

SUBMISSION FROM PARADIGM RESEARCH

The Link Between Young Runaways and Youth Homelessness

1. Introduction

This submission focuses upon the link between young runaways¹ and youth homelessness.

From the 1990s, a number of research studies² have identified the link between running away and youth homelessness. For example, a 2005 study³ found that 59% of young people who were homeless had run away before the age of sixteen. Some of these research studies have drawn upon data relating to children and young people in Scotland and it is these findings that are addressed in this submission.

2. Evidence-based findings relating to running away and youth homelessness in Scotland

A 1999 UK-wide research study⁴ found that two groups of children and young people who run away are particularly likely to experience youth homelessness: those who start running away from home under the age of 11 and a sub-set of young runaways who become detached⁵ from parents and carers.

In 2010-2011 Shelter undertook a survey with homeless young people aged 16 – 24 addressing their experiences of running away and found that 84% of survey respondents said that they had run away before the age of 16⁶. The findings of this survey suggest that:

- young runaways are particularly at risk of youth homelessness;
- persistent runaways are more likely to become homeless; and
- there is confirmation of the links between running away under the age of 11 and youth homelessness (Ibid)⁷.

2.1 Children and young people who run away under the age of 11

¹ The term 'young runaway' is defined in Annex 1

² Craig T Hodson S & Richardson S (1996) *Off to a Bad Start* London: The Mental Health Foundation; Kirby P (1994) *A Word from the Street* London: Centrepoin/Community Café; Simons R & Whitbeck L (1991) *Running Away During Adolescence as a Precursor to Youth Homelessness* Social Services Review 5.

³ Smeaton E & Rees G (2005) *Running Away in South Yorkshire* London: The Children's Society.

⁴ Safe on the Streets Research Team (1999) *Still Running: Children on the Streets in the UK* London: The Children's Society.

⁵ The term 'detached' is defined in the Annex 1.

⁶ Shelter (2011) Running away and future Homelessness – the missing link http://scotland.shelter.org.uk/data/assets/pdf/file/0019/3480/Running_away_and_future_homelessness_FINAL.pdf Accessed 1st February 2012

⁷ Ibid.

It is estimated that, in Scotland, at least⁸ 20% of the one in nine children who run away overnight do so before the age of 11⁹. At least 1200 – 1400 children under the age of 11 will run away for the first time each year. These children and young people are more likely to: experience physical abuse and family conflict before running away; develop running away careers; experience higher levels of physical or sexual abuse whilst running away and youth homelessness¹⁰.

2.2 Detached children and young people

A 2009 report¹¹ provides the most in-depth exploration of the relationship between running away and youth homeless and focuses upon detached children and young people.

2.2.1 These children and young people's experiences of family life are often fraught with difficulties that they are habitually left to manage with no explanation or support. Many children and young people's parents experienced substance misuse, domestic violence and mental health issues that often lead to parents being chaotic or emotionally unavailable and impact upon their ability to care for their children. Many children experience a range of, often extreme, abuse in the home.

2.2.2 For many, violence is part of daily life in the home, in their local neighbourhood, at school and on the streets. Violence takes the form of children and young people experiencing threats and intimidation prior to becoming detached and once detached. Violence, in general, is a common experience on the streets with children and young people being victims of violence, responding with violence in self-defence and perpetrating violence.

2.2.3 Identities, behaviours and states of being are all too often a consequence of damaging experiences from early childhood that are reinforced as the child grows older. Substance use is rife amongst detached children and young people, often starting at a young age, and linked to fun, escapism and coping with emotional feelings that children and young people find difficult to manage. Substance use often escalates when a child or young person becomes detached. Polydrug use is common and some children and young people become heavy users of drugs such as heroin and cocaine. There is a close relationship between substance use and crime with violent street crime being linked to a child or young person's substance use. Many of the children and young people have experienced depression, and other mental health issues, and have never received any support to address the trauma behind their depression.

⁸ These figures are likely to be underestimates of the prevalence of young people running away in Scotland.

⁹ Wade J (2002) *Missing Out: Young Runaways in Scotland* Stirling: Aberlour Childcare Trust.

