

Learning from Callers to Runaway Helpline™ and Message Home

Missing People conducted a one-year (2009-10) data collection project examining callers to its Runaway Helpline™ and Message Home services, exploring the outcomes of statutory referrals and evaluating the processes and actions taken.

Key Points

- More than 9,000 actionable contacts were made to Runaway Helpline™ and Message Home in the year 2009-10.
- Roughly equal numbers of males and females contacted Runaway Helpline™ and Message Home. The distribution of calls to the helpline echoed existing research that suggests that as teenagers, girls are more likely to go missing, and as adults men are more likely to go missing.
- The main issues mentioned by callers were problems at home (17%), homelessness, accommodation or housing (9%), abuse (9%) and mental health issues (5%).
- A total of 728 (around 12%) of all logged calls resulted in a successful substantial action taken to reconnect that caller with family, carer or statutory services.

1. Background

Missing People operates two services that are aimed at supporting people who are away from, or thinking of leaving, home or Care. Both services are accredited by The Helplines Association. Runaway Helpline™ and Message Home are both caller-led, and do not adhere to a strict step-by-step focussed intervention. Instead, each call is explored with the caller to identify their problem(s) and to discuss possible options. The caller will then be supported to take action if they wish.

The services are confidential and staff and volunteers cannot see callers' telephone numbers or email addresses. However, callers sometimes provide information about themselves or their whereabouts. In this event, call takers will assess the risk to the caller, including child protection issues, and if there is sufficient concern about the caller the call taker may, with the agreement of a manager and their supervisor, break confidentiality in order to safeguard the caller.

2. Method

Information was collected from a number of sources including: the telephone system management information; the internal call logging system; the internal database of callers; and handover notes shared between call takers. The primary limitation of the project has been the use of secondary data that have been captured for operational purposes and vary somewhat in quality and depth.

While the two services are separate with distinct remits, in practice there are a number of callers who use both. While Message Home has historically been marketed towards adults, many young people choose to use this service instead of Runaway Helpline™. Similarly, there are many adults who call the Runaway Helpline™. Staff and volunteers do not currently distinguish between callers to the two services when providing the service; the service is provided on a case-by-case, caller-led basis. For this reason, the two services have been examined together and many of the analyses described above used aggregate data.

3. How many contacts did the services receive?

The total number of actionable contacts to Runaway Helpline™ and Message Home in the year 2009-10 exceeded 9,000.

Telephone calls

In 2009-10, Runaway Helpline™ and Message Home answered a combined total of 61,379 telephone calls, of which around 10% (6272) were logged as actionable calls. The remaining 90% was largely made up of 'testing' calls; either hoax, silent or inappropriate.

Email and text messages

Runaway Helpline™ received 2,392 text messages and 353 emails while Message Home received 199 emails.

4. How many people made contact?

The total number of people who contacted the services is estimated to exceed 4,700.

Telephone

The total number of unique telephone callers is estimated to be 4,048.

Of the 6,272 logged calls, 2,925 calls (just under 50%) came from 701 individual callers. The remaining 3,347 calls were not identified as being a repeat caller, so it is assumed that they represent 3,347 individuals. It is possible that within this number of calls, there may be repeat callers who did not reveal that they had called previously, or calls from callers who then went on to become recorded cases. The estimate of 4,048 unique callers is therefore likely to be an overestimate.

355 callers were known to have contacted the helpline more than once in 2009-10, accounting for 2,579 calls. Some repeat callers called more than once during a single running away incident. Others called regularly over a longer period, across more than one running away incident.

Around 25% (n=1,563) of all actionable calls were made by the top 1% (40) prolific callers. The highest number of recorded calls from one caller in the year 2009-10 was 168. The next highest was 126, the next 105. Each of these three callers had started calling the services before the start of the data collection period and continued to call after the end of the reference year. These are, however, unusual. For all *repeat* callers, the mean number of calls in the year was 7, the mode 2 and the median 3.

Email and Text messages

Runaway Helpline™ received texts from 486 mobile telephone numbers, and emails from 142 email accounts, while Message Home received emails from 105 email accounts, meaning that an estimated 733 people contacted the services via text-based media.

5. Who telephoned?

Sex

On some occasions the caller was not asked their sex, but the call taker recorded what they believed to be the person's sex based on their voice or information they disclosed (such as a name or, for example, pregnancy).

It is estimated that of 4,048 individual callers, 98 (2%) were of indeterminate sex, 1,977 (49%) were male and 1,973 (49%) were female.

3,048 (49%) calls were made by girls or women, 3,126 (50%) by boys or men, and in 98 (2%) calls the caller's sex was not recorded.

