed guidance on the formal procedures that local authorities will need to develop to respond effectively to the problem is provided in Section 3. Sections 5-6 focus on improvements in practice that may help to prevent running away amongst looked after young people and, for those who do go missing, to inhibit the development of a repeat pattern.

Clearly, local authority social services departments cannot do all this alone. As the guidance will make clear, effective responses will need to be based on partnerships between social services, other local authority departments and statutory agencies, the police and voluntary agencies that provide services for these groups of young people. Local partnerships will be necessary to provide a range of preventive services, appropriate reporting and response procedures and a diverse range of services that can provide short and long term support to young people who run away and their families/carers.

1.   The problem of going missing

Summary points

Patterns
- One in nine young people run away at least once before the age of 16.
- Young people who are 'looked after' are more likely to run away than those living at home, and those in residential care are the most likely to go missing.
- The proportion of young people going missing from residential care varies between different local authorities, ranging from 25% to 71% of all those 'looked after' in children's homes during a year.
- There are wide variations in running away rates between different children's homes, even where their intake is similar.
- The average age of first going missing is 13 but many begin before the age of 11.
- Few leave their local area while they are missing.
- Many stay with friends, acquaintances or relatives, but between a quarter and a third of runaways sleep rough.
- There is a strong association between running away and non-attendance at school, due to truancy or exclusion.
- The most common reasons for running away from home are conflicts with parents or stepparents, physical or sexual abuse, rejection and neglect.

Risk
- Young people may be as much at risk on the first occasion they go missing as after multiple absences.
- Equally, repeat runaways are just as vulnerable as others, although they are often viewed more as 'problems' in themselves rather than as 'at risk - and sufficient consideration should be given as to why they are persistently absenting themselves.
- Young people who go missing are at risk of violence and victimisation, including sexual assault, especially if they sleep rough.
- Young people who go missing are vulnerable to sexual exploitation, including involvement in prostitution.
- Runaways are at risk of involvement in offending, and this is especially true for those who go missing often from placements in residential care.

Persistent runaways
- Most young people run away only once or twice, but a substantial minority go missing repeatedly and this group are at greatest risk of depression, offending, detachment from school and drug or alcohol abuse.
- Young people with emotional and behavioural difficulties are more likely than others to go missing repeatedly from care.
- Young people who run away repeatedly from home have often experienced severe family problems and disruption or abuse.
- Persistent running away may be a precursor to adult homelessness.

Runaways from home
At greatest risk are those who:
- Run away once or twice due to abuse or depression.
- Run away three or more times, especially if they begin before the age of 11.
- Have become detached from their families for lengthy periods (6 months or more).
- One fifth of runaways from home have been forced to leave.

Runaways from care

- 60% go missing for one day or less.
- Around half have gone missing from home before being 'looked after.'
- Around half go missing to be with friends or, to a lesser extent, with family.
- Reasons for going missing, patterns of absence, actions while away and patterns of return tend to vary depending on whether young people are 'runaways' or 'missing to be with friends.'
- Two thirds of runaways from care who sleep rough are only 11-13 years old.
- Differences in the management, regimes and cultures of individual children's homes appear to make young people either more or less likely to go missing.
- Young people may also go missing from care because they are upset about separation from their families; have little previous experience of boundaries being set for their behaviour; are overwhelmed by the pressures of institutional life; are influenced by friends within and outside placements; or are using going missing as a safety valve or cry for help.

Numbers going missing from home and care

1.1   There has been growing concern in recent years about the number of young people running away from home or going missing from care placements. The *Safe on the Streets*' survey has been able to produce the most reliable estimate of prevalence yet. This survey has estimated that one in nine (11%) of young people in the UK will run away for one night or more on at least one occasion before the age of 16, amounting to 77,000 young people running away for the first time each year *(Safe on the Streets, 1999)*. This study found that the prevalence rate was similar across different types of areas, irrespective of population density and economic prosperity. In other words, young people are likely to run away in all parts of the UK (urban, suburban and rural) and from more as well as less affluent families. As others have found, running away is a national phenomenon *(Abrahams and Mungall 1992)*.

1.2   Young people looked after in residential or foster placements are far more likely than average to run away *(Safe on the Streets 1999; Abrahams and Mungall 1992)*. Surveys have found that, while less than 1% of children are looked after, around 30% of runaways reported to the police are missing from substitute care *(Abrahams and Mungall 1992; Newman 1989)*. The NCH survey found that 96% of young people reported missing from care placements were absent from residential care *(Abrahams and Mungall 1992)*. Although there is evidence that young people do go missing from foster placements, little is known about the extent of this problem, as this group is less likely to be recorded by the police as being missing from care. The York University study of young people missing from care placements confirmed that many young people looked after in residential care do go missing. This study found that the proportion of all 11-16 year olds looked after in children's homes who went missing on at least one occasion during a twelve month period ranged from around 25% in two local authorities to 65% and 71 % in another two (*Wade et al 1998)*.

1.3   The proportion of young people in residential care who go missing is therefore high, and this constitutes a serious problem. Yet, since the actual number of young people who are looked after in residential placements at any one time is small, the number of young people missing from residential care probably accounts for only a small proportion of all runaways *(Wade et al 1998)*. However, there is some evidence that young people going missing from residential care are more likely to run away repeatedly than those running away from home, so this relatively small group of young people may be responsible for a high number of incidents of running away *(Stein et al 1994; Rees 1993; Abrahams and Mungall 1992)*.

1.4   Yet, although going missing from care placements is extensive, local authorities may have little information about the scale of the problem, particularly among those missing from foster care.

Characteristics of young people who go missing

Age

1.5   Running away is primarily a phenomenon of the mid teen years.   Surveys of young people missing from home and substitute care have found a majority age of between 13 and 15 years.   The average age at which young people first go missing from both home and care is 13 years *(Wade et al 1998; Graham and Bowling 1995; Rees 1993)*. However, a substantial minority first go missing much younger than that.   The *Safe on the Streets* survey found that a quarter had first run away or been forced to leave home before the age of 11, while the York University survey of runaways from care found that one fifth had first gone missing (from home or care) before the age of 12 (Safe *on the Streets 1999; Wade et al 1998)*.   There is also evidence that those who first go missing at an early age are more likely to run away more often *(Safe on the Streets 1999)*.

Sex

1.6   Females are more likely to run away from home than males, but males are likely to first run away at an earlier age and to run away more often (Safe *on the Streets 1999)*. Research on young people going missing from care found few gender differences in respect to rates of running away but did find that males who went missing were more likely to have been assessed as having emotional and behavioural difficulties, to have been excluded from school and to have a history of offending *(Wade et al 1998)*.

Ethnic   origin

1.7   Earlier studies had tended to find that, compared to white young people, there were higher rates of running away among young people of African-Caribbean origin and lower rates among those of Indian/Pakistani/Bangladeshi origin (Rees 1993; Abrahams and Mungall 1992).   However, the Safe on the Streets research, based on a much larger representative sample of young people, casts doubt on this pattern.   This study suggests that, although there are differences between ethnic groups, with white young people having the highest rate, these differences are not statistically significant (Safe on the Streets, 1999).

1.8   Earlier research also suggested that young people of African-Caribbean origin were more likely to go missing from residential care than white young people *(Abrahams and Mungall 1992)*.   However, detailed analysis of this issue in one London borough indicated that this apparent over-representation was due to the fact that black young people were heavily over-represented among the residential care population and that they were, in reality, no more likely to go missing *(Wade et al 1998)*.   In overall terms, therefore, recent research has tended to emphasise the similarity in running away rates across different ethnic groups.

Special   needs

1.9   There are some indications that young people with special needs are more likely than average to run away *(Safe on the Streets 1999)*. Among young people who go missing from care, those assessed as having emotional and behavioural difficulties form a distinctive sub-group.   They are likely to first go missing at a younger age, to go missing more often and to stay away longer. They are far more likely to have been excluded from school and to have past convictions for offending than others who go missing.   The implication of this is that, although they constitute less than a fifth of those go missing from care, young people with emotional and behavioural difficulties are a high risk group for going missing often *(Wade et al 1998)*.

Patterns of going missing from home

1.10   Most young people who run away do so only once or twice *(Safe on the Streets 1999; Rees 1993; Abrahams and Mungall 1992;)*. For example, the *Safe on the Streets* study found that this was the case for around four out of five of the runaways surveyed.   On the most recent occasion they had run away, one third had been missing only during the day and one third had spent only one night away from home, but around one in seven spent a week or more away.   Those aged 16 and 17 tended to stay away for longer periods *(Safe on the Streets 1999)*.

1.11   Research on young people missing from home has sometimes made the distinction between 'runaways' and 'throwaways', that is, young people thrown out of home. The *Safe on the Streets* study found that, although the majority of young people going missing under the age of 16 had run away, one fifth had been forced to leave home. Young people who had gone missing repeatedly and those aged 16 or 17 were more likely to have been forced to leave. The 14 and 15 year olds who were forced to leave home were the group most likely to be living in a stepfamily (27%) and the least likely to be living with both birth parents. This group were likely to stay away longer than average, in many cases for a week or more, and most stayed with relatives *(Safe on the Streets 1999)*.

1.12   Very few young people go outside their local area while away *(Safe on the Streets 1999; Rees 1993; Abrahams and Mungall 1992)*. Although many runaways find a temporary place to stay, a substantial minority are at risk through sleeping rough. The *Safe on the Streets* study found that while around two thirds of the young runaways slept at a friend or relative's house the last time they were away, a quarter slept rough. While most young people relied on friends and relatives for support while away, around one in seven used more risky strategies such as begging, stealing and survival sex (*Safe on the Streets 1999*).

1.13   This study identified four broad groups of runaways: young people who do not run away overnight; young people who have run away overnight once or twice; those who have run away repeatedly and those who have become detached for lengthy periods. It identified certain groups as being at particularly high risk, both at home and while away. These were: young people who have run away overnight once or twice due to abuse or depression; young people who ran away three times or more, especially if they began before the age of 11, and those who have become detached for lengthy periods, having no contact with their families for at least six months. The latter group in most cases ran away due to physical violence, although some were prompted by sexual abuse, domestic violence and peer influence. Most of this group adopted risky survival strategies, including offending, drug dealing or survival sex.

1.14   Compared to those under 16, those who first run away or are forced to leave at the age of 16 or 17 are more likely to do so for reasons of family conflict and breakdown and less likely as a result of abuse. Problems relating to mental health, alcohol and drugs are as common among this group as among those who first run away or are forced to leave at a younger age. The *Safe on the Streets* study found that this group often spend long periods of time living in unstable situations and in some cases never return home. Many are highly vulnerable, with a substantial minority sleeping rough or begging and stealing in order to survive.

Patterns of going missing from care

1.15   The University of York study found that young people in different types of placement tended to have different histories of going missing. Young people in residential placements were likely to have gone missing more often in the past than those going missing from foster placements, but their absences tended to be of shorter duration.

1.16   Around 60% went missing from residential or foster placements for one day or less while, at the other extreme, 10% were missing for a week or more. Those aged 14 and 15 tended to stay away longer *(Wade et al 1998)*.

Young people who first go missing from home

1.17   Many of those who go missing from care have run away from home before they started to be looked after *(Stein et al 1994; Rees 1993)*. A recent study of young people going missing from care found that nearly half had first run from home *(Biehal and Wade 2000; Wade et al 1998)*. These tended to be teenage entrants to care, who were more likely to be looked after as a result of relationship breakdown. For these young people, the roots of going missing from care tended to derive from problems they experienced while living in the family home.

