

Missing 16 and 17 year olds

Key points:

- In Britain, 15 – 17 year olds go missing most frequently, making up 34 per cent of missing person cases (NPIA).
- Young people aged between 16 and 18 can be “additionally vulnerable as they are very unlikely to meet the threshold criteria for children’s services intervention” (Harris and Scott, 2006:38).
- Most young people aged between 16 and 17 go missing because of family conflict and poor relationships, or they are forced to leave home by parents/guardians or for economic reasons.
- Many 16 and 17 year olds who go missing or leave home become homeless.

Background

Every year approximately 250,000 people are reported missing to the police and other agencies across the UK.

Missing young people aged 15 – 17 make up 34 per cent of cases reported to the police (NPIA). Research by Gees and Siakeu (2004) found that 16 and 17 year olds who go missing are likely to stay missing. Many lose touch with their families and become homeless. Biehal et al. argue that “young people who run away or break links with their families at 16 or 17 rarely do so through choice” (2003:35). In 2005/6, nearly 8,500 young people (aged 16/17 or care leavers 18-20) were deemed unintentionally homeless and in priority need (DfCLG, 2007:4).

Research has shown that young people at this age can be just as vulnerable as younger teenagers who go missing. Missing young people who become homeless face risks to their health, safety and well-being. There are also increased risks when they are housed in temporary accommodation of being targeted for gang recruitment and/or being sexually exploited (DfCLG & DfCSF, 2008). Many 16 and 17 year olds lack the means to live independently; they generally cannot sign tenancy contracts and may not be eligible for certain benefits (Citizens Advice Bureau).

A report on emergency accommodation for young runaways found that statutory and voluntary sector professionals believe that 16 and 17 year old runaways fall into a “grey area” and are likely to ‘fall through gaps’ between children and adult services.

The report also gives examples of cases where 16 and 17 year olds have been deemed ‘intentionally’ homeless and therefore have not been offered help by children’s or housing services. This is also reported in research by The Children’s Society (2007).

Why do 16 and 17 year olds go missing?

Gees and Siakeu (2004) interviewed a sample of 16 and 17 year olds who had been forced to leave home and found that many lost touch with their families, either living in hostels or on the streets. Some of those interviewed said economic factors were a key reason for their forced departure.

A report by the Joseph Rowntree Foundation suggests the main reason for homelessness amongst 16 and 17 year olds (of which a proportion will be reported as missing) was a “relationship breakdown with someone they lived with” (2008:36). This is supported by research by Shelter which shows family conflict is the main factor “leading to homelessness among under-18s” (2005:5), with between 60 to 90 per cent of homeless young people becoming homeless because of conflict with their families.

What support do they have?

There are three pieces of legislation which relate to service provision for 16 and 17 year olds who run away, go missing or become homeless, covering both those under the care of the state, and those who are not (Shelter, 2005):

- The Children Act 1989 requires social services to provide accommodation for 16 and 17 year olds who are defined as ‘in need’¹ or subject to a care order ² and 17 year olds where their welfare is likely to be ‘seriously prejudiced’.
- The Housing Act 1996 and the Homelessness Order 2002 extends priority accommodation status to 16 and 17 year olds who are not already covered by the Children Act 1989.
- The Children (Leaving Care) Act 2000 requires social services to support care leavers until their eighteenth birthday both financially and with housing needs.

A House of Lords decision (R v London Borough of Southwark) states that children’s services’ duty for supporting 16 and 17 year olds must take precedence over the local housing authority. Nevertheless, many children’s services and housing services are working together to tackle homelessness among 16 and 17 year olds (DfCSF, 2009).

Emergency accommodation

The four Acts above oblige local authorities to provide accommodation for 16 and 17 year olds. Most 16 and 17 year olds are entitled to help from children’s services by way of the Children Act (1989). If they are not entitled, or refuse accommodation from children’s services, the young person can apply for help from housing services under the Housing Act (1996). According to the Homelessness Code of Guidance, the use of B&Bs for 16 and 17 year olds should only be used “as a last resort for the shortest time possible” (2006:105).

However, Biehal et al found “limitations in the supply of supported accommodation options for young people who leave home aged 16 or 17” (2003:36), with one young person commenting: “When I wanted help, I was told I was too young for hostel and was told to leave, and I was too old for social services, so that left me with nothing” (2003:36). The Rees et al report also found “a lack of direct access emergency accommodation provision for this age group, or long delays in gaining access” (2009:73). In England, Safe@Last run the only refuge for children aged 16 and under, which has two spaces (The Children’s Society, 2011).

1 A ‘child in need’ is defined as a child with a disability, or one “unlikely to achieve or maintain...a reasonable standard of health or development” or “whose health or development is likely to be impaired” without the provision of services by a local authority (Children Act, 1989, 17)

2 A care order allows a local authority to take a child into care if that child “is suffering, or likely to suffer, significant harm” (Children Act 1989, 31.2b)

Mediation

Guidance accompanying the Homelessness Act (2002) supports the use of mediation in the first instance for 16 and 17 year olds who are homeless. The aim of mediation is to prevent homelessness in the first place by seeing if the young person can reconcile with their family or live with another relative. Except in cases of violence or abuse the government believes it is “in the best interest of 16 and 17 year olds to live in the family home” (2006:104).

What are the outcomes?

Research by Biehal et al (2003) found that leaving home/going missing for many 16 and 17 year olds was a permanent decision. Sixteen and seventeen year olds were twice as likely to “remain missing for more than six months” (2003:41) than 13 and 15 year olds.

Biehal et al. argue that for those leaving home at 16 and 17 years old “more options would have been available to make a permanent break from their families and establish independent lives for themselves as young adults” (Biehal 2003:23). This ‘permanent break’ resulted in being missing for years, and once traced the majority refused contact with their families.

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For more information please contact the Policy and Research team by email at policyandresearch@missingpeople.org.uk

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