Vulnerable children on the run, a European challenge

"Findings from a European Survey"

Martin Houghton-Brown
Chief Executive, Missing People

Young Runaway

Preliminary Definition

- Child – Under 18 years of age
- Away – from care / supervision / permission / family home
- At Risk – Facing risks consistent with being 'away'

- Departing from family or state care without permission.
- Forced out of their home by their carers in some cases.

In the UK The Children's Society surveyed 10,000 children in 1999 and 2005 about their experiences of running away.

100,000 children in the UK run away overnight, under 16 years, each year

Who?

- More girls than boys
- Majority are age 13 and older
- Same rates from rural / urban / wealthy / deprived

Why?

- Problems at home – particularly strained family relationships
- Conflict and maltreatment
- Personal problems including depression
- School problems
- 25% said they had been forced to depart from home

What happens?

- 1 in 6 young runaways sleep outside (on the streets)
- 1 in 8 beg or steal to survive
- 1 in 12 are hurt or harmed whilst away

25% of all young runaways face serious risks and would require immediate help

If a child repeats the behaviour they are more likely to be at risk

Range of issues

1. All children are **vulnerable to running away**

2. In most cases **there is an underlying problem**

3. Most problems are resolved by carers within 48 hours

4. For **25% of young runaways the problems are more serious**

   - We don't know which ones are the 25%

   - Children **targeted for sexual exploitation** manifest as running away

   - Children **who are trafficked and abducted** from care homes may appear to have run away

Purpose

To understand the approach taken to help young runaways across Europe and if possible to understand the scale of the problem.

To seek out definitions, data and good practice.

To identify where we could do better together than we can alone.

Method

A total of 21 member states cooperated with the research.

Questionnaires were completed by representatives of Government in 19 member states.

Telephone interviews were conducted with representatives of NGOs in 11 member states.
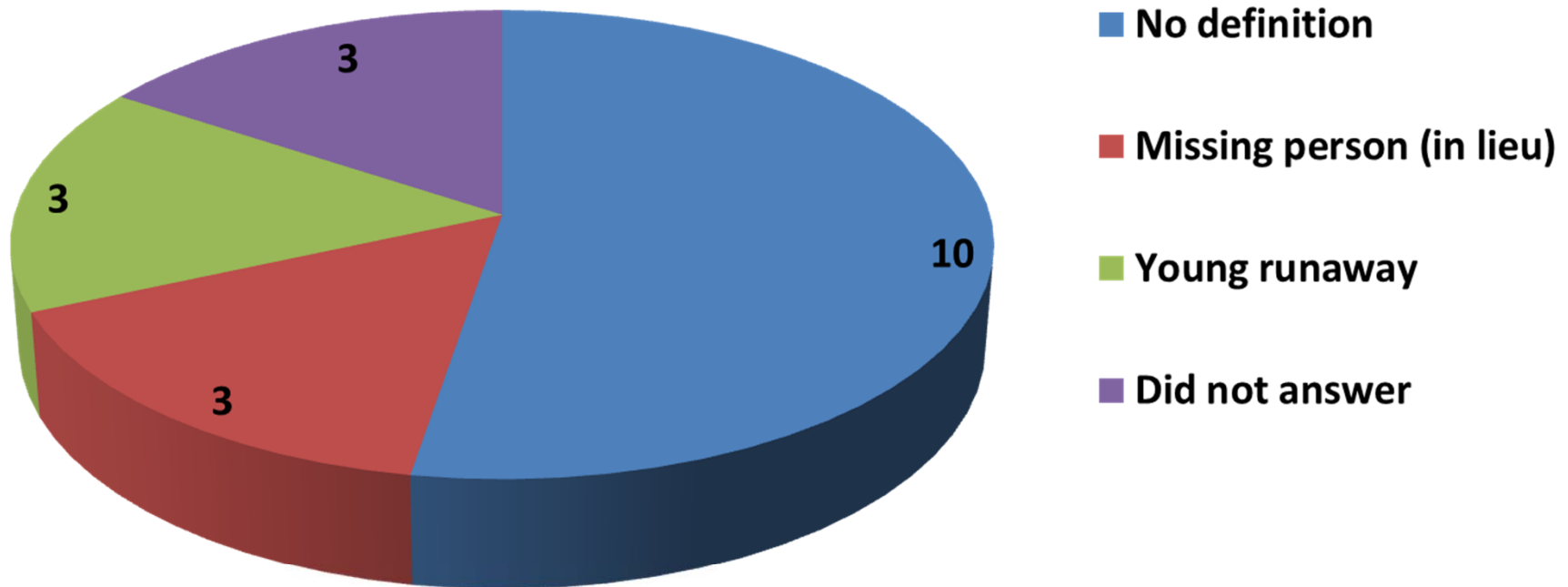
Young Runaway