1.18   Those who began going missing after they were placed in substitute care were more often looked after from a younger age, as a result of abuse or their families' inability to provide care, and they tended to have experienced more placement movement during their care careers.

Patterns of absence

1.19   The NCH survey found that in many cases 'running away' from care placements is simply absence without staff permission, or running to stay with family or friends *(Abrahams and Mungall 1992)*. Consistent with this, the University of York study identified two distinctive patterns of absence *(Biehal and Wade 2000; Wade et al 1998)*.   Social workers and carers reported that, on the last occasion young people had gone missing, just over half had gone missing to be with family or friends, of whom the vast majority stayed with friends.   The remainder had run away or stayed away without permission.   These were classified as *the friends profile* and the *runaways profile*. As Table 1 shows, those whose absences approximated to the *friends* profile tended to be slightly older and were more likely to be in foster placements, while those involved in incidents fitting the *runaways* profile were likely to be younger and were more likely to be in residential placements. Nearly three quarters of those involved in runaway incidents were from residential settings.

Table 1: nature of absence

	Friends profile	*Runaways* profile
Age	Older	Younger
Placement type	More in foster care	More in residential care
Absences in past year	Lower number of absences	Higher number of absences
Length of time away	Away longer	Away less time
Immediate reasons	Time with friends/family centred reasons - 51%	Time with friends/family centred reasons - 17%
	Placement centred reasons/ personal difficulties - 36%	Placement centred reasons / personal difficulties - 75%
Alone or with others	More likely alone (62%)	More likely with others (53%)
Where stayed	92% with friends/family	49% with friends/family; 30% slept rough
Offending while away	27% committed an offence	68% committed an offence
Nature of return	62% returned voluntarily	48% returned voluntarily

1.20   Each of these profiles is associated with different patterns of going missing.   In incidents fitting the *friends* profile, young people were more likely to go missing in order to spend time with friends or for family-centred reasons, and were less likely to leave for placement-centred reasons. They were more likely to go missing alone, to stay away for a longer period of time and to return voluntarily. They had gone missing less often in the past and were less likely to have committed offences while away.

1.21   In contrast, the majority of those involved in *runaways* incidents were prompted to go missing by placement-centred or personal difficulties and had gone missing more often in the past. They were more likely to go missing with others, to stay away for shorter periods of time, and were less likely to return voluntarily. Although many stayed with friends or relatives, nearly a third of this group slept rough. Two thirds of those involved in *runaways* incidents were involved in offending while they were away. These patterns of absence have important implications for practice, which will be discussed in Section 5.

Young people who go missing repeatedly

1.22   Although most young people run away only once or twice, some do so persistently. The *Safe on the Streets* researchers found that around 15% of all runaways under the age of 16 had run away overnight more than three times *(Safe on the Streets 1999)*. The University of York study found that, while nearly one third of the young people who went missing from residential placements did so only once during the course of a year, just over a quarter of the residents (28%) went missing ten or more times and were responsible for the majority of incidents *(Wade et al 1998)*.

1.23   Other studies have also found that young people who run away repeatedly are more likely to have some experience of substitute care, either currently or in the past *(Stein et al 1994; Rees 1993)*. A number of those who repeatedly run away from home subsequently enter substitute care. Some stop running away, others continue to run away but remain attached to the care system, while others become detached from substitute care *(Stein et al 1994)*.

1.24   For those who go missing often, there is a progressive risk of detachment from family, carers and school. They are more likely to be detached from the school system, either through exclusion or non-attendance *(Wade et al 1998; Rees 1993; Abrahams and Mungall 1992; Millham et al 1977)*. They are also more likely to have problems with depression, drugs and alcohol and to have involvement in offending *(Wade et al 1998; Stein et al 1994; Newman 1989)*. For those going missing from care placements, the relationship between going missing often and offending is the strongest of these associations *(Wade et al 1998)*.

1.25   Repeat patterns of going missing may therefore have long term implications for the transition to adulthood for some young people. There is evidence that persistent running away can be a precursor to adult homelessness *(Craig et al 1996; Kirby 1994; Simons and Whitbeck 1991)*. In addition, research on leaving care has found that where young people's care careers are marked by movement and instability, offending, and a failure to obtain educational qualifications, their chances of a successful transition from care to community as young adults are seriously reduced *(Biehal et al 1995; Cook 1994; Broad 1994)*.

Going missing and offending

1.26   The link between running away and involvement in offending has been identified in a number of studies *(Wade et al 1998; Graham and Bowling 1995; Abrahams and Mungall 1992)*. In particular, the closeness of the relationship between running away and offending has been a consistent theme in the literature on residential institutions since the 1970s *(Sinclair and Gibbs 1998; Millham et al 1977; Clarke and Martin 1971)*. For example, the NCH study found that 46% of runaways from residential care had previous criminal convictions, compared to 7% of reported runaways from home, and for male runaways from residential care this figure rose to 70% *(Abrahams and Mungall 1992)*. Looking at this another way, a major study of children's homes established that young people with previous convictions were far more likely to run away than those who had none, and that those who ran away were far more likely to be convicted while living in the home. However, this association between running away and being convicted while living in a children's home was particularly strong for those who had no previous convictions, which suggests that young people were led into offending by other residents *(Sinclair and Gibbs 1998)*.

1.27   The University of York study found that some young people had begun offending prior to their admission to care and ran away from their placements (usually in children's homes) in order to continue doing so. Others began offending once they were looked after, either because they were enticed or to gain acceptance from peers and avoid bullying, which was rife in certain units. In some cases, offending occurred during 'group escapes' from children's homes, which had a strong criminal sub-culture. In others, individuals committed opportunist crimes while away in order to survive on the streets *(Wade et al 1998)*.

Going missing and detachment from school

1.28   There is a close association between running away and school non-attendance through truancy or exclusion *(Safe on the Streets 1999; Wade et al 1998; Stein et al 1994; Rees 1993; Abrahams and Mungall 1992; Brennan et al 1978)*. For example, the *Safe on the Streets* study found that over half of those who regularly or sometimes truanted had run away overnight compared to just 6% of those who had never truanted. The York University study also found that going missing from care placements is strongly associated with school exclusion and non-attendance. Over two fifths of their sample were out of mainstream schooling at the time they last went missing. Other research has also shown that there are often serious problems with school attendance for young people living in residential placements. An SSI/Ofsted inspection found that one in four 14-16 year olds in residential care do not attend school regularly and that many have been excluded (SSI/Ofsted 1995).

1.29   Evidence would suggest that the relationship between school non-attendance and running away is reciprocal rather than causal. Once these patterns become established they are mutually reinforcing *(Safe on the Streets 1999; Wade et al 1998)*. Although, for some of those looked after, non-attendance began before entry to care, young people in residential care were often affected by a culture of non-attendance apparent in some children's homes. In addition, a lack of appropriate or adequate provision by education authorities for young people experiencing difficulties at school meant that many young people drifted for months without regular education and consequently without any structure to their daily lives, making them more likely to be led by peers into the seeming attractions of going missing *(Wade et al 1998)*.

Reasons for going missing from home

1.30   The vast majority of young people run away due to problems at home *(Safe on the Streets 1999; Brennan et al 1978). The Safe on the Streets* study found that, where disharmony in families is less severe, young people living in stepfamilies or with a lone parent are significantly more likely to run away than those living with both birth parents. However, where family disharmony is severe, young people are equally likely to run away from any type of family. For those who ran away repeatedly, particularly high levels of family problems and disruption were identified.

1.31   Conflict with parents or step-parents is the most common reason by young people for running away *(Biehal et al, 2002;Mitchell 2002; Safe on the Streets, 1999).* However, over a quarter of the young people in the *Safe on the Streets* survey were attempting to escape physical and emotional abuse, rejection or neglect. The need to escape difficulties between parents - including domestic violence, drug and alcohol problems and persistent arguments - were a major influence for some young people; as were boundary and control issues and feelings of unfair treatment for others. Running away was rarely motivated by the need for excitement.

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1.33   While conflicts may most often trigger running away, these may be symptomatic of deeper seated difficulties within families. Many young runaways using streetwork projects have been found to have experienced a high level of disruption in their lives due to relationship breakdown, conflict and violence and some have spent time in care earlier in their lives *(Stein et al 1994; Newman 1989)*. This is consistent with the findings of research in the USA, which has indicated that persistent runaways may be attempting to escape severely abusive parents *(Simons and Whitbeck 1991; Brennan et al 1978)*. Both British and American studies have identified physical abuse as an important factor underlying the decision to run away *(Rees 1993; Johnson and Carter 1990; Newman 1989; Farber 1984),* and this may be especially the case for those who first run away from home before the age of 11 *(Safe on the Streets 1999)*.

1.34   Other studies have found that runaways may be fleeing sexual abuse *(Spatz Widom and Ames 1994; Rees 1993; Cohen et al 1991; Newman 1989; Stiffman 1989 Janus et al 1987)*. Physical, sexual or emotional abuse may be underlying reasons for going missing even among those who have run away only once or twice and, for this sub-group, experiences while missing may be similar to those of persistent runaways, with an increased likelihood of sleeping rough and being hurt *(Safe on the Streets 1999)*. Around a quarter of the young people in the *Safe on the Streets* survey reported that problems at school were linked to their decision to run away. However, the fact that most young people were not able to identify a particular issue at school and that, in most cases, these young people were also experiencing problems at home, suggests that problems at school are only likely to be a direct trigger for running away for a relatively small minority of young people.

Reasons for going missing from care placements

The impact of the placement context

1.35   Not only are there wide variations between local authorities in the proportions of young people who go missing, there are also considerable differences in running away rates between children's homes, even within the same authority *(Wade et al 1998; Abrahams andMungall 1992)*. Successive studies have found wide variations in running away rates from similar residential establishments.   Significantly, it has not been possible to explain these variations in terms of differences in types of establishments or in intake *(Sinclair and Gibbs 1998; Abrahams and Mungall 1992; Clarke and Martin 1971; Sinclair 1971)*. This implies that, whatever individual reasons young people might have for going missing, the regimes and cultures of individual placements are likely to be highly influential.

1.36   The University of York study explored the ways in which the environment of particular children's homes appeared to make going missing more or less likely. They found that in some units staff felt overwhelmed and powerless to control the behaviour of residents.   In units where there was little structure and little evidence of staff authority, children as young as 10 or 11 quickly realised that they could come and go as they pleased. Units where staff authority was weak and where there was a generally permissive atmosphere could be frightening places for younger or less well-established residents.   Some therefore ran away to escape bullying which staff appeared unable to control, while others were enticed by their peers. In units with high rates of running away there was often a culture of offending and running away.   In these circumstances, young people often felt obliged to go missing with other residents in order to gain acceptance from the group.   In the absence of adequate protection from staff, some young people found that a failure to conform to the norms of the resident group could make life very unpleasant indeed.   Not surprisingly, some young people spoke of how stressful group living could be and how they went missing to escape the pressures of institutional life.

1.37   Children's homes with lower rates of going missing differed in terms of management style and staff culture. In these homes there was evidence of strong leadership from senior staff and a shared view of the home's purpose. Although, like other units, these homes could be volatile places, staff felt well supported and had the opportunity to discuss and agree a consistent approach to individual young people.   In these respects, homes with lower rates of running away were similar in nature to those identified as providing good quality care in a recent study of children's homes *(Sinclair and Gibbs 1998)*.

1.38   Institutional features of the care system may also contribute to the problem of going missing. The lack of placement choice has been identified as an underlying problem, resulting in many young people being accommodated in inappropriate placements.   Social workers of young people who go missing have voiced concerns that, due to a lack of placement choice, many are in placements which fail to meet their needs *(Wade et al 1998; Abrahams and Mungall 1992)*. Such placement policies can also create a mix of difficult and vulnerable young people that is hard to manage successfully *(Utting 1997)*.   Young people in inappropriate placements may be unhappy or out of control and hence more likely to go missing.