Age

Age was known in fewer cases. An age was recorded for just under three-quarters of all calls (71%). Some callers state their age without being asked while others will be asked their age if it is necessary in order to provide an appropriate service. 43% of all calls received were from people aged under 18 years, but when the age was known, 61% were from callers aged under 18. This

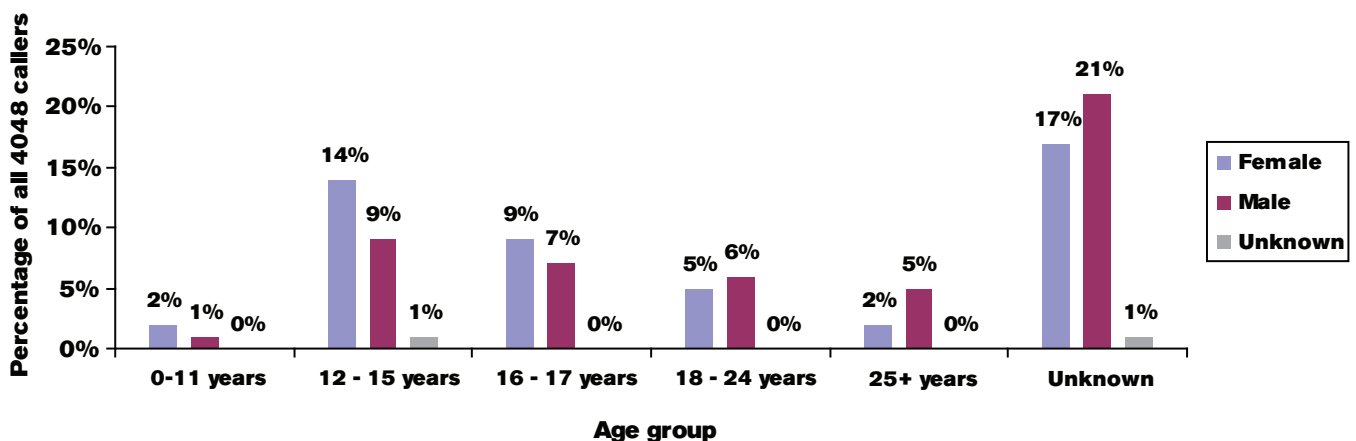
may reflect the propensity of staff and volunteers to ask about and record age when a caller is young, because it is more likely to affect the service and advice they can provide.

Table 1: Age group of callers to the helplines, 2009-10

Caller age group (years)	No. (%) of all calls		No. (%) of calls where age was recorded	
0-11	236 (4%)	2,683 (43%)	236 (5%)	2,683 (61%)
12-15	1,502 (24%)		1,502 (34%)	
16-17	945 (15%)		945 (21%)	
18-24	1,127 (18%)		1,127 (25%)	
25+	622 (10%)		622 (14%)	
Unknown	1,840 (29%)			
Total	6,272 (100%)		4,432 (100%)	

This very balanced split of male and female callers is not in line with much other research about people going missing, apart from a recent National Policing Improvement Agency (NPIA) report that suggests a similar division of males and females reported missing to the police (NPIA 2011:11). However, the age *and* sex comparison is more similar to the patterns of missing people from previous research (Biehal, Mitchell and Wade, 2003: 8-10) which found that in the 12-to-17-year-old age group girls were more likely to go missing than boys, while adult men were more likely to go missing than adult women.

Figure 1: Sex and age of callers



6. Where in the UK were the callers based?

Callers are not routinely asked questions about their characteristics (such as ethnicity, nationality, sexuality, religion, etc.) as information is collected primarily for operational purposes. The helplines are also confidential, which means that callers are not asked for potentially identifying information unless this is required in order to provide a service. For example, information about the country or region where a caller lives was recorded for less than half (2,714, 43%) of all actionable calls.

Two measures are used to establish the regional origin of calls: telephone calls received from landline telephones can be analysed by the telephone system and geo-coded, and some callers reveal their location during a call.

Table 2: Location of calls and callers to the services in 2009-10

Government Office Region	% of UK Population (at mid-09)*	% Landline calls (n=84,845**)	% calls where region is known	% callers where region is known
East Midlands	7.3%	7.2%	14%	11%
East of England	9.4%	6.3%	3%	5%
London	12.6%	8.5%	23%	26%
North East	4.2%	5.3%	3%	4%
North West	11.2%	18.2%	13%	12%
Northern Ireland	2.9%	2.9%	0%	1%
Scotland	8.4%	11.7%	6%	7%
South East	13.6%	8.6%	7%	9%
South West	8.4%	6.7%	5%	5%
Wales	4.9%	4.8%	7%	3%
West Midlands	8.7%	9.7%	8%	7%
Yorkshire and the Humber	8.6%	10.0%	12%	9%
Outside the UK	N/A	0.1%	0%	0%
Total	100.0%	100.0%	100%	100%

*From <http://www.statistics.gov.uk/pdfdir/pop0610.pdf> mid-2009 estimates.