2001 Council Resolution on the contribution of civil society in finding missing and sexually exploited children under former Belgian Presidency

- Justice & Home Affairs Council requested that the Commission would analyse the actual extent of the phenomenon of missing and sexually exploited children

- European Commission funded research on epidemiological data 'missing and sexually exploited children'

-> Definition used for the research: "Runaways: This category concerns all minors who voluntarily run away from home or from the institution where he/she has been placed"

Data collection is organised in a very chaotic and poor fashion

Government Definitions

- No definition
- Missing person (in lieu)
- Young runaway
- Did not answer

In some cases where there was no response or no definition the inference was that if a child was missing they would be dealt with by missing persons procedures.

Definitions

Missing Children

"Whereabouts unknown" common to all
Member states variations:
> *- at risk*
> *- someone looking for them*
> *- concerns for safety*
> *- in their best interests for someone to look for them*
> *- absent from where they are expected to be*

Young Runaway

A young person / child who runs away from home, foster home or institution (without permission)

A child who left voluntarily his or her home (or has been forced out)

Problems with definitions

Variation of risk associated with number of times a child runs away

Children from care four times as likely to run away

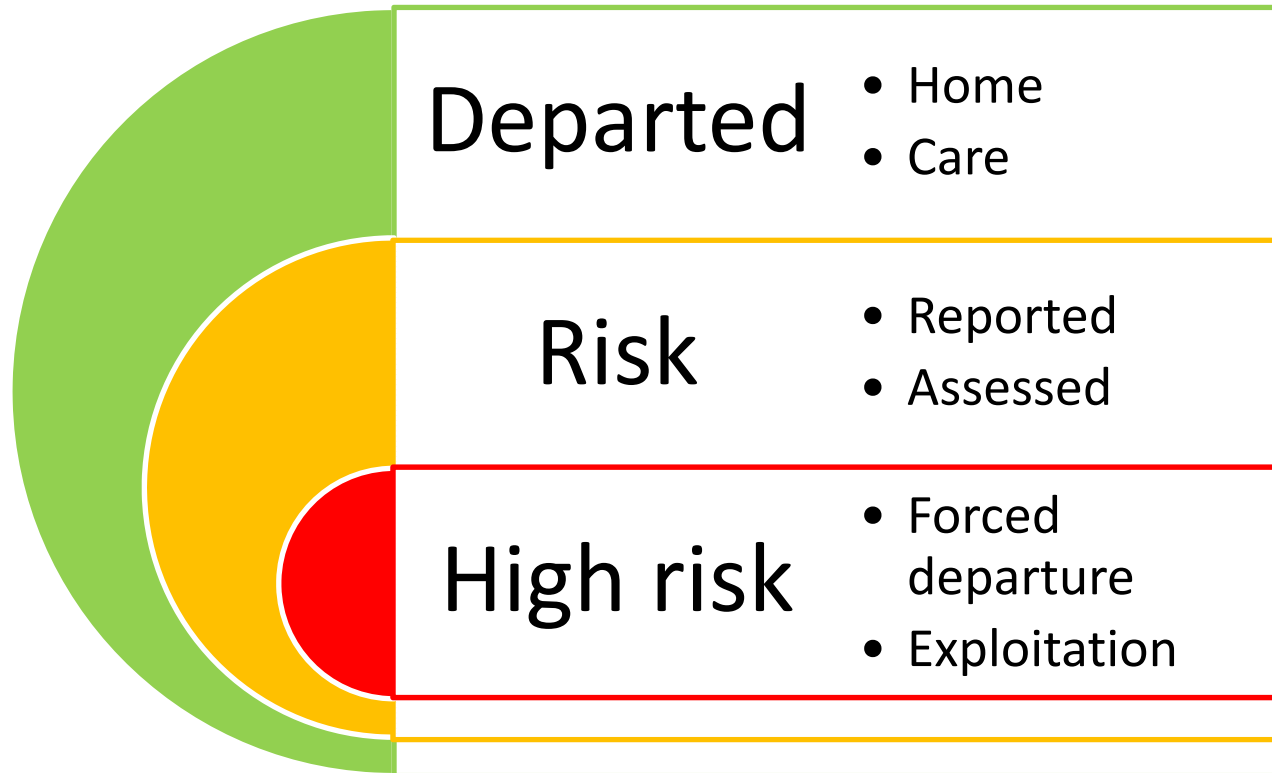Children from broken families up to three times as likely to run away