Individual motivations

1.39   Although there is clear evidence that the placement context has an effect on going missing, it is important to bear in mind that young people who go missing from care placements are usually from troubled family backgrounds which are also influential. Many have already run away from home as a result of the same difficulties experienced by the runaways from home discussed above.   In many cases, their individual histories and circumstances therefore constitute underlying reasons for running away from care (Safe on the Streets 1999; Wade et al 1998).   The York study found that for some young people, going missing had its roots in the lack of controls or boundaries they had experienced while living with their families.   They had little experience of adult restrictions on their behaviour and were not prepared to accept them from residential staff or foster carers. For these and others who had previously run away from home, going missing was a strategy developed before they entered substitute care.

1.40   Some were deeply upset about separation from their families and, although they had no complaints about their placements, they simply did not want to be looked after. This group repeatedly ran home in the hope that they would be allowed to stay, although sadly these were often the very young people whose families had rejected or abandoned them. These and others used going missing as a safety valve or as a cry for help when they felt angry or upset.

1.41   For others, wider social networks were influential and they would stay out overnight to spend time with friends. Some of these were involved in offending or drug use while away. Those living in cities were sometimes drawn by the apparent attractions of street life to spend nights on city centre streets.

The lack of therapeutic services

1.42   Recent research has identified a high rate of mental health problems among looked after children *(McCann et al 1996; Dimegen et al 1999)*. One study found that a significant proportion of looked after adolescents were suffering from psychiatric disorders which had previously gone undetected. Two thirds of adolescents looked after in one county authority had a psychiatric disorder, including nearly a quarter who had a major depressive disorder. Among those in residential placements the proportion with mental health problems rose to 96% *(McCann et al 1996)*. Yet although some young people who are looked after have serious behaviour problems or are struggling to cope with experiences of abuse or rejection, only limited therapeutic help is available to address these issues, either within or outside their placements *(Berridge and Brodie 1998; Wade et al 1998)*. Since 1998, the development of the *Quality Protects* programme and its implementation by local authorities has required that they should adopt a more systematic approach to the provision of services to address the health needs of looked after young people, including their mental health needs (see 2.13 below).

1.43   The University of York researchers found that the case management role of many social workers left them with little opportunity for direct work with young people and few alternatives were available. A lack of community-based therapeutic resources and the long delays in gaining access to those that were available meant that young runaways with serious emotional or behavioural problems failed to receive help. Even where these services were offered, take up was often poor as some young people found sessions at clinics too formal or their lives were too chaotic for them to attend regularly. The study suggested that closer liaison between health and social services is needed to ensure the flexible delivery of a range of services appropriate to the varied needs of this vulnerable group of young people *(Wade et al 1998)*.

The risks involved in going missing

1.44   Young people who go missing may encounter a variety of risks. Some resort to stealing, begging or providing sex for money in order to survive and some may be involved in substance abuse *(Biehal and Wade 2000; Safe on the Streets 1999; Stein et al 1994; Newman 1989)*. For example, one study found significant levels of substance abuse, offending, self harm and depression among young runaways using streetwork projects *(Stein et al 1994)*. Not surprisingly, sleeping rough has been identified as a particularly risky activity. Young people who sleep rough or stay with someone they have just met are far more likely to be hurt than other runaways, and those who sleep rough are especially vulnerable to being sexually assaulted *(Safe on the Streets 1999)*. Among those going missing from care, those whose activities corresponded to the *runaways* profile were more likely to sleep rough, and two thirds of those who slept rough were only 11-13 years old *(Wade et al 1998)*. Irrespective of whether they sleep rough, young people who go missing are at risk of violence and victimisation.

1.45   A key finding from recent research studies, which has implications for assessing the likely risks attached to a young person's absence, is the absence of evidence to support the notion of a developing pattern of running away from not so bad to worse. The *Safe on the Streets* study found that, although those who had run away more often had been exposed to a greater range of risks than those who had only run away once or twice, this pattern of higher risk absences tended to have been in evidence from the beginning of this pattern of behaviour. Equally, for young people going missing repeatedly from care placements, there is no evidence of a progressive pattern in which successive episodes will necessarily become more protracted and riskier *(Wade et al 1998)*. Since there is no

developing pattern in running away, young people may be as much at risk on the first occasion they go missing as after multiple absences. What matters is why they go, where they go and who with on any given occasion.

1.46   Young people who go missing are also vulnerable to sexual exploitation, including involvement in prostitution. Young runaways and looked after young people may be targeted by paedophiles and procurers, who are aware of their extreme vulnerability to sexual exploitation (*Wade et al 1998; Shaw et al 1996; Newman 1989; Wild 1989)*. The University of York study of young people going missing from substitute care found that most of those involved in prostitution had been drawn into it while being looked after. Some are drawn into prostitution by contacts outside the care system, and are then pressurised to entice or coerce their peers in children's homes to follow suit *(Wade et al 1998; Farmer and Pollock 1998)*. Young people going missing from care who engage in prostitution may be pressurised by violence or threats of violence, but may also be enticed through the illusion of being valued and the lure of money.

2.   Law and policy

Summary points

Law

- It is an offence for a person who does not have parental responsibility to "take or detain" a young person under 16 without lawful authority.
- It is an offence to assist young people in running away if they are on a care order, an emergency protection order or in police protection (S.49 Children Act 1989).
- In these circumstances, the court may make a recovery order (S.50 Children Act 1989).
- Young people who have a history of absconding may be placed in secure accommodation if in doing so they are likely to suffer significant harm if they abscond again (S.25 Children Act 1989).
- The responsible authority are required to draw up and record in writing the procedures to be followed when any child accommodated in a children's home is absent without permission and have a policy for unauthorised absences and ensure that these procedures are drawn to the attention of the children accommodated in the home and of all staff working in the home (Regulation 20 of the Children's Homes Regulations 1991).
- Short-term refuges may be provided for runaways under 16 years (S.51 Children Act 1989).
- The Children (Leaving Care) Act 2000 imposes a duty on local authorities to keep in touch with young people who have left care in order to make sure that they receive the support to which they are entitled. The duty runs until the young person reaches 21, or later if he/she is still receiving help from the local authority with education or training. These provisions will ensure that a young person leaving care cannot simply disappear and be forgotten.

Policy

- Runaways from home are likely to be 'children in need' and may therefore be entitled to services under S. 17 of the Children Act 1989.
- Research indicates that persistent runaways are likely to be socially excluded and hence fall within the remit of the lead priority of the *National Priorities Guidance.*
- The *Quality Protects* Objectives 1,2, 3, 4 and 7 are likely to apply to many young runaways.
- *Quality Protects* Management Action Plans (MAPS) should include plans to reduce the rate of going missing from care placements.
- Children's Services Plans should demonstrate careful inter-agency planning to meet the needs of runaways from both home and care.

The law regarding young people away from home

2.1   If a child under 16 (or 18 if disabled) 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. The Act also provides that anyone who has care of a child without parental responsibility may do what is reasonable to safeguard and promote the child's welfare (Children Act 1989 S.3.5). In these circumstances, it might be considered 'reasonable' to inform the police or social services, if not the parents, of the child's whereabouts.

2.2   Anyone who 'takes or detains' a runaway under 16 without lawful authority may be prosecuted under Section 2 of the Child Abduction Act 1984. The enforcement of this provision might be problematic, however, if the young person has chosen to stay with another adult of their own free will. Despite this legal difficulty, in practice young people who run away under the age of 16 are likely to be returned to those who have parental responsibility for them, unless to do so would be placing them at risk of significant harm.

2.3   A young person who wishes to leave home under the age of 16 may apply for a residence order under Section 8 of the Children Act 1989, if the court is satisfied that he or she has sufficient understanding to make this application. In these circumstances, parental responsibility is given to the person with whom the young person resides, for the duration of the residence order. Residence orders are normally made only in respect of young people under the age of 16.

2.4   While the options for young people aged 16 or over who run away or are forced to leave home or substitute care are limited *while they are away,* they are greater than those that exist for the under 16's. The former are legally able to find employment, can claim benefits in exceptional circumstances and gain access to emergency hostel provision. Young people under 16 away from home have no legal right to live independently of adult care, no entitlement to benefits, only a limited ability to work and, in consequence, no legitimate means of supporting themselves *(Safe on the Streets 1999).*

The law regarding young people missing from substitute care and accommodation

2.5   For young people who go missing from care placements, local authorities have fewer powers in respect of those who are accommodated, than with regard to those on care orders. Since there is no transfer of parental responsibility when young people are accommodated by a local authority under Section 20 of the Children Act, their legal status if they go missing from care placements will be the same as for young people who go missing from home. This means that neither the police nor social services have any additional powers to effect their recovery unless it is felt that they are likely to suffer significant harm

2.6   However, in respect of young people on:
- care orders
- emergency protection orders, or
- in police protection

where either the local authority "shares" parental responsibility or the child has been placed under the protection of a constable, it is an offence to assist young people in running away or to keep them away from a 'responsible person' who legally has care of them at the time *(Children Act 1989 S.49).* For young people in these circumstances who go missing, run away or stay away, Section 50 of the Children Act allows the court to make a recovery order. This authorises the police to enter premises to search for a missing child and allows a person authorised by the court to remove a child.

2.7 In addition, Section 32 (1A) of the Children and Young Person's Act 1969 permits the arrest, without warrant, of a young person who is missing:
- from a place of safety to which he or she has been taken following an arrest
- accommodation in which he or she is required to live under a residence requirement attached to a supervision order, or
- from local authority accommodation to which he or she has been remanded.

2.8   Section 46 of the Children Act 1989 empowers police officers to take a child into police protection when they would otherwise be likely to suffer significant harm. They may remove that child to suitable accommodation and keep them there. Whilst, the Act gives police officers the power to take a child into police protection it should be emphasised that it does not allow the use of force to do so.

2.9   When young people who are looked after cannot be prevented from going missing by any other means, Section 25 of the Children Act makes provision for them to be placed in secure accommodation, but only if it appears that:
- they have a history of absconding and are likely to abscond from any other type of accommodation *and*
- if they abscond, they are likely to suffer significant harm.

2.10   The legislation makes it clear that secure accommodation must never be used simply because a child runs away but only if he or she is *also* likely to suffer significant harm in doing so. Secure accommodation may be used for young people who are accommodated as well as for those on care

orders who meet the criteria established by Section 25 of the Children Act 1989. For those who are accommodated parental agreement to placing them in secure accommodation must be sought.

2.11   In addition, the Children (Secure Accommodation) Regulations makes it clear that a child can only be placed in secure accommodation for up to 72 hours in any 28 day period before obtaining an order of the Court *(The Children (Secure Accommodation) Regulations Department of Health 1991).*

The legal provision for refuges

2.12   Some young people may benefit from a short period of time away from home in order to resolve some of the issues which led them to run away. Section 51 of the Children Act 1989 provides a legal framework for the provision of short term refuges to young people under the age of 16, exempting agencies which provide refuges from charges of harbouring young people running away from home or missing from care. Young people may only be accommodated in a refuge or with a refuge foster carer if they appear to be at risk of harm. They may stay for a continuous period of up to 14 days, and for no more than 21 days in a three month period. *(Department of Health 1991a).* The objectives of refuges are expected to be rehabilitation with parents or other responsible authority where this is consistent with the welfare of the child.