¹⁰ Rees G & Smeaton E (2001) *Child Runaways: Running Away Amongst Under 11s* London: The Children's Society; Wade J (2002) *Missing Out: Young Runaways in Scotland* Stirling: Aberlour Childcare Trust.

¹¹ Smeaton E (2009) *Off the Radar: Children and Young People Living on the Streets in the UK* Sandbach: Railway Children.

2.2.4 Only a minority of children and young people receive interventions to address problematic issues in their lives. Some children and young people identified barriers to seeking support such as not knowing where to go for help or having to be self-reliant to survive. The majority of children and young people do not enjoy school and leave before the age of sixteen with no qualifications, sometimes because it is difficult for them to attend school and often because they prefer the culture and the company on the streets.

2.2.5 Integration of the homeless population and non-homeless population sometimes plays a part in how a child or young person finds themselves on the streets and detached. Some children and young people become involved with the homeless population whilst still living at home or care, drawn by the freedom and excitement the streets offer, and become involved with individuals and groups from the homeless community. Because of this contact between the homeless and non-homeless, the transition from non-homeless and homeless can take place very quickly. For example, a child or young person with contacts in the homeless population who is experiencing difficulties with home life may take recourse to the streets in a quicker time-frame than a child or young person who has not contacts on the streets and no knowledge of street life. Where children and young people have established relationships of different kinds, they are able to draw upon these relationships as a survival strategy and become part of an established network. This brings about both positive and negative consequences. For example, homeless adults may provide support for others on the streets, especially the young. However the homeless community can also be subject to jealousies and conflict that may have negative impacts for children and young people who can experience both support and hostility from others on the streets.

2.2.6 The normalisation of street life also makes it difficult for some children and young people to withdraw from street life. For many children and young people there is an acceptance that this is how their life is and not awareness that their life could be any different than what it has become: living on the streets is a natural progression of the direction of their life.

2.2.7 Once children and young people reach sixteen, the range of options for support widens and they become eligible to access services for homeless adults. Many are placed in hostel accommodation for the homeless but largely find living amongst the adult homeless population too frightening. Many children and young people express reservation about accessing generic services for the adult homeless population, viewing these places as undesirable and some homeless adults as dangerous. Services for the adult homeless population are not appropriate for detached children and young people as many are too vulnerable to cope with such frightening and chaotic environments and

some children and young people become are introduced to new drugs and behaviours and become further entrenched in street life.

3. Evidence-based recommendations to meet the needs of young runaways and prevent youth homelessness

3.1 Research studies carried out in Scotland have highlighted the need for a range of preventative interventions to prevent running away and youth homelessness. These include:

- strategies to raise awareness of running away
- information about services
- preventative services with a focus upon young runaways
- family and parenting support

3.2 Findings from research and evaluations of specific services for young runaways support the important role that responsive interventions can play in achieving positive outcomes for young runaways. These services include:

- Independent return home interviews
- refuge
- Targeted interventions to meet young runaways' needs

3.3 The extent of running away amongst the under 11 population, the risks they face and the link between running away under the age of 11 and youth homelessness highlight the importance of providing appropriate preventative and responsive interventions with primary school aged children.

3.4 The experiences and needs of detached children and young people, many of whom run away before the age of 11 and experience youth homelessness, suggested that mainstream services for young runaways will not be effective for this group of children and young people. Evidence-based recommendations to meet the needs of this particularly vulnerable group of children and young people will play an important part in preventing youth homelessness:

3.4.1 When developing services to meet the needs of detached children and young people, it is important to start with the premise that children and young people who become detached often have chaotic and messy lives which will impact upon attempts to intervene and with the process of supporting them and meeting their needs. It is crucial to accept that detached children and young people may not share the cultural values and norms of services and professionals. It is also necessary to accept that years of unaddressed trauma require years of recovery and long-term interventions and

that it will take time to acquire detached children and young people's confidence and build a full picture of their experiences and needs. Detached children and young people, and their families, may present a number of challenges to those working with them and front-line workers need support and back-up from managers and other colleagues.