Definitions not child centred – tend to be focused on law enforcement

Children often not reported as missing when:
(68% unreported in UK Studies)
- forced out of home
- post conflict
- suspicion of Police or Government agencies

A Possible Framework for a European Definition

Departed:
- Home
- Care

Risk
- Reported
- Assessed

High risk
- Forced departure
- Exploitation

For example: **A child who has departed their home or care at risk**
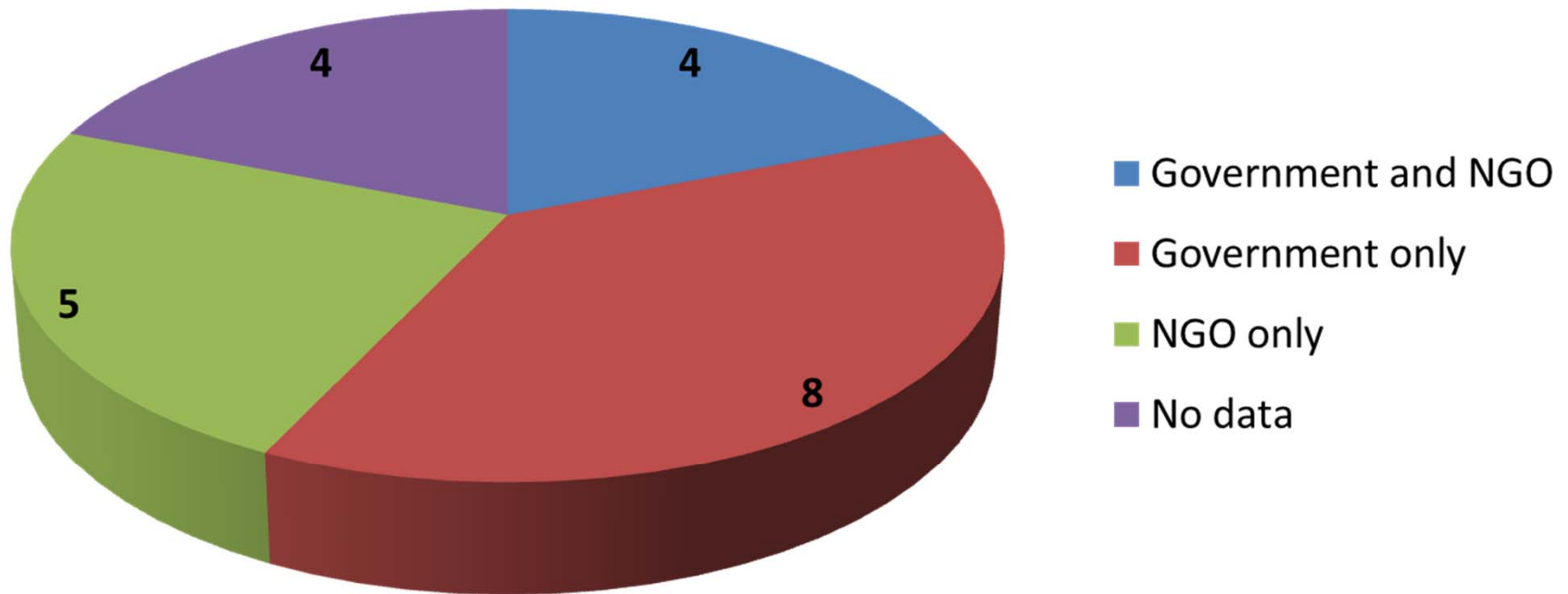
Not: Voluntary departure as it places a value judgement on the child's agency
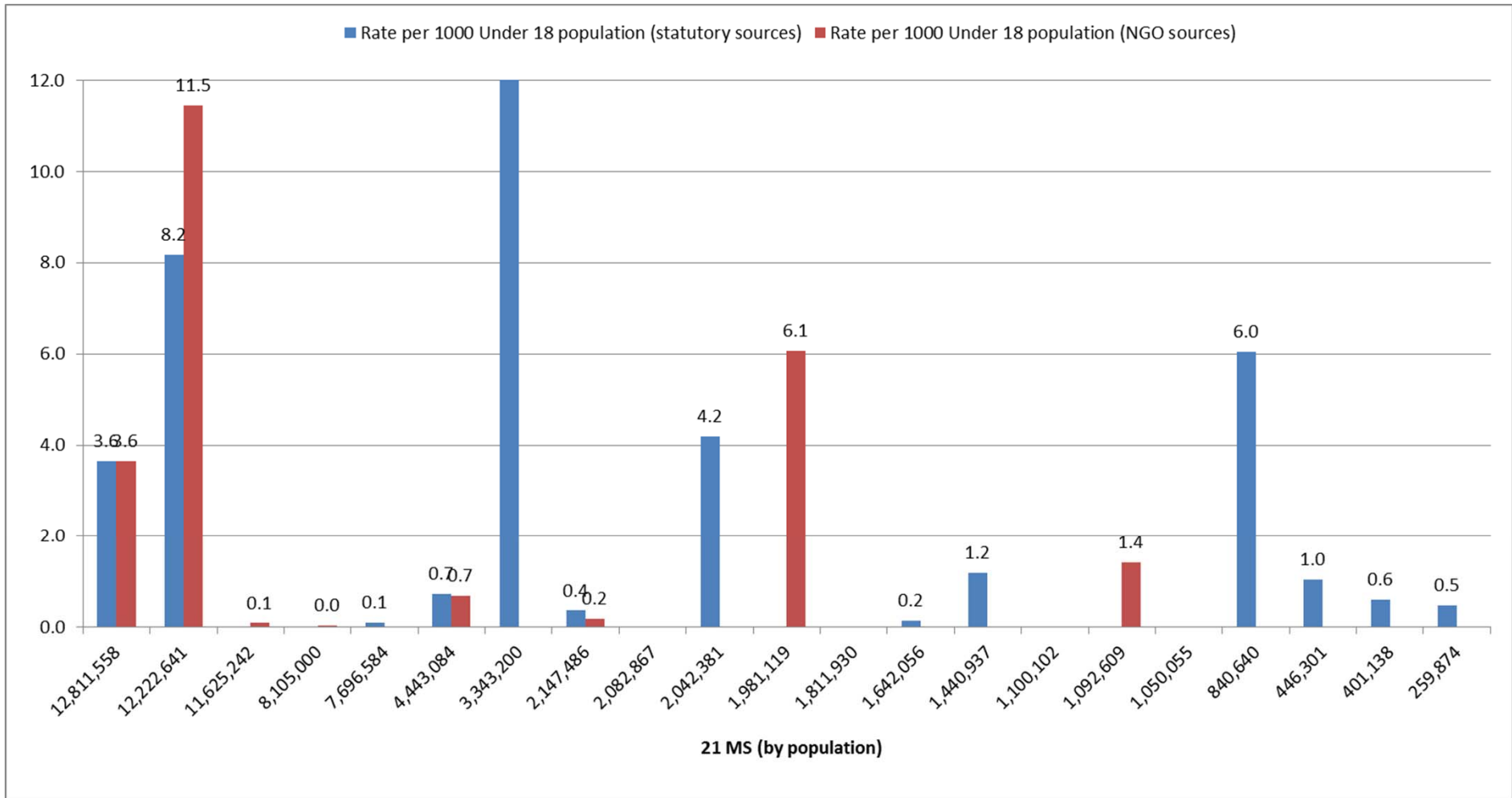
"I can give you my 93.4% assurance that there is less than a 65.6% possibility that this exercise will simply generate 34.8% more meaningless statistics"