The policy framework

2.13   Many young people who run away from home will be 'children in need' *(Section 17 of the Children Act 1989),* who may be suffering, or may be likely to suffer, significant harm *(Section 47 of the Children Act 1989).* As the research shows:
- running away may be an indicator of serious problems, such as abuse or neglect.
- while absent, runaways may be at risk of physical harm or involvement in offending, prostitution or substance abuse
- running away may be symptomatic of serious family conflict which may lead to family breakdown
- persistent runaways may become detached from home and school.

2.14   For all these reasons, runaways from home are likely to be children in need and may therefore be entitled to services under the family support provisions of the Children Act 1989, including advice, guidance and counselling. Local authorities consequently have a duty to safeguard and promote their welfare and to facilitate the provision of services by others, such as voluntary agencies.

2.15 *The National Priorities Guidance for Modernising Health and Social Services* and the *Quality Protects* programme *(Department of Health 1998a; 1998b)* provide a framework for the provision of services to children in need and set specific objectives and targets. The lead priority for children's welfare in the *National Priorities Guidance* is 'to promote and safeguard the welfare of children vulnerable to social exclusion, and particularly of children looked after by local authorities'. Young people who run away persistently, becoming detached from centres of adult authority, and young people who run away due to parental neglect or abuse might all be regarded as socially excluded. Action to safeguard the welfare of young people who go missing from both home and care therefore falls within the priorities set out in the *National Priorities Guidance.*

2.16   The *Quality Protects'* objectives for improving children's services also apply to young runaways. Objective 1 of ensuring that children are securely attached to carers capable of providing safe and effective care, which applies to family support work as well as to children looked after, would clearly encompass both preventive work with families where young people run away from home and responses to those who go missing from care. Objectives 3 and 4, which refer to the need to ensure that children in need, including children who are looked after, gain maximum life chance benefits from educational opportunities, health care and social care, are also pertinent. Objective 5 requires local authorities to ensure that young people leaving care are not isolated and participate socially and economically. The Children (Leaving Care) Act 2000 places a duty on local authorities to "keep in touch" with care leavers. Therefore, local authorities ought to be proactive in attempting to find young people they have looked after whose whereabouts is unknown. Equally relevant, is Objective 7, referring to effective assessment, as it might ensure that serious attention is given to assessing the reasons why young people go missing and planning an appropriate response in both family and care contexts. The new *Framework for the Assessment of Children in Need and their Families* provides

helpful guidance on the development of a systematic approach to assessment *(Department of Health, Department for Education and Employment and Home Office 2000)*. In view of the risks faced by runaways from both home and care, Objective 2 of ensuring that children are protected from abuse and neglect would also apply.

2.17   The *Quality Protects* programme requires social services departments to produce MAPs which are endorsed corporately by the local authority. In setting out how the authority plans to improve the life chances of looked after children, with particular reference to educational attainment, health and offending, MAPs should include plans to reduce the rate of going missing from care placements. Since going missing is so closely linked to truancy, exclusion and offending, these objectives may be viewed as inter-linked.

2.18   The *Guidance on Children's Services Plans* makes specific reference to runaways. Children's Services Plans are expected to demonstrate careful inter-agency planning to meet the needs of young runaways, through the development of services for young runaways who find themselves homeless and without support. In addition, the *Guidance* emphasises that plans should be made to ensure the assessment and follow-up of young people once they return to their families or care placements *(Department of Health/Department for Education and Employment 1996). A* wide-ranging preventive response is clearly envisaged, involving collaboration between social services, the police and the voluntary sector and with the engagement of education where necessary. This approach is also consistent with the proposals on inter-agency co-operation outlined in *Working Together to Safeguard Children (Department of Health et al 1999).* The Guidance on *Children's Services Plans* also highlights the importance of monitoring running away, suggesting that local information systems which reveal the incidence and patterns of running away are important both for the planning of services and the identification of families or institutions from which young people run away repeatedly.

3. Procedures: Young people who go missing

Summary points

- Joint protocols should be drawn up between Social Services and the Police. These protocols should then provide valuable clarification of the agencies' respective responsibilities towards young people missing from care and from home and where possible will benefit from including any relevant local voluntary sector agencies.
- Clear guidance on the notification of unauthorised absences from placements should be given to social services staff and foster carers *(Section 20 of the Children's Homes Regulations 1991).*

Risk

- Protocols should include procedures on risk assessment for young people who go missing from care. In most cases risk assessment can be in place before a young person moves to a placement and should then be regularly reviewed.
- An inter-agency framework for risk assessment should be based on locally agreed categories of types of absence and the likely level of risk associated with them. These should underpin decisions about police notification.
- Since research has shown that there is no developing pattern, in which each episode becomes progressively riskier, the assessment of risk should be based on a detailed knowledge of each young person, including their history, likely motivation and destination and recent pattern of absences (if any). It is not the number of previous absences but the particular circumstances of these absences which indicates the level of risk.
- Short absences may be as risky as longer ones and should be viewed with equal seriousness.
- Repeat runaways should be viewed with as much concern as any others and careful risk assessments should be made and regularly reviewed.

The return of missing young people

- Plans should be made for the return of looked after young people, including plans as to whether they should return to the same placement.
- Young people should always be encouraged to talk to someone independent of their placement upon their return.
- Police should consider referring runaways from home to social services for assessment for family support services. In some cases, an investigation under S.47 of the Children Act 1989 may be appropriate.
- Where young people missing from home are located, but have not been reported missing to the police by their families, further investigation will be warranted.

Recording and monitoring

- Social workers, staff in children's homes and foster carers should carefully record details of all episodes of unauthorised absence on the case files of looked after young people to ensure that important information needed to protect them and plan their future support is easily accessible.
- Files should contain regular summaries with chronologies kept up to date. This should enable the identification of individual patterns of running away.
- Local authorities should monitor centrally all incidents of unauthorised absence, from care placements, even those of short duration, so that young people or placements in particular difficulty can easily be identified. Procedures should also be in place to collate centrally all incidents of young people who go missing from families.
- In relation to looked after young people, this monitoring information should be regularly reviewed by area managers, residential managers and the police.

- Local monitoring reports should be fed into an annual strategic review of patterns of going missing from care placements, involving senior staff from all partner agencies included in the joint protocols.[2]
- "Section 22" visits by Members to children's homes might also provide an opportunity for monitoring any pattern of young people going missing from the home.

Joint protocols for young people who go missing from care and home

3.1   In 1997 the Local Government Association and the Association of Chief Police Officers produced the joint report *Missing From Care,* which provides a framework for local procedures in relation to children who are absent from local authority care or accommodation *(LGA/ACPO 1997).* Since the publication of this report, many social services departments and police authorities have developed joint protocols. Our survey of local authorities, while by no means exhaustive, drew responses from 60 local authorities that either had or were in the process of developing such protocols. However, given that most derive from the Local Government Association (LGA)/Association of Chief Police Officers (ACPO) report, the focus of most is solely on looked after young people and they rarely address the potential role of voluntary agencies that may be involved with runaways at the local level.

3.2   Joint protocols can provide valuable clarification of the respective responsibilities of social services staff and the police regarding children missing from care. They may also be a vehicle for setting out guidance to social services staff. In the past, only residential staff have been given specific guidance on responding to unauthorised absences from care. Joint protocols therefore provide an opportunity to offer clear guidance not only to residential staff, but also to managers, field social workers and foster carers on action to be taken when young people go missing from placements. In developing the procedures, which constitute these protocols, the safety of the child should always be the principal aim.

3.3   However, these protocols need to address more clearly respective responsibilities, including those of relevant voluntary sector agencies, in relation to young people who run away from home. Despite differences in philosophy and practice that are likely to exist between agencies, these developments represent an opportunity to create a co-ordinated response to all young people who run away. Close co-operation between local authority departments, the police and voluntary agencies will therefore be necessary to exchange information, plan services and facilitate an early response.

Notification of absence

3.4   Given the evidence about the high levels of risk to which young people may be exposed when they go missing, prompt notification of any unauthorised absence is likely to be crucial to their protection. In relation to young people missing from substitute care, residential workers and foster carers should be provided with clear guidance as to who they should notify when they discover that a young person has gone missing. For residential staff, this will probably be the senior manager on duty, while for foster carers it may be the child's social worker, the duty social worker or, if out-of-hours, the Emergency Duty Team. The child's parents should also be informed, unless there are reasons connected with the child's welfare which indicate that this should not be done.

3.5   Regular reports about young people who remain missing from placements should be made to a designated senior manager with responsibility for monitoring going missing. Local guidance should specify the time period after which social workers should notify this senior manager of the absence.

3.6   Protocols should spell out procedures for sharing information about young people missing from substitute care between partner agencies, where this is appropriate. Projects that engage in

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[2] For example, In Portsmouth senior officers of the authority to present an annual *Safety of Children* report to Members of the City Council. This gives information about the number of times young people have gone missing from care along with proposed strategies to better support them to minimise the likelihood of their going missing in the future

outreach work may, in reality, be the first to make contact with some of these young people on the streets.

Risk assessment for looked after young people

3.7   Joint protocols for looked after young people who go missing should include agreed procedures for risk assessment. Before a young person is placed, parents and any relevant agencies should be asked whether he/she has gone missing before and asked to provide details of any previous episodes (in particular, where the young person has gone). In most cases, a risk assessment can be in place from the time the child first moves to the placement and then regularly reviewed within the child care planning and review cycle. This will assess the likelihood of the child going missing, including the triggers and underlying causes of any previous episodes, their likely behaviour if they do and the likely risk to them should this occur. If a child is likely to go missing, the parents' advice should be sought on what action should be taken should this occur. In the light of this, when a child goes missing a designated member of social services staff should then make a risk assessment relating to that specific absence. Local guidance should indicate who should undertake this task, for example the residential unit manager, the child's social worker or, in their absence, the team manager or duty social worker.

Factors to consider in risk assessment for looked after young people

3.8   The assessment of the likely risk to any individual needs to be based on a detailed knowledge of their history, their skill levels, their likely motivations, the pattern of recent absences (if any) and where they are likely to go. Research on running away has consistently shown that there is no developing pattern, in which successive episodes become progressively riskier or more protracted. It is the particular circumstances in which young people go missing and what they do on any particular occasion that are the key factors, rather than the number of previous episodes.

3.9   Research on runaways from care has identified two profiles, which characterise the majority of incidents *(Wade et al 1998). The friends* profile more often involved older teenagers who, without negotiation, left their placements to spend time with friends, or, less commonly, younger children returning to their families. They tended to stay away for as long as they wanted and then return voluntarily. Their absence was less problem-focused and they were less likely to be in trouble with the police while away. The *runaways* profile characterised the absences of three quarters of those who went missing from children's homes, who tended to be in the pre-teen/early teenage range. They were more likely to be experiencing problems in their placements and to have other personal difficulties. Although they tended to be away for a shorter time, they appeared to be at greater risk while away, for example through sleeping rough and offending, and were more reluctant to return (see Section 1.15). Although patterns can change over time, for young people who have gone missing recently these profiles may be an aid to risk assessment.

3.10   The research evidence also suggests that the duration of absences should not be taken as an indicator of the level of risk to the young person. Absences of short duration may be as risky as longer absences and should be viewed with equal seriousness. For example, young people who go missing in order to commit offences or to engage in prostitution are often missing for only a few hours, usually overnight.