**This is more than the 61,379 answered calls because it includes calls that were not answered and calls that did not last long enough to ring in the building.

***UK Pop and Landline calls are rounded to one decimal place. Callers and Calls are rounded to no decimal places.

This table shows that while the phone calls that are received from landline telephones are fairly proportionate to regional population, the proportion of actionable calls and individual callers from each country or region is divergent. For example, the helplines receive a slightly lower proportion of calls than might be expected from the South West, but a much higher proportion of calls from London.. This may be because there is uneven distribution of actionable calls, or calls where it is relevant to ascertain whereabouts, or it may be that there is an uneven recording of region amongst call takers.

7. Why did callers make contact?

- 2,549 calls were received from people who were away from home or Care at the time of the call. 660 of these (just over one-quarter) were received during office hours of Monday to Friday, 9am to 5pm. The remainder were received on weekends, and during evenings and nights.
- Nearly one-third (1,272, 31%) of individual callers were away at the time of their call on at least one occasion.
- 39 calls (less than 1%) were received from people who were thinking of running away. Previous research looking at email and text message contacts suggests that a higher proportion of these text-based conversations are from people thinking of running away. For example, nearly 1 in 10 text message conversations are from people who are thinking of leaving.

Main issues

Of 6,272 calls...

...1,078 (17%) mentioned problems at home

...569 (9%) mentioned homelessness, accommodation or housing

...555 (9%) mentioned abuse

...294 (5%) mentioned mental health issues

...144 (2%) mentioned dissatisfaction with a care placement

...118 (2%) mentioned health or other medical issues

...111 (2%) mentioned problems at school or work

...101 (1%) mentioned substance use

Homelessness/housing issues

Around 9% of actionable telephone calls to the helplines (n=569) related to accommodation, housing and homelessness. This relates to more than 500 unique callers (12.5%), 458 of whom were recorded as unique callers while 47 callers accounted for 111 calls. Around one third of these calls come from callers aged 16 to 19, 37% from girls and women and 61% from boys and men.

342 calls about accommodation, housing and homelessness (60%) were received outside 9-5 office hours. 527 calls (93%) mentioned being away at the time of the call. 6 calls also mentioned abuse, 5 mentioned health problems, 15 mentioned mental health, 2 mentioned problems at home, and 5 mentioned substance use.

Sexual abuse and trafficking

A total of 82 calls were received from 68 callers where the main issue was sexual abuse or concerns about trafficking. Around two-thirds of these callers were female and around a third were aged 12 to 15 years.

People living in Care

100 individual callers, on 144 occasions, discussed being unhappy in a care placement. The largest group was young people aged 12 to 15 years, 49 (5%) of whom discussed disliking a care placement. Of all the 100 callers who called to talk about being unhappy in a care placement, 59 were girls and 40 were boys (1 was undetermined). 97 of 144 calls about this issue (more than two-thirds) were received outside of normal office hours, and 73 calls (51%) were received where the caller was away at the time of the call.

8. At what times did people telephone?

Both Runaway Helpline™ and Message Home aim to provide a 24 hour service, 7 days a week, 365 days a year. In 2009-10 the services achieved 88% of this cover. Calls are received round the clock, although there is a noticeable drop in call volumes between 2am and 6am most nights.

A 2002 government report recognised that callers who have run away from home or Care are likely to seek help outside of regular office or school hours.

“Runaways are likely to seek help at times when many services are unavailable. The peak time of calls to helplines, for example, is between 4pm and 11pm, while research by ChildLine has found that runaways are significantly more likely than other groups of young people to require help at night. Peak times for calls to local authorities about runaways tend to be around 10pm or 11pm”. (SEU, 2002: 39).

During office hours the options available to callers to, and staff and volunteers who provide Runaway Helpline™ and Message Home, are much wider than out of hours. Many services to which callers may be referred, including dedicated runaway services, are closed outside office hours, so options at that time can be limited to emergency statutory services such as the police and emergency duty social work teams.

- Of the 6,272 calls received in 2009-10, 1,727 (28%) were received during office hours, and 3,979 (63%) were received out of hours. The remaining 566 did not have a time recorded.
- Of the 2,549 calls received from people who were away from home or care, more than two-thirds (1,736, 68%) of these were received out of hours.
- 65% (1,746) of all 2,683 calls from young people aged under 18 years were known to have been received out of hours compared to 25% received during office hours.