3.4.2 Abuse and others risks experienced in the home at very young ages confirms the importance of implement home-based interventions to halt the flow of events that lead to children and young people taking to the streets. The majority of detached children and young people's parents do not, for a number of reasons, access children's centres and health clinics and professionals must be facilitated to carry out significant parts of their practice in the family home where they gain access to family dynamics. In general, early intervention should be promoted to prevent children and young people from being harmed and to work with parents and carers so it becomes possible, both from a child protection perspective and parents' and children and young peoples' perspectives, for the child to remain in the home.

3.4.3. Not all children and young people will come to the attention of support services whilst still living at home. An opportunity arises to access children and young people when they start to spend time on the streets before they have ceased to live at home and become detached. Street-based youth work should be carried out on the streets and other areas that children and young people frequent at times when children and young people are spending time on the streets, particularly evening, weekends and school holidays. This work should be carried out in an informal manner by professionals with appropriate expertise using a range of creative measures to engage with children and young people. If a child's needs are identified at this point, it will be possible, in some cases, to work with the child or young people and their family to address their issues so that the child or young person can remain in the home. If this is not possible, a safer alternative can be set in place in a planned manner.

3.4.4 Where prevention is not possible, detached children and young people's needs have to be responded too when they have become detached from parents and carers and are living on the streets. This may be challenging as many will have developed identities, attitudes and behaviours that influence their perceptions and way of life, leading some to be exceptionally difficult to engage. This may not be the case with children and young people who are identified as soon as they come to the streets as they may be more amenable to receiving support. Responsive measures should take three forms:

- outreach work to identify detached children and young people on the streets;
- drop-in centres for children and young people that operate in an informal way and open during weekends, evenings and holidays;

- accommodation provision for children and young people also operating in an informal manner based upon the principles of hostels for the adult homeless but with the capacity to respond to further requests for support.

3.4.5 Many children and young people find withdrawing from street life difficult. Having safe and permanent accommodation is clearly a crucial first step for young people to enable them to change their lives but it should not be assumed that providing accommodation will provide the solution to all their issues. For those used to living with a group of people, living on their own is isolating and lonely, leaving too much room to dwell upon unwelcome emotions related to past events. Many children and young people will require a lot of support to address a range of issues, including substance use and mental health issues, so that they are able to remain in their accommodation and move on with their lives.

3.5 To conclude, implementing both preventative and responsive measures to meet the needs of children and young people who run away will, in turn, play an important role in preventing youth homelessness.

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1. Definition of 'young runaway'

The term 'young runaway' is used to describe children and young people who run away from home or care and those who are away from home or care through being forced to leave (thrown out) or 'staying out' without parental or carer permission. It is important to note that whilst some children and young people are reported as missing to the police by parents and carers, it is not appropriate to use the terms 'running away' and 'going missing' interchangeably. This is because the majority of children and young people who run away are not reported as missing to the police¹² and missing children also include those who are taken against their will. The Scottish government defines a runaway as:

"A child or young person under the age of sixteen, who is absent from their domicile without the reasonable authority of those responsible for, or in charge of them, and needs a service either to find and return them to that place (where it is safe or in the child's interest to do so), or to (a) keep them safe (b) ensure an appropriate and proportionate response to their needs(c) meet statutory requirements

Children between the ages of 16 and 18 will be included in this definition when (a) they have a history of running away which predates their 16th birthday (b) they are looked after, or looked after and accommodated."

(Scottish Government, 2008)¹³

2. Definition of 'detached' young runaways

The term 'detached' is used to describe children and young people who are away from home or care for lengthy periods of time who live outside of key societal institutions such as the family and education and other statutory institutions. These children and young people often do not receive any formal support but are self-reliant and/or dependent upon informal support networks. Detached children and young people are often forced to rely upon dangerous survival strategies, are particularly at risk from those seeking to harm them and frequently spend time living on the streets.

¹² Rees G & Lee J (2005) *Still Running 2* London: The Children's Society; Smeaton E & Rees G (2005) *Running Away in South Yorkshire* London: The Children's Society.

¹³ Scottish Government – *Recommendations of National Working Group on Young Runaways* 2008.