3.11   Factors to be considered in assessing risk may include:
  • previously assessed level of vulnerability
  • age of the child
  • time of day/night
  • history of self-harm
  • physical/learning difficulties
  • previous history of going missing
  • any agreement reached regarding staying out beyond the usual time
  • where the child is believed to be
  • his/her likely associations while missing
  • state of mind at time of going missing
  • group behaviour
  • any guidance within the child's own care plan

- any other particular circumstances at the time of the incident

3.12   A number of joint protocols already developed by local authorities have recommended classification as high, medium or low risk on the basis of two or three key indicators: age, legal status and history of going missing. In some authorities, for example, all children under the age of 13 or 14 years are classified as high risk after an agreed number of hours has elapsed or after a certain time at night. In Bedfordshire and in Luton, young people with learning difficulties up to the age of 21 years are also automatically classified as missing and reported to the police without delay. Some authorities automatically classify absences as high risk where young people are on emergency protection orders, police protection orders, on remand, or on bail with a condition to reside in local authority accommodation.

3.13   Some local protocols combine this with a grading of risk on the basis of how many times the young person has previously gone missing (never before = high risk, once = medium risk, more than once = low risk). However, as the research indicates, it is not the number of previous absences but the particular circumstances of each absence (why the young person has gone, where they are likely to be, what they are likely to be doing) which indicates the level of risk to the young person. Risk assessment therefore needs to be based on an assessment of the history, context and circumstances of the absence for each individual.

3.14   Consultation with residential staff and field social workers regarding the framework for risk assessment is desirable, in order to agree broad definitions of vulnerability to guide staff in making risk assessments. This kind of 'bottom-up' approach is likely to produce a better framework grounded in an appreciation of local circumstances. It may also help to reduce possible confusion about interpreting the framework and encourage commitment to implementing it. The inclusion of examples in joint procedures may assist staff in interpreting the framework for risk assessment. The assessment of risk faced by a young person should they run away should not just be based on the number of running away incidents.

> 'The behaviour of a very disturbed 11 year old who has no history of running away from home, but who has threatened to do so, should be considered as a serious level of risk. The behaviour of a 15 year old who persistently returns late from visiting friends can be treated as a less serious level of risk. The 15 year-old's behaviour is not acceptable but it will need to be dealt with in a different way to that of the 11 year old.'
> *Children/young people missing from accommodation: Rochdale Borough Council*

Defining types of absence for looked after young people

3.15   Subsequent to risk assessment, decisions can be made as to the action to be taken, including the decision as to whether the police should be notified. The overall aim should be to manage missing episodes without excessive bureaucracy, while appropriately managing risk. An inter-agency framework for risk assessment should be based on locally agreed categories of unauthorised absence. Research on runaways from care and the LGA/ACPO report would indicate that these categories might include:

- *Unauthorised absence:* children who absent themselves for a short period and then return. They may stay out longer than agreed either on purpose or unwittingly and, although they are absent without permission, their whereabouts are known and they are not considered to be at risk. Such children may be testing boundaries, which may be regarded as being within the range of normal teenage behaviour, and are not necessarily at risk, as long as carers know where they are, are confident that they are safe and that they will shortly return. For example, 'unauthorised absence' might include young people who stay overnight with a friend without authorisation.
- *Missing:* where a child's location is unknown and there is cause for concern, either due to the child's own vulnerability or the danger they pose to others. The reasons for the absence may or may not be known. Equally, the child's likely location may be known and it may be considered to be against the best interests of the child, or even dangerous, for him/her to remain there.

3.16   Some local authorities have included additional categories in their procedures, for example, *persistent missing person* or *absconder*. The latter refers to children who are looked after as a result of a court order, for whom the police have greater powers of recovery (see Section 2.5).

Types of absence and police notification for looked after young people

3.17   The intention is that these locally agreed categories of absence should assist in clarifying the respective roles of the police and social services in responding to incidents. The LGA/ACPO report suggests that *missing* incidents are likely to be higher risk and should lead to immediate police notification.

3.18   The report suggests that incidents in the category of *unauthorised absence* are normally lower risk and should not be notified to the police, initially at least. However, while these young people remain missing they should be subject to continuing risk assessment and the police may be notified at a later stage if necessary. Some local authorities have taken the decision that the safest response is to reclassify as *missing* all young people who have not returned within an agreed interval of their expected return time, ranging from two to six hours in most cases.

3.19   Procedures on notification should also give guidance as to the action to be taken if a child goes missing during an external activity, such as an outing. This may include notification of the local police, as well as the social worker or emergency duty social worker and the residential unit manager.

Locating the looked after young person

3.20   For young people assessed as *missing,* social services staff should pass on to the police any information they can gather about possible locations. Police and social services should work together to locate and return the child, with the police taking primary responsibility.

3.21   For young people assessed as *unauthorised absent,* social services should take all reasonable and practical steps which a good parent would take to establish the whereabouts of the child and arrange for any possible locations to be checked. They should attempt to find and return the child without delay, unless specific safety or public order issues indicate that the police should be involved in effecting his/her return. If young people remain absent after an agreed time limit, they should be reclassified as *missing* and the police should then take primary responsibility for locating them.

3.22   However, social services' role in locating and returning missing children will have resource implications as residential units do not always have sufficient staff on duty to allow a staff member to leave the unit and social workers cannot always abandon their other duties at short notice in order to search for a child. What can be done will inevitably be limited by the number of staff on duty and by foster carers' responsibilities to other children in their care. Local procedures should therefore include guidance as to who will provide back up support to search for a child in these circumstances.

Planning for the return of looked after young people

3.23   Procedures should set out expectations for the planning that should take place if a child remains missing for more than a few hours. Such plans would include consideration of:
- whether the child should return to the same placement
- who will take him/her there
- who will be an appropriate independent person for the child to talk to on his/her return.

> "In planning for the child's return, the key purposes to be achieved are:
> - identifying and dealing with any harm the child has incurred;
> - understanding and dealing with the reasons the child ran away
> - trying to avoid it happening again;."
> *(Joint protocol for children missing from care: Somerset County Council)*

The return

3.24   The Children's Safeguards Review recommended that the reason for a child going missing from care must be identified to ensure that they are not returned to an abusive placement *(Utting 1997)*. Recent research has identified a range of other factors, both internal and external to placements, which may also prompt young people to go missing from care (see Section 1.35). Understanding young people's motivations for going missing is a vital element of any strategy to deter them from repeating this behaviour.

3.25   Young people should therefore be aware that they would be expected to talk to someone independent of their placement on their return. This may well be the social worker, but could be another independent person if the young person wishes, for example a relative, a voluntary agency worker, police officer or a children's rights officer. Ideally there should be an element of choice. It is important that the young person feels comfortable with the person and that account can be taken, wherever possible, of any ethnicity and gender choices they may have. For those in residential placements, this should not be anyone with line management responsibility for the home. Those in external placements should be visited by their social worker within a designated period of time after their return. Procedures should give guidance as to the time within which the child should speak to an independent person, for example 48 hours or 72 hours.

3.26   In relation to young people missing from home, procedures also need to be in place to provide them with an opportunity to talk to an independent person. Since, as we have suggested, running away may be a symptom of deeper seated difficulties within the family, it is important that this interview ascertains young people's reasons for going missing and considers whether the provision of further family support services may be appropriate.

3.27   Where a young person missing from home is located but is found not to have been reported missing to the police by their family, further investigation will be warranted to identify the circumstances of their absence. While their family may simply have not known they were missing or assumed them to be safe and well, the circumstances surrounding the absence may give cause for child protection concerns.

Longer periods of absence

3.28   Joint protocols may also include procedures for information sharing and review in cases where young people are missing from placement for lengthy periods. A senior manager should be identified who will monitor progress in tracing a young person once he or she has been missing for a specified period of time. A number of local authorities have arrangements for inter-agency review of young people who remain missing after a specified period of time which ranges, between authorities, from 72 hours to 14 days. In view of the likely risks to young people whose whereabouts are unknown, a shorter period would be preferable.

Repeat runaways

3.29   Repeat runaways are often viewed as being 'problems' in themselves and considered less vulnerable than others, particularly if they have a history of offending. However, their vulnerability is likely to be equal to that of others who go missing and equal attention and concern should be shown towards them. However frequently a young person runs away, it should not be regarded as routine, normal behaviour. Careful risk assessments should be made which take account of the individual circumstances and history of each young person, in order to determine whether each specific absence should be viewed as low risk or high risk.

> 'When a child has a history of repeatedly going absent, care must be taken not to see successive incidents as simply 'crying wolf.' Any child who consistently goes absent will be experiencing personal problems which may lead him/her into potentially difficult or dangerous circumstances. It is crucial that each episode is assessed in its own right, as well as being assessed in the continuum of incidents.'
> *Missing children who are looked after by the authority: Dorset County Council*

Information for looked after young people

3.30   Information guides for looked after young people should include information about the procedures that will be followed if they go missing and the expectation that they will talk to someone upon their return. This information should also make clear who young people may talk to independent of their placement if they are experiencing difficulties. This may include, for example, their social worker, children's rights officer or a voluntary agency worker. Young people should also be provided with the numbers of national and/or local telephone helplines.

Recording

3.31   As the Guidance to Children's Services Plans suggest, effective interventions in relation to young people who run away from home or substitute care are likely to be premised on good local information systems. It is difficult to envisage how, without accurate information about the 'at risk' population, services can be appropriately planned, monitored and resourced. The careful recording of all incidents therefore represents a first essential building block.

3.32   For young people missing from home, the police have first responsibility for recording details of reported incidents. With regard to young people missing from care, the *Children's Homes Regulations* require local authorities to record in writing the procedure to be followed when any child accommodated in a children's home is absent without permission, and to draw this procedure to the attention of children and staff. They also require residential staff to record on children's confidential records the date and circumstances of any absence of a child from a home, including whether an absence was authorised and where a child went during the period of absence *(Department of Health 1991b)*. However, there has previously been no such requirement for foster carers or social workers.

3.33   Working Together to Safeguard Children recommends that foster carers should monitor the whereabouts of their foster children, their patterns of absence and contacts *(Department of Health et al 1999)*. They should note the time and the circumstances in which young people go missing and pass this information on to the child's social worker. Social worker case files should contain a clearly ordered record of absences, the circumstances in which they took place, the risks associated with them and the responses attempted. Young people move between placements and social workers come and go. Without a clear record of previous absences on individual case files, information important to protecting young people and planning their support will be lost to future social workers and caregivers. *The National Standards for Foster Care   (UK Joint Working Party on Foster Care, NFCA 1999) recommends that the placing authority provides clear procedures for carers and social workers to implement if a child is missing from a foster home.*

Monitoring

3.34   The development of a co-ordinated response will require that information relating to all incidents of young people going missing from home and substitute care is centrally collated and shared between partner agencies. Accurate information about patterns of going missing has, to date, been scant and has inhibited service development by both statutory and voluntary agencies.

3.35   Central monitoring of going missing from both foster and residential care is needed to enable local authorities to identify both placements and young people with particular difficulties and to plan preventive measures and responses. Research has consistently indicated that some children's homes have much higher rates of going missing than others, but without central monitoring it is difficult to see how these can be identified by senior managers so that plans can be made to help staff teams to resolve these difficulties.

3.36   Such procedures are particularly important in the light of the Utting report's recommendations on improving safeguards for young people who are looked after *(Utting 1997)*. Similarly, monitoring patterns for the relatively small number of individuals who go missing repeatedly may provide some pointers towards an effective response. All absences notified to residential managers or social workers should be collated centrally, irrespective of their duration, since research has shown that many of those young people who are most at risk run away repeatedly for relatively short periods of time. Analysis of placement problems could lead to improved quality of care, thus feeding into the *Quality Protects* agenda.

