

Return Interviews

Key Points

- Statutory guidance on children who run away or go missing states that when a child is found they should be offered an independent return interview (DfE, 2014:14).
- The Association of Chief Police Officers (ACPO) suggests that return interviews are 'relevant to all missing persons' regardless of age (NPIA, 2010:55).
- The key benefits of return interviews are to identify people at risk; understand the risks and issues faced whilst missing; reduce the risks of future episodes of missing or running away; and equip people with the resources and knowledge of how to stay safe if they do choose to run away again (DfE, 2014: 15-16).

Background

Every year approximately 250,000 people are reported missing to the police and other agencies across the United Kingdom. Annually, an estimated 140,000 people under the age of 18 go missing (Home Office, 2010).

Children and young people