

# 1 in 9 – The Scottish Coalition for Young Runaways

## Briefing Paper



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### Young Runaways

For the purpose of this briefing “young runaways” are young people and children under the age of 16 who spend at least one night away from the family home or substitute care without the permission of their parents or carers or as a result of being forced to leave by their parents or carers.

### How many children run away?

- 1 in 9 of Scotland’s children run away before the age of 16.
- This amounts to 9,000 children running away each year including those who have ran away previously.
- Each year there are 11,000 – 12,000 incidents of children running away in Scotland.

### Why do children run away?

*“I ran away because I couldn’t put up with my mum and dad nagging at me, and my dad raped me.”*

*“Getting beatings from my both parents. My dad was an alcoholic and my mum’s just been abused by my dad and my mum abused me.”*

- 20% of young people said maltreatment (abuse or neglect) was the major cause of their last incident of running.
- 50% of young people state that maltreatment figured prominently in their lives and was associated with their running. In many cases, the boundaries between distinctive forms of abuse became blurred.

Family conflict, often persistent, was the immediate cause of running away identified by around two fifths of young people.

*“I argued with my step-dad and he told me he was going to throw me out, so I never gave him the pleasure and I left.”*

## What happens when children and young people run away?

### Risks

Studies have calculated composite risk estimates based on experience of one or more of a range of risk factors. (1)

- 17% of children/young people who ran away, slept rough or with someone they had just met.
- 21% slept in one of the above situations and/or said they had been hurt or harmed whilst running away.
- If begging as a survival strategy is added to this group the figure rises to 22%.
- When stealing is added we move to just over 25% of children/young people who run away who face these risks.

These are the most recent data figures and could underestimate. For instance, Missing Out stated that:

- 1 in 6 young runaways were physically and/or sexually assaulted whilst running away.
- Missing Out also stated that 28% of young runaways slept rough on their last occasion.

### Asking for help

Still Running 2 revealed that:

- Only 5% of young people ask for help from agencies when they run away, perhaps indicative of the lack of awareness and support for young runaways.
- Only 1/5 of young people said they asked for help from anyone, including friends and extended family. (1)

### Reported missing?

- 68% of young runaways are not reported missing to the Police, which is an alarmingly high number.

There should be grave concern about our lack of awareness of these vulnerable young people. These figures come from Still Running 2 but are comparable to figures from Aberlour’s ROC Refuge (57%) and the South Yorkshire Study (65%) (2)

## Police response

Of course the Police can only proactively respond when young people are reported as missing.

In situations when the police find that a young person is reported missing they have a responsibility to return them home unless there is an indication that this would be unsafe. If there is such a risk then police would liaise with social work services. In most cases it is assessed to be safe to return young people to their homes.

The financial cost to the Police of carrying out this work has been estimated in Scotland to be £5.4 million, equivalent to 14,178 days of Police time. (3)

## Local Authority Response

Local authorities have duties under the Children (Scotland) Act 1995 to safeguard and promote the welfare of children in need and to provide accommodation for any child in their area who needs it because they are lost or abandoned, no-one has parental responsibilities for them or the person who cares for the child is prevented from giving them suitable accommodation or care. These categories could include some children who run away.

There is a specific power, rather than a duty, that local authorities have under section 38 of the Children (Scotland) Act to provide short-term refuge for children who appear to be at risk of harm and who request refuge. This can be provided in designated or approved residential establishments or foster carers, the purpose of which is to provide somewhere safe to stay, to access help to resolve the crisis which led the child to seek refuge and to reconcile the child with family/carers or divert the child to other suitable services and/or accommodation. The local authority or another voluntary or private agency can provide refuge if designated by the local authority.

## What services do we have in Scotland?

There are only three services in Scotland which specifically target young runaways.

- Aberlour Child Care Trust's, ROC (Running Other Choices) Service operating in and around Glasgow offers preventative work in schools, work with young people who have run away or are at risk of running away and has the only 3 Refuge beds in Scotland for young people who run away and are at risk.