3.37   In Gloucestershire, for example, residential units are required to prepare monthly reports for external line managers which include information on the number of incidents, the circumstances and duration of absences and action taken *(Bridge Child Care Development Service 1996)*. Alternatively, information recorded by social workers on individual case files could be collated at area office level for analysis by a designated senior manager who has responsibility for monitoring patterns of going missing from placements across the authority. This would ensure that information on those missing from foster placements and from residential placements in the private and voluntary sector is also monitored centrally.

3.38   The LGA/ACPO report recommends that this monitoring information should be regularly reviewed at local operational level. Local review of this nature would include residential managers, area managers and the police. Reports on local monitoring data could also be aggregated for authority-wide strategic review.

Medway Social Services are developing a custom built looked after children information system which includes a missing from care module. Social workers are asked to assess the likelihood of young people going missing and suggest plans to mitigate the risk. When information on an incident of going missing is entered, key notifications are automatically made. This system tracks episodes of children going missing, from which placements and at which times. Information on key developmental areas together with an overall rating on their vulnerability will be collected. Trends and patterns in 'missing' statistics together with the outcome of 'return' interviews can be used for service planning.

Strategic review

3.39   Annual strategic reviews of patterns of going missing from home and from foster/residential placements (including placements in the private and voluntary sector) should be established, involving senior staff from all partner agencies. The LGA/ACPO report, although restricted to looked after children, recommends that these meetings should be used to review monitoring reports and to develop effective multi-agency service responses. The report suggests that issues that would be monitored locally and reviewed strategically would include:

- agreed categories of going missing
- incidence
- location
- destination of missing children
- practice and procedural issues
- shared information and procedures
- child protection
- action on return.

These kinds of issues could provide a focus for strategic discussions in relation to both young people missing from care and those who run away from home.

Children on child protection registers who run away from home.

3.40   Where a child reported missing from home is found to be on the child protection register, the police should inform social services immediately. Where any such young person is assessed as being at high risk, local procedures should indicate that the custodian of the Child Protection register in that authority, and in any other local authority where the child is thought likely to be, should be informed. Custodians in the relevant local authorities should be provided with a description of the young person and information about any particular concerns for their welfare.

4. Missing from care: prevention through improving corporate parenting

Summary points

Improving the quality of care for looked after young people may help to provide a context in which going missing is made less likely. In particular, evidence suggests that the following may be helpful:

- Provision of a sufficient range of placement options to meet the differing needs of young people may help to reduce the use of inappropriate placements, improve the mix of residents and may promote greater stability and security.
- Quality of care in children's homes appears to be better where homes are small; where heads of home offer clear leadership, have a clear sense of purpose, proper delegated authority and responsibility, including some control over admissions; and where there exists a strong and positive staff culture.
- School non-attendance and going missing are mutually reinforcing. Positive attention to educational attendance and progress, the avoidance of 'drift' for excluded young people and the provision of specialist help for those with learning difficulties may help to reduce going missing.
- Young people should have regular access to a trusted adult outside their placement and user friendly complaints procedures are required.

Improving corporate parenting

4.1 As corporate parents, local authorities have a duty to safeguard and promote the welfare of children that they look after.[3] The Government has set out its expectations for local authorities as corporate parents in the *Quality Protects* framework. These include the expectation that authorities will provide consistent support, a mixture of care and firmness to support the child's development and will be proactive, not passive, when there are known or suspected serious difficulties. However, the research evidence suggests that certain aspects of corporate parenting may make going missing more likely (see Section 1.35). *Working Together to Safeguard Children* recommends a number of essential safeguards for young people living away from home which would also help to improve corporate parenting *(Department of Health et al 1999, p.63-65).*

4.2 Attention to the institutional factors which make young people unhappy and unsettled in placements can improve the quality of care they receive. Better quality care, which meets the diverse needs of individuals and provides greater structure and stability in their daily lives, may provide a context in which going missing becomes less likely. The *Looking After Children Assessment and Action Records* provide a basis for improving corporate parenting by linking the assessment of young people's needs and progress in all areas of their lives to the child care planning and review process. They also provide the opportunity to place the risk of going missing in the wider context of young people's lives.

Placement choice and stability

4.3 The research indicates that young people who go missing are often in inappropriate placements which fail to meet their needs, due to a lack of local placement options. In line with the recommendations of the Utting report, local authorities need to ensure that a range of placement options is available to meet the needs of different individuals *(Utting 1998)*. This framework might include a number of small, well-managed children's homes, each operating to a clear brief, and a well-resourced and supported professional fostering service for teenagers. Where placement stability is lacking, young people are less likely to establish a stable pattern of attachments and strategies to tackle the underlying difficulties that may influence going missing are likely to be less effective (see Section 6.21).

The culture and regimes of children's homes

4.4   A number of studies have indicated that variations in running away rates between similar residential units are influenced by the culture and regimes of individual placements. Ordinary children's homes contain many young people with complex histories of abuse, neglect and rejection and with serious behaviour problems, presenting difficult problems of care and control to staff. The mix of young people in these establishments may also cause problems for those residents who do not have a history of going missing, truancy or offending, with the result that some are drawn into this once they are looked after. In this context, research has identified a general lack of confidence and sense of powerlessness among many residential staff struggling to deal with young people going missing, leading to ineffective strategies in preventing and responding to this problem *(Wade et al 1998).*

4.5   Recent research on residential care has found that the leadership style of the head of home is a key factor which influences a children's homes regime and its effectiveness in dealing with difficult behaviour. It found that children's homes offering high quality care tended to be those that were small and where the head of home had a clear sense of purpose and a high degree of autonomy, including a say in admissions. Managers and staff were clear about what they should be doing and how they should be doing it, increasing consistency and continuity in the care of young people *(Berridge and Brodie 1998; Sinclair and Gibbs 1998).*

4.6   Consistent with this, the University of York study of young people going missing from care found that, although all children's homes can be volatile places, the regimes and staff cultures in homes where going missing was less of a problem shared certain features:
- heads of home had a clear view of how the home should operate and provided strong leadership,
- staff felt well-supported and morale was reasonably high,
- staff had the opportunity to discuss and agree a consistent approach to individual young people,
- young people were involved in negotiating acceptable boundaries and patterns of behaviour.

4.7   Staff in homes with a strong and positive staff culture were more confident in setting clear expectations for young people's behaviour. They also protected residents from one another, intervening to deal with intimidation and bullying. Some such staff groups routinely monitored resident cultures, intervening to fragment and dissipate groups developing a culture of bullying, going missing, offending or non-attendance. Supporting residential managers and staff in developing strong and positive staff cultures and effective regimes may lead to improved quality of care, and this, in turn, is associated with a reduced likelihood that young people will go missing.

4.8   In one children's home where a new manager introduced a new regime, a member of staff commented:
'Before, morale used to be zero with staff and nobody expected anything and nothing was expected of the young people, so therefore they didn 't do anything. Expectations have been raised, you do have to behave in a reasonable manner to get on with people. So a lot of young people have responded to that, and it has improved and staff morale has improved because they feel they 're doing something.' (Wade et al 1998)

In residential placements staff 'should create an atmosphere in the home which aims to reduce the need of young people to be absent improperly rather than a regime which restricts their opportunities to be absent improperly. The objective should be to promote young people's well being rather than remove their means of escape.'

Young people who run away or are not at their proper place: Durham County Council

Prioritising education

4.9   Many young people who go missing from care placements are not attending school or are excluded. As the research has shown, the lack of integration into school life means that their daily lives may be aimless and unstructured. Non-attendance and going missing appear to be mutually reinforcing, so ensuring appropriate educational provision and good attendance is likely to have a positive effect on patterns of going missing *(Wade et al 1998)*. The Guidance *Education of Young People in Public Care* jointly published by the Department of Health and the Department for Education in 2000 sets out the expectation that, acting corporately, local authorities should ensure that looked after children are able to access appropriate educational opportunities, which should usually be in a mainstream school.

4.10   School can be a source of continuity and stability in the lives of young people who are looked after. As good corporate parents, local authorities should ensure that young people are given positive support in maintaining school attendance, ensuring that they receive appropriate help with any learning or behaviour problems. For those who are excluded or who require specialist education resources, full time education should be rapidly provided, avoiding any drift or delay.

Independent advice and complaints procedures

4.11   Looked after young people should have regular and planned access to a trusted adult outside their placement - for example, a family member, the child's social worker, an independent visitor or a children's advocate. User friendly complaints procedures ought to be in place which should address both informal as well as formal complaints. A pattern of minor complaints may indicate more deep-seated problems in the management and culture of placements. Systems that do not promote open communication about 'minor' complaints are unlikely to be responsive to 'major' ones *(Department of Health et al 1999)*. Offering young people access to independent advice and representation may help to safeguard young people and reduce the need for them to run away.

5. Missing from care: preventive strategies for carers and social workers

Summary points

An inter-agency approach to care planning, including an assessment of the likely risk of going missing, will be necessary from the point at which young people are first looked after. In particular, social workers, residential social workers and foster carers need to:

- be aware of the kinds of immediate and underlying reasons that may prompt individual young people to go missing;
- have a thorough knowledge of young people's past histories of going missing, whether from home or substitute care;
- keep accurate records;
- and plan ahead to manage situations in which young people may be vulnerable to going missing.

Awareness of why young people run away

5.1   It is important to be aware of both the underlying reasons and immediate triggers for going missing for each individual who is looked after. As the research indicates, young people go missing from care placements for a variety of reasons:

- because they are unhappy about separation from their families
- because they are unhappy in their placements
- because running away is a strategy they developed at home or in past placements to respond to difficulties
- because they are encouraged or intimidated by other residents in children's homes, or foster care, leading them to go missing with others to gain acceptance by peers or go missing alone to escape bullying
- as a reaction to feeling angry or upset
- as a reaction to restrictions imposed by carers, particularly for those unused to any controls in the past
- to return to families
- to spend time with friends
- because they are drawn to the apparent attractions of city centre street life
- to commit offences
- to engage in prostitution

5.2   Young people with a known or suspected history of involvement in offending or prostitution are known to be likely to go missing. For these young people an inter-agency approach to care planning is likely to be necessary from the time they start to be looked after in order to address their multiple problems.

> 'All staff must remember that for those young people who have possibly been living on the streets, those who have been involved in the sex industry, heavy users of drugs and/or alcohol, and/or who have been rough sleepers, this lifestyle may, to the young person at least, appear more exciting and have more to offer than life in a residential unit or foster home. Adults here should pay particular attention to attempting to engage the young person, and should make them feel as comfortable and secure as possible and should consider involving other agencies who may be more experienced in working with that young person's particular issue.'
> *Draft operational procedure regarding missing children and runaways: London Borough of Greenwich*

Knowledge of past patterns of absence

5.3   Knowledge of young people's histories of going missing in the past, either from home or from care, should also assist planning. Evidence from recent research as to the contours of different patterns of absence - the *friends* profile and the *runaways* profile discussed in Section 1.15 - may be an aid to understanding previous patterns. For those who have gone missing in the past, understanding past patterns of absence can help carers predict the circumstances in which future incidents might potentially occur. Strategies that link a knowledge of young people's past patterns with future planning will depend upon good standards of record keeping.

Planning ahead

5.4   Understanding the underlying reasons and immediate motivations which might prompt young people to go missing, and the likely circumstances in which they might do so, can serve as an aid to risk assessment and planning ahead. Residential staff and foster carers should be given details of any history of going missing, or threats of running away. The child care planning and review process should pay proper attention to the potential risk that young people may go missing, so that preventive measures can be in place as soon as they arrive in placement. Social workers and carers should jointly identify the circumstances in which a young person might go missing and plan to avoid these. For example, they may:

- arrange to keep a close eye on a young person before and after a difficult meeting to help them feel secure and reassured
- spend time with a young person after a difficult contact with a parent
- respond immediately to incidents of conflict or bullying among residents
- plan a consistent approach by all members of the staff team to manage a particular young person or to respond to a particular behaviour.