Source of data

- Government and NGO — 4
- Government only — 8
- NGO only — 5
- No data — 4

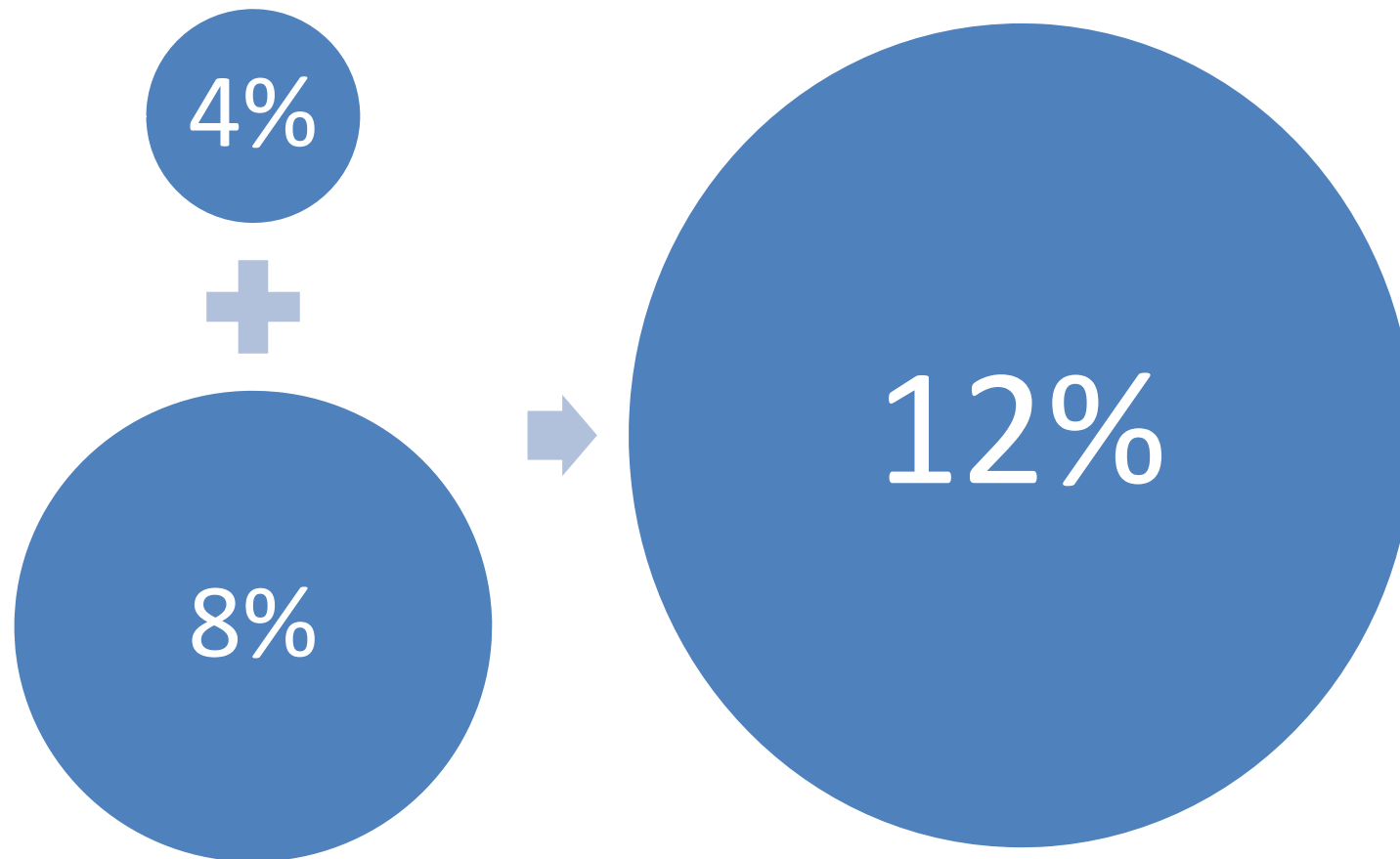| Estimated under-18 pop (20% of total estimated pop.)	Rate Per 1000 under-18 pop (statutory)	Rate Per 1000 under-18 pop (NGO)
12,811,558	3.64	3.64
12,222,641	8.18	11.45
11,625,242	-	0.09
8,105,000	-	0.04
7,696,584	0.10	-
4,443,084	0.72	0.68
3,343,200	20.00	-
2,147,486	0.36	0.19
2,082,867	-	-
2,042,381	4.19	-
1,981,119	-	6.06
1,811,930	-	-
1,642,056	0.15	-
1,440,937	1.18	-
1,100,102	-	-
1,092,609		1.42
1,050,055	-	-
840,640	6.04	-
446,301	1.04	-
401,138	0.60	-
259,874	0.47	-