- Barnardo's Aberdeen Young Runaways Service aims to increase the safety of, and reduce the number of young people accommodated in residential units, residential school and foster care in Aberdeen who run away. Through individual and group work the service seeks to explore the reasons for young people running away, to help young people understand the risks of running away and to develop alternative coping strategies.
- Streetwork UK's Runaways Action Programme, based in Edinburgh, aims to reduce the number of young people who run away and to reduce the number of young people at risk on the streets by providing an accessible and responsive service. This service involves the provision of detached youth work, group work, one to one support and educational workshops in schools to raise awareness and understanding of issues, risks and options for young people who run away or are at risk of running.

There are a range of other services which come into contact with missing children and these include:

- Street-based work and/or detached youth work projects operating in some of Scotland's major cities.
- Helplines, such as Childline, offering a telephone counseling and information service. In 2003/2004, 250 children in Scotland called ChildLine about running away.

But given the lack of specific work with runaway children and young people, it is difficult to prevent young people running away and coming to harm, or to prevent further harm if they return home.

## What is the Coalition calling for?

We want a National Strategy for Young Runaways, with National leadership.

This is a national problem of great significance because of the desperate situations that children and young people find themselves in without adequate support and because of the numbers this affects. Research has shown that this problem exists in urban, suburban and rural areas and across social and economic groups. There are however groups who are more likely to run away and we should ensure through a national response that other policy and guidance is linked with a strategy on Young Runaways. "Getting it Right For Every Child", and the "Performance Improvement Framework for Children and Families" are two such areas where young runaways needs will have to be addresses. But in other areas such as child protection, youth justice, residential

and foster care, education and young people not in education, employment and training, issues regarding young runaways will be relevant. Only by addressing this nationally and including the range of agencies that are involved can we find realistic solutions.

## What would this involve?

There may be a range of views about what this strategy would involve, but we would expect the following to be important steps in the development and implementation of a strategy:

### 1. Measuring the problem

We need to ensure that we have national statistics that begin to measure the extent of this problem. A National Police database for missing young people would be a positive step forward. However, we know that around two thirds of young people are not reported missing, so the strategy would need to look at how to address this. A campaign to raise awareness of the need to report missing young people should be part of a strategic approach which would help ensure this measurement is more accurate and, more importantly, help keep children safe.

We also should develop our knowledge of the range of situations that young runaways come from. This would help us design preventative services.

### 2. Measuring what has already been done

Whilst there are few services specifically focusing on the needs of young runaways, there are some examples of services that may come into contact with young people who run, and services that may be carrying out successful preventative work. There may be some positive examples of protocols working well in local areas which can link young people to support. We need to audit what we already have and what is working well.

### 3. Developing services

The Scottish Coalition is calling for a range of services in recognition of the vulnerability of young runaways. These have previously been recommended by a range of studies including Missing Out. They include:

- Preventative Services in schools and other youth settings to help children young people with difficulties at home or school and provide opportunities to discuss and resolve these before they go missing. This would include promoting greater awareness amongst adults, children and young people about the prevalence and nature of children going missing.

- Every child/young person who goes missing should be offered an independent interview to ascertain their reasons for going missing and opportunities to receive support to help resolve these. This needs to be carried out by an appropriately trained person who is seen by the child to be trusted and independent.
- There is an urgent need for Refuge provision for children and young people who go missing and who would otherwise be at risk. This could include both residential refuge provision and “refuge” foster carers.

**This reflects the fact that children and young people who go missing are vulnerable, both because of the reasons that cause them to go missing and because of the harm that they are likely to suffer as a result of going missing.**

## References

All statistical information is from Wade, J (2002) “Missing Out. Young Runaways in Scotland,” Aberlour Child Care Trust other than  
(1) Rees, G and Lee, J (2005) “Still Running II,” The Children’s Society  
(2) Smeaton, E and Rees, G (2005) “Running Away in South Yorkshire” The Children’s Society  
(3) provided by ACPOS

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