5.5   It is helpful to have a recent photograph of all looked after children held on social work files, to assist in finding any who may go missing. Care should be taken to ensure that young people do not feel that 'mug shots' are being taken. Rather, these photos should be taken in the same circumstances as any family photographs might be, for example on outings or on birthdays.

6.   Missing from Care: practice issues

Summary points

Exercising care and control

- Although carers, like biological parents, tend to manage the care of young people through negotiation, they must, when it really matters, exercise their authority.
- *The Guidance on Permissible Forms of Control in Children 's Residential Care* sets out that it may be permissible to restrain a young person as a last resort to prevent young people from going missing. However, such action will hardly offer a long-term solution to a young person's difficulties. An action plan for their support will be necessary - which would have to be based on a sound analysis of their motivation for wanting to run away.
- When a young person returns, a positive welcome can provide a foundation for careful follow up. Punitive responses rarely have a deterrent effect.
- Showing care, concern and worry can be helpful, but action is also needed to try to resolve underlying problems that may have prompted the incident.

Listening to young people

- Following up young people's absences in order to understand their motivations for going missing and the risks to which they may have been exposed, will be vital to their future protection. It may also help identify any placement centred difficulties.
- Some young people will be reluctant to speak about their difficulties. However, careful listening and patient probing over time can bring rewards.
- Young people should have the opportunity to talk to someone independent of their placement. Whoever undertakes this task needs to have the skills to listen carefully, evaluate the information offered and to act effectively in the interests of the young person.

Negotiated   approaches

- Where older teenagers go missing to spend low risk time with friends or family, and where clear procedures for risk assessment exist, it may be helpful to negotiate boundaries of acceptable behaviour with the young person and lessen the need for them to be reported missing.

Young people who go missing often

- Intervention at an early stage of a young person's career of going missing is likely to be most effective, since going missing often is associated with a gradual detachment from the influence of adult authority.
- For some young people, influenced by placement peers, a change of placement may help. For a small minority at serious risk , through offending or prostitution, an out of authority placement may offer the only means of protection.
- The range of risk factors associated with going missing often, highlight the need for a focused corporate and inter-agency approach and for co-ordinated intensive support structures for young people.

Sexual exploitation

- *A* rapid preventive response, recognising young people as victims of abuse, is needed whenever young people are suspected of becoming involved in prostitution or other forms of sexual exploitation. Not only are they themselves at risk, but they may endanger others.
- Child protection procedures should be observed. For those young people more deeply involved, separation from peers and local networks may be important.
- Area Child Protection Committees should be encouraged to develop protocols, incorporating all relevant partner agencies, to respond to the problem of child prostitution in their areas.
- Where numbers of young people are involved in an area or particular children's homes targeted, a co-ordinated approach to investigation and support is likely to be more helpful than an individual case approach.

Longer term strategies

- Placement stability, enabling the growth of trust and attachment to a caregiver, appears to be an important ingredient in dissuading young people from going missing in the longer term.
- It also offers a basis for tackling the underlying difficulties that may have prompted young people to go missing in the past.

Diversion

- Where young people are at an early stage of going missing, strategies to divert them can be effective.
- From the outset of a placement, identification of young people's educational, cultural, sports and leisure interests should form part of the assessment process and be integrated into subsequent child care planning.

Harm minimisation

- Strategies to reduce the harm to which young people may be exposed while missing are important to their future health and protection. However, unless accompanied by more pro-active strategies, they are unlikely to have much impact on patterns of going missing.

Care and control

6.1   responding to going missing raises difficult issues about the balance between listening to the wishes of children and providing care and control in order to protect them, even if they do not agree that protection is needed. Like biological parents, residential and foster carers usually manage the tension between letting young people make their own choices and ensuring that they are safe through a process of negotiation. However, when it really matters, carers should not be afraid to exert their authority. The letter sent to local authorities by the Department of Health's Chief Inspector of Social Services makes it clear that the responsibilities of substitute carers are in no way diminished by the Children Act's emphasis on the rights of children. It argues that:

> *'children in care have a variety of needs from the adults responsible for them; these needs include clear guidance, influence and where necessary control, as well as sympathy and understanding; staff and other adults responsible for children in care have, generally speaking, the same rights and responsibilities as a parent to influence a child in the interests of its welfare, to protect it from bad influences and where necessary to protect others from harm; it is the professional role of staff to pursue these objectives as fully and purposefully as they can within the framework of the law; the law protects all children against the unreasonable use of force; and limits the children who may be deprived of their liberty to those properly placed in secure accommodation. Otherwise it does not disempower staff from pursuing these goals; and in no way does it oblige them to agree to a child's preferences or wishes where doing so would be likely to prejudice its welfare. ' (Social Services Inspectorate 1997).*

Discouraging young people from leaving placements

6.2   The *Guidance on Permissible Forms of Control in Children's Residential Care* sets out the powers of residential staff in respect of young people who attempt to go missing. Children who are accommodated by the local authority may be refused permission to go out, with the knowledge and preferably the agreement of those with parental responsibilities, and for children on care orders this decision can be taken by the local authority alone. Where a child is remanded to or detained in local authority accommodation, residential staff are expected to 'intervene positively if a child . . . .indicates or attempts to leave the home without authority' *(Department of Health 1993)*.

6.3   The Guidance and the Chief Inspector's letter advise that when a staff member is concerned about a young person's intention to leave a unit without permission or run away, the young person should be given clear instructions and warned of the consequences of not complying with these. Staff may use their physical presence to obstruct an exit, may hold a young person by the arm or may bolt a door in order to create an opportunity to express concern or remonstrate with the young person. Although patient persuasion is recommended, where it is clear that if the young person were to leave the unit there would be a strong likelihood of injury or risk to him/herself or others, staff are permitted

to use physical restraint to prevent the young person leaving the building. It would be reasonable to assume that an 11 or 12 year old wanting to leave a children's home in the evening against the instructions of staff is likely to be at risk of harm, as would young teenagers if they are involved with vice or crime or otherwise at risk *(Social Services Inspectorate 1997)*. However, attention is drawn to the fine line between the protection of children and the abuse of their civil liberties. For children who are not in secure accommodation, any measures to restrict their liberty should be confined to circumstances where 'immediate action is necessary to prevent injury to any person or damage to property' *(Department of Health 1993)*. Follow-up work will be necessary to bring about longer-term stability and avoid repeated use of physical restraint. In addition, public authorities, such as local authorities, are under a duty to act compatibly with, in particular, articles 3,5 and 8 of the European Convention of Human Rights.

6.4   An early response to first attempts to go missing is vital. First, this demonstrates care and concern for the young person. Second, once a pattern of going missing becomes established, young people become increasingly detached from carers and it becomes harder to deter them. Many young people are initially ambivalent about going missing and may respond to intervention at an early stage. In some cases young people want a staff member to stop them leaving or to give them an excuse for not going along with others.

6.5   The University of York study found that, with those ambivalent about leaving, doggedly reasoning with them, following them around the building and even following them out of the door were strategies that sometimes worked. However, even with those determined to leave, these interventions may also have some value, since they reinforce expectations about acceptable behaviour within the placement, both for the young person concerned and other residents, and also serve as a demonstration of concern. Although young people sometimes complained about being prevented from leaving or being brought back, they often appreciated staff demonstrating their commitment to them in these ways and this could lay the foundations for further work with them.

> *Curtis, a persistent runaway, described the only children's home, which had succeeded in reducing his running away. 'Well the staff there, they turn round and tell you that they care about you.you think twice. You run away and you think of them and you think, well they do care, they are bothered. And it's — why are you running away? But in another kid's home where they don 't care -you don 't think twice, you just go out and have a good time when you run away. '(Wade et al 1998).*

The return

6.6   The initial response to young people on their return tends to set the tone for everything that follows. Welcoming young people back, with expressions of concern for their well being, can provide a foundation for careful follow up. Studies of absconding from residential settings in the 1970s found that accepting people back and maintaining the placement tended to have a beneficial effect on patterns of running away in the longer term *(Sinclair 1971; Millham et al 1977)*. These studies found that a punitive response to runaways did not have a deterrent effect, as the decision to run away was not based on rational calculation.

6.7   These and other studies of the period recommended the combination of a general caring and therapeutic ambience to reduce motivation for going missing, with a direct response to this behaviour when it occurred *(Sinclair and Clarke 1973)*. Similarly, the University of York study found that children's homes which were more successful at managing the problem of going missing were those where young people felt that staff genuinely cared about them and staff expressions of warmth, acceptance and concern on their return went hand in hand with the setting of clear expectations and boundaries for acceptable behaviour.

6.8   Young people interviewed in the York study on the whole viewed staff or foster carer anxiety, frustration and distress at their absences as demonstrations of concern. With those who did not yet have a well-established pattern of going missing, this could help to deter them, as long as it went hand in hand with action to address other problems, such as bullying within a placement or pressure from parents or friends outside it. For other young people, accepting them back with demonstrations of care and concern did not bring an immediate change in their behaviour but nevertheless formed an important element of a longer-term approach to working with them. Although young people were often

unwilling to refrain from going missing again in the near future, this reassurance that someone cared about what happened to them formed an important part of a longer-term strategy of building relationships, working through their difficulties with them and discouraging behaviour that put them at risk *(Wade et al 1998).*

Listening to young people

6.9   It is important to follow up young people's absences in order to gain an understanding of their reasons for going missing, identify any placement-related or other problems that may have prompted them to go, and plan a response to these difficulties. Young people are often reluctant to divulge very much about their activities while missing, but it is nevertheless important to try to establish where they have been, who with and any risks they have encountered, in order to ensure their protection. Although young people may not impart this information immediately upon their return, with patient follow-up it may emerge over a period of time.

6.10   It is equally important to listen to young people who have been found but are unwilling to return. Their reluctance may be linked to placement-centred difficulties and it is important that these are taken seriously. Listening to young people and addressing the problems they raise can underpin negotiation aimed at securing their return, either to the same or another placement.

6.11   Although residential and foster carers should follow up incidents when young people have gone missing, young people should also have the opportunity to talk to someone independent of the placement. This task may be undertaken by the social worker, but some young people may feel able to talk more freely to someone who does not have regular contact with their carers or families. Whoever undertakes the task of discussing the incident should be capable of listening carefully, evaluating the information offered and acting effectively in the young person's best interests *(Bridge Child Care Development Service, 1996).*

> *Geri (16) had gone missing from past foster placements. She had been away for weeks at a time and had slept rough, begged and stayed with strangers. On entering her children 's home she experienced bullying and responded by running away. Once her keyworker tracked her down, he undertook to tackle the bullying and persuaded her to return. A formal complaint was made and, once the bullying stopped, she settled in and no longer felt the need to run away. (Wade et al 1998)*

Negotiated approaches

6.12   Some incidents involve older teenagers going missing to spend time with friends or family and returning later than agreed. These incidents do not constitute running away and often approximate to *the friends* profile described in the University of York study (see Section 1.15). Although young people may be at risk on any occasion that they go missing, episodes consistent with the *friends* profile tend to involve less risk. These incidents might include teenagers staying late at parties or clubs or staying overnight with friends before police checks have been completed and authorisation given. This kind of behaviour has been difficult to accommodate within institutional or foster settings.

