



Registered Charity No. 1020419

APPG Inquiry: written evidence

1. Introduction

Missing People welcomes the inquiry into children who go missing from care which is being undertaken by the All Party Parliamentary Group for Runaway and Missing Children and Adults (to which we are joint Secretariat) as well as the All Party Parliamentary Group for Looked After Children and Care Leavers.

Through delivering the Runaway Helpline,¹ Missing People is able to ensure that runaway children and young people can access help and support 24 hours a day, 7 days a week. The charity also runs a service called Message Home which enables children and young people to pass a message to their families or carers.

2. Children who go missing or run away from care

In 2010, Missing People conducted a one-year (2009-10) data collection project examining callers to its Runaway Helpline and Message Home services. The main issues mentioned by callers for running away were: problems at home (17%); homelessness, accommodation or housing (9%); abuse (9%); and mental health issues (5%).

In addition, 100 individual callers (on 144 occasions) discussed being unhappy in a care placement. Of these callers, 59 were girls and 40 were boys² echoing existing research that suggests that as teenagers, girls are more likely to go missing. More than two-thirds of these calls were received outside of normal office hours, and just over half were received after the child or young person had gone missing.

3. Data recording

SSDA903

Local authorities provide data to the government on looked after children via the SSDA903 return which captures details of children who have left care or are missing from their agreed placement.

Missing People is under the impression that SSDA903 was originally designed to capture the reasons why children leave care, not to record missing incidents. However, in lieu of any other mechanism to capture this information, SSDA903 appears to have evolved into the only source of data on missing incidents. This may

explain why SSDA903 a) only captures missing incidents that last for more than 24 hours and b) appears to be an unreliable standard.

For example, official returns reported to the Department for Education under SSDA903 in 2006 showed that no young people were cared for within a section 51 refuge; however the London Refuge report for 2006/7 stated that 12 Looked After Children were cared for.³

Similarly, research into children missing from care undertaken by West Mercier Police explored SSDA903 returns across all local authorities between 2008 and 2010. These showed an apparent decrease in missing looked after children from 1,100 in 2008 to 920 in the year to March 2011. According to the local authority returns for West Mercia, only 15 looked after children went missing in FY10-11, yet police statistics recorded 277 individuals as reported missing across the same time period. Through extrapolating the percentage of looked after children missing for 24 hours or more in West Mercier, the research suggested that the FY10-11 figure of 920 missing children could in actuality be in excess of 7,000 children.⁴

Whilst there are a number of factors that explain the differences between local authority and police data (for example: the police record all reported missing incidents regardless of the length of time they have been missing, not just after 24 hours; missing children are not counted against the local authority in which they are living if they are the responsibility of another local authority) these figures appear to be worryingly disparate. Indeed this pattern appears to hold nationally, with police force data across England suggesting that there are as many as 38,000 incidents of children missing from care a year.⁵

Significant numbers of children who leave care are being recorded in the 'catch-all' box labelled 'any other reason'. Mr Hemming, a member of the All Party Parliamentary Group for Runaway and Missing Children and Adults, analysed figures for 2011 and found that, of the 25,000 children who left care, 5,950 were listed in the 'other reasons' category. Of these young people, 4,360 were aged between 16 and 18, while 630 were 10 to 15-year-olds.⁶ Using such a broad category prevents officials from noting important patterns such as those cases where vulnerable children may have been abducted from their care home with a view to the child being trafficked or because they were in the process of being trafficked.

In addition, SSDA903 makes an assumption that a child missing overnight, even if it is every night, is not a significant issue of risk. Regular brief episodes of a child going missing are not properly risk assessed. Children missing from care for less than 24 hours at a time are not recorded for government reporting, even if they have been missing multiple times. This is concerning since many of the young people who are reported as having been sexually exploited will be away overnight and yet be returned to the place of care in the morning. The survival strategies adopted by young people whilst away can also lead to children being targeted for sexual exploitation. Recent news coverage around child sexual exploitation in Rochdale has highlighted again the importance of social services providing accurate returns.

Missing People also believes that the current guidelines around 'absconding' are inappropriate. The charity believes that the term 'abscond' is inappropriate language and should not be applied to care home settings since it refers to attempts to 'escape custody' or 'avoid arrest'. On this basis the charity would argue 'absconding' is no difference to 'being absent'.

Missing People therefore believes that good absence management procedures are required in line with corporate parenting. According to the Metropolitan Police, for example, 80-90 per cent of young people reported missing are from the care system.⁷ But, rather than indicating genuine running incidents, these high rates reflect the fact that carers are likely to report children and young people as missing, even in cases of unauthorised absence or the child is simply home late.

Action has been taken to address over-reporting by children's homes using police recording systems such as Compact. These make it possible to identify data trends relating to individual children's homes and there are cases where some homes have been closed down as a result.

Children missing from home

Evidence would indicate that, whilst children are more likely to run away from care, the statistical picture is also distorted by significant levels of under-reporting of children running away from home to official agencies. Research has found that only a minority of children are reported to the police by their parents.⁸ This highlights the over-reliance on police missing person statistics and the need for local authorities to collect local data from a variety of different sources.

Recommendations

- The Government should encourage local authorities to develop a more robust data collection framework for children who run away from home and care. This framework should contain elements that identify where a child has run away from (including home and care settings), the level of reported and assessed risk, and evidence of high risk outcomes such as exploitation or abduction. Missing People proposes that:

SSDA 903 is made fit for purpose by: expanding the codes under which local authorities provide statistical returns on children missing from care; including all missing episodes (not just those that last for 24 hours or longer); making it a requirement that children reported as missing via SSDA903 are also reported as missing to the police AND Local Safeguarding Children's Boards (LSCBs) should be under a statutory obligation to compile a local missing child profile with aggregate data from care homes, the police and service providers which is reviewed annually by CEOP.

- Ofsted should undertake inspections of the care pathways of looked after children in order to understand and assess the experience and outcomes for

looked after children across the different institutions/services they come into contact with.

¹ In May 2011 the Runaway Helpline will be known as 116 000

² One was undetermined

³ Evans, C, Houghton-Brown, M. & Rees, G. (2007) Stepping Up: The Future of Runaways Services, The Children's Society

⁴ West Mercia Police, Research Into Children Missing from Care, Detective Inspector Phil Shakesheff, HQ Public Protection, PowerPoint presentation (not dated)

⁵ NPJA (2012) Missing persons: data and analysis 2010/11

⁶ <http://www.express.co.uk/posts/view/319775/9-held-in-child-sex-grooming-scandal>

⁷ Houghton-Brown, M (not dated) Missing from Care – power point presentation

⁸ Rees, G (2011) Still Running 3, The Children's Society