Table 3: Age group and time of call

Age group	No. of calls in office hours (row %)	No. of calls in office hours under 18 yrs (row %)	No. of calls out of office hours (row %)	No. of calls out of office hours under 18 yrs (row %)	No. of calls time unknown (row %)	No. of calls time unknown under 18 yrs (row %)	Total no. of calls (row %)	Total no. of calls under 18 yrs (row %)
0-11 yrs	66 (28%)	674 (25%)	135 (57%)	1,746 (65%)	35 (15%)	263 (10%)	236 (100%)	2,683 (100%)
12-15 yrs	365 (24%)		998 (66%)		139 (9%)		1,502 (100%)	
16-17 yrs	243 (26%)		613 (65%)		89 (9%)		945 (100%)	
18-24 yrs	276 (24%)		764 (68%)		87 (8%)		1,127 (100%)	
25+ yrs	177 (28%)		381 (61%)		64 (10%)		622 (100%)	
Unknown	600 (33%)		1,088 (59%)		152 (8%)		1,840 (100%)	
Total	1,727 (28%)		3,979 (63%)		566 (9%)		6,272 (100%)	

*Not all row totals sum to 100% because of rounding.

9. What actions were taken?

There are a number of actions which staff and volunteers providing Runaway Helpline™ and Message Home can take, in agreement with the caller, to provide help. It is understood that all actionable calls will be explored, and the call taker will spend time listening to the caller.

Many callers were given advice or support without being referred or directly connected to another service or family member. 1,884 calls involved the caller being given advice and support, 1,833 involved the caller being signposted to other appropriate services, and in 609 calls the callers were signposted to another voluntary agency.

More substantial actions are also available to call takers: a referral may be made to a voluntary or statutory agency who will then make direct contact with the caller and assess their ongoing needs; a three-way conference call may connect the caller to a family member, carer or support agency; and a message may be passed between the caller and a family member, carer or support agency.

Actions taken

Of all 6,272 calls received in 2009-10...

- ... 1,311 calls representing 766 callers (21% logged calls, 2% of total answered calls) resulted in an attempted substantial action (referral, three-way call or message passed).

- Of these 1,311 calls, 753 of them - representing 508 individual callers (12% of logged calls, about 1% of all answered calls) - resulted in a successful substantial action. This would amount to around 14 per week or 2 per day.
- Of the 508 individual callers who had received a successful substantial action in 2009-10, 214 (42%) were aged under 16 years, 128 (25%) were aged 16 years or 17 years, 143 (28%) were aged over 18 years and 23 were age unknown. 254 (50%) were female, and 254 (50%) were male.
- 45 calls resulted in a successful three-way call to a family member (49 failed) and 93 messages were successfully passed to family members (69 were not passed).
- 61 calls resulted in a successful three-way call to Social Care Services (and 40 attempts failed), 66 in a successful three-way call to Police (6 failed), and 3 in a successful three-way call to Emergency Housing departments. 47 calls resulted in a successful three-way call to a children's home (16 failed).
- 236 calls resulted in a successful referral to Social Care Services (i.e. the referral was made and accepted) (30 failed). 25 calls were successfully referred to the police. 60 were referred to Emergency Housing (12 failed). 21 calls resulted in referrals to children's homes.
- A total of 728 calls (around 12% of all logged calls) resulted in a successful substantial action taken to reconnect that caller with family, carer or statutory services.

10. What happened after the callers made contact?

Of the 519 callers whose calls resulted in substantial successful action, 204 cases were deemed suitable for follow up within the data collection period

Follow up (outcome) information was collected for 64 callers (around one third).

- In 23 cases the caller could not be contacted by the statutory service (e.g. not answering phone, not where they said they'd wait) and 1 was contacted but declined to engage.
- In 7 cases the caller was contacted and given advice. In 4 cases the caller was signposted elsewhere for help and advice. (In 4 cases no details could be found/provided).
- In 7 cases the caller returned to home or Care, and in 10 cases the caller was returned by the statutory service provider.
- In at least 4 cases the caller was known to have been allocated to a social worker and 1 case was being supported by Connexions.
- 3 callers were accommodated as a direct result of the referral made by the services. One further had accommodation arranged, but then could not be contacted.

23 respondents from statutory services had not previously heard of Runaway Helpline™; 4 said they had and 37 were not asked or could not provide an answer. All respondents were offered further information and materials about Runaway Helpline™, and all of those who had not previously heard of it expressed interest in hearing more, both to improve their own awareness and to pass on to young clients.

11. References

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