6.13   Within the framework of clear procedures for risk assessment, as described in Chapter 3, there can be scope for greater flexibility in responding to behaviour of this kind by older teenagers. An appraisal of risk should be undertaken with regard to each incident, but where social workers and carers are confident that young people are not at risk and will shortly return of their own accord, some negotiation may be possible around the issue of when the young person is allowed to return. An undertaking to consider each incident on its merits, if young people agree to phone carers to say they will be late and to tell them where they are, will be preferable to young people simply absenting themselves and leaving carers with no idea as to whether they have come to any harm. Negotiated approaches of this kind can only be successful if they occur within a broader negotiated agreement with young people as to the acceptable boundaries of behaviour.

6.14   For a negotiated approach to work successfully there may well be additional demands placed upon caregivers. Checking out friends and relatives that young people may stay with, and gaining *their* co-operation, may well be a time consuming task. Equally, such a strategy may involve collecting young people at the end of an evening out, as parents might. In children's homes, consistency within the staff team is also likely to be a crucial ingredient.

Young people who go missing often

6.15   Young people who go missing often are usually in residential placements, in many cases because this behaviour has contributed to the breakdown of earlier attempts at fostering. The research evidence suggests that the prospects for young people who go missing often may be bleak. These young people are more likely to have problems with offending, school attendance, drugs, alcohol and depression and are at risk of drifting into adult homelessness (see Section 1.22). Young people assessed as having emotional and behavioural difficulties form a distinctive sub-group who are particularly likely to go missing often, and for them going missing is one element of a cluster of behaviour problems *(Wade et al 1998)*. It is important to address any underlying difficulties or more immediate triggers to going missing at an early stage, before young people become more detached from the influence of adult authority. The statutory requirements to review young people's progress in care should offer a forum for considering whether or not placements are meeting young people's needs and for developing any action necessary so that young people are placed appropriately, minimising any motivation that they might have to run away. The Department of Health *LAC Materials* provides a framework which enables social care staff to take a holistic approach to assessing the needs of vulnerable looked after young people.

6.16   Once young people have established a pattern of going missing repeatedly (and in some cases this pattern will have been established while they were living with their families), intervention is more difficult. For some young people a change of placement may help to fragment a peer group that has established a pattern of regularly absenting itself. In a few cases, where others outside the care system have drawn young people into a pattern of going missing repeatedly to engage in offending or prostitution, an out of authority placement may be the only means of protecting the young person from these influences.

6.17   A sharply focused corporate and inter-agency approach is needed, since the range of factors associated with going missing often indicates that this problem cannot be dealt with in isolation. As many of those who go missing often are also involved in offending, joint work with youth offending teams to address both aspects of this problem may be beneficial. Co-ordinated plans should be made by social workers, youth justice staff, education, health and voluntary sector professionals to support and protect the young person and divert him/her from repeatedly going missing. In respect of children with emotional and behavioural difficulties, the *Government's Response to the Children 's Safeguards Review* proposes that local authorities should identify corporately the groups of children whose needs should be jointly addressed, agree objectives and the work needing to be done, who should take this forward and how this should be resourced. They should also develop mechanisms for monitoring outcomes and plans for working with the NHS *(Department of Health et al 1998)*. This strategy might usefully be broadened to include all of those who go missing often, who tend to have multiple problems requiring the input of more than one agency.

Sexual exploitation: the need for child protection procedures

6.18   A number of studies have highlighted the links between running away, past sexual or physical abuse and involvement in prostitution *(Wade et al 1998; Lee and O 'Brien 1995; Spatz Widom and Ames 1994; Finkelhor 1986)*. Young people with a history of sexual abuse may be vulnerable to sexual exploitation if procurers gain access to them *(Kelly et al 1995)*. Recent research has pointed to the ways in which child abusers target children's homes, either directly or through encouraging young people to recruit others *(Shaw et al 1996; Wild 1989)*. Recent studies have found that the majority of looked after young people drawn into prostitution were first enticed or pressurised into this after they started to be looked after, as procurers encouraged and coerced young people already under their influence to draw others in *(Wade et al 1998; Farmer and Pollock 1998). A* shortage of placement options can only heighten risks where vulnerable young people are placed in children's homes alongside others already engaging in dangerous behaviour.

6.19   A rapid preventive response is needed whenever young people are suspected of becoming involved in prostitution. Not only are they themselves at risk, but they may also endanger others. For those more deeply involved, separation from peers and local networks may be important, involving placement in specialist foster placements at some geographical distance from their home area (Farmer and Pollock 1998).

6.20   Child protection procedures should be observed whenever it is thought that prostitution may be a factor in going missing. The Department of Health has issued statutory guidance to local authorities stating that Area Child Protection Committees should be encouraged to develop protocols for handling the problem of child prostitution in their local area. The National Plan for Safeguarding Children from Commercial Sexual Exploitation was published in 2001. A formal and co-ordinated approach linking social services, the police, health and relevant voluntary agencies will be necessary and should be informed by a perspective that treats the child primarily as a victim of abuse rather than as a perpetrator of a crime *(Department of Health et al 1998; Department of Health et al 2000).* Where a number of young people are involved, or particular children's homes are targeted by procurers, a co-ordinated approach to investigation and support for all involved is likely to prove more useful than an individual case by case approach *(Kelly et al 1995).* The Children's Safeguards Review has called for specialist teams of police and social services to carry out complex investigations of abuse in residential settings *(Utting 1997).* The brief of such specialist teams should be widened to include investigation of adults outside placements who abuse young people by enticing or coercing them into prostitution.

6.21   There is evidence that young people, who may often present themselves to the authorities as unaccompanied asylum seeking children are subsequently trafficked into the vice industry. Local authorities and police services in areas where trafficking is likely to occur (ports of entry to England) should ensure protocols are in place to protect the victim.

Nottingham has a multi-agency approach to tackling the sexual exploitation of young people, including those who go missing from home or care and become involved in prostitution. A multi-agency steering group has been set up which includes representatives from social services, the police, local voluntary agencies, the health service, young offenders teams, leisure services and local organisations offering street-based support.

When local street workers or the police identify a young person involved in prostitution, they will encourage them to return home or arrange for them to go to an alternative safe place. A multi-agency meeting is then called and a package of support is offered. Early identification and prevention are viewed as key elements of the strategy, including the development of links with children's homes by the police and local outreach projects. *(Bond, 2000).*

Longer term strategies

Building relationships

6.22   The York study found that the most effective means of reducing the incidence of going missing was the longer term strategy of ensuring placement stability, in the context of which residential or foster carers had the opportunity to form attachments and develop trusting relationships with young people. In the few cases where young people had, over time, been dissuaded from going missing, the key appeared to be young people's gradual development of attachment to a carer. Without the basis of a trusting relationship based on mutual respect, other more direct attempts at control tended to prove ineffective. The converse was also true: building relationships did not appear to be effective unless accompanied by other more direct forms of intervention to discourage going missing *(Wade et al 1998).* This strategy requires considerable staying power and carers will need support if they are to consistently accept young people back and continue to offer stability and security.

Paul (aged 12) came from a disorganised family that had a chaotic lifestyle and had neither known consistent care nor firm boundaries. He had gone missing from home for a few hours at a time as a release from pressure and to be with his friends. This pattern continued once looked after and several foster placements had broken down through running away. His career accelerated with his move to a children 's home and he was involved in daily peer based absences. His 18 months at this foster placement had been his first experience of stability and, although he still stayed out occasionally with his friends, he no longer went missing regularly, nor for long periods. According to his social worker this change had been achieved through the consistent care and commitment shown by his carer. Her approach was to make her home safe, comfortable and secure for him, a place he would want to be. She quickly tried to establish a rapport and identify the kinds of responses that might work with him. She rarely scolded him for his absences, since he was unable to take criticism and this was likely to reinforce his behaviour. However, she demonstrated her commitment by searching for him at his usual haunts and bringing him home. She was flexible in her routines, was able to accept disruption and his testing out behaviour and strove to reassure him that this was his home. Together with his social worker, she attempted to separate him from his former peers. They approached his former unit and got agreement from them to refuse him entry. They had also persuaded him to return to school part-time in an effort to provide greater structure to his days. (Wade et al, 1998)

Dealing with underlying difficulties

6.23   Building relationships over time can provide a foundation for carers to address any underlying difficulties that may be linked to going missing. Young people's motivations for going missing may be complex, multi-layered and shift over time. Whether the primary motivation lies in family problems, placement contexts or deeper personal difficulties related to past experiences, help to resolve young people's underlying problems is likely to be an important key to changing their pattern of behaviour. This will prove difficult to organise effectively if young people lack a stable set of attachments.

Diversion strategies

6.24   The York study found some evidence that, where young people were at an early point in their careers of going missing, strategies to divert them could be effective. These were likely to work best in placements that were well structured, with a positive ethos linked to school attendance and appropriate standards of behaviour. Such strategies involved organising individual quality time with young people and developing their interests in sports, cultural and social activities. From the point at which young people enter a placement, identification of their educational and leisure interests should form part of the initial assessment process.   The promotion of outside interests can then be built into the child care planning and review process. Not only might this limit the risk of them going missing but it would also broaden the range of social relationships available to them.

6.25   Discussing possible scenarios with young people in advance of potential difficulties arising may also be a helpful strategy. This may be done individually or, in a residential unit, perhaps in groups. A series of 'What if?' questions can be devised and discussed with young people *(Kidscape, undated).* For example, *what if:*

*   you were being bullied by another resident, or at school, and had promised not to tell?
*   a friend asks you to run away with them?
*   your friends want you to stay out with them ?
*   you think a rule at your placement is unfair?
*   you were upset by someone, or by something that has happened?
*   a friend, or an adult, puts pressure on you to do something you don't want to do?

6.26   What if? questions appropriate to the age, placement and circumstances of different children and young people are easy to devise and may constitute part of a preventive strategy, as well as teaching personal safety. This strategy may be used both by residential staff, by foster carers and by social workers and may also serve as a way of opening up individual discussion of problems that young people may be having in their placements.

Harm minimisation

6.27   The York study also found that social workers and carers often made a concerted effort to minimise the harm to which young people might be exposed when missing. Considerable effort was made to persuade young people of the risks they were likely to face, to get them to leave contact numbers, to ring if they were going to return late or to arrange taxis. Equally, broader health issues were a major concern, especially where young people were thought to be at risk of sexual exploitation. Advice was available on safe sex, condoms were sometimes provided and, upon return, appointments arranged at doctors or clinics if necessary.

6.28   Harm minimisation strategies are obviously important to the future health and protection of young people and are not to be under-estimated. When allied to other strategies, these measures could bring about gradual change and reduce the need to report young people missing. However, when other measures were absent, it could leave young people in control of high risk patterns of behaviour and practitioners without a coherent strategy to address them.

Support to residential staff and foster carers

6.29   Research has shown that residential staff often feel demoralised and powerless to intervene when young people go missing, and foster carers often feel isolated and unsupported in these circumstances *(Wade et al 1998)*. Residential staff and foster carers understandably need support to enable them to deal consistently with these very difficult situations. In residential settings, clear leadership and the involvement of staff teams in developing plans for each individual are needed to reinforce staff confidence in their ability to intervene effectively, in the knowledge that their intervention will take place in the context of mutual support from colleagues. This strategy should also help to ensure a consistent response across a staff team if residents attempt to go missing. Foster carers are also likely to appreciate regular advice and reassurance regarding their management of going missing.

> *'What happens when it's eight o'clock at night and you want to talk to someone and the young person is still missing? Who do you turn to then?... You need someone when the problem's then, not 12 hours later. ' (Foster carer, in Wade et al 1998)*

6.30   Standard 19 of the National Minimum Standards for Children's Homes and Standard 9.8 of the National Minimum Standards for Fostering Services sets out the requirements that children's homes and fostering services should have clear written procedures to be followed if young people go missing from their placements.

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