Findings from data

- **Rate does not appear to correlate with population figures**

- **Data variations**
  - Difference in reporting thresholds
  - Difference in recording practices
  - Difference in definitions
  - NGO and government estimates sometimes differ

- **Lack of data concerning specific scenarios**
  - Children running from care
  - Problems associated with children who are hurt or harmed
  - Problems associated with migrant children and trafficked children

- **Most comprehensive picture from self reporting surveys**
  - Only place where risks assessed – e.g. living on streets or being exploited

4%

+

8%

→

12%

Average estimates of runaways would indicate 4% of child population with potentially a further 8% who are not reported, leading to a probable
12% of the child population estimated to run away

Highlighted Support Best Practice in the Survey

Reporting
- *Risk assessment processes*
- *Local data providing problem analysis*

Crisis Response
- *Role of helplines – 116 000 & 116 111*
- *Emergency shelters*
- *Police search and locate*
- *Assessment of risk*

Welfare services post episode
- *Return welfare interviews*
- *Referral into welfare assesment*
- *Referral into integrated youth programme*

Breathing space
- *Youth supported accommodation*
- *Respite and self actualisation programmes*
- *Parenting support and family mediation*

Thematic Support Best Practice

- Joint working between agencies – both government and non-government

- Information sharing arrangements in place

- Integrated and holistic services provide cost effective support

- Knowledge of and access to existing services (whoever provides them)

- Best responses are found where children's risk and vulnerability is understood

With thanks to
all agencies who cooperated

Missing Children Europe Secretariat

Belgian Ministry of Justice

Martin Houghton-Brown
martin.houghton-brown@missingpeople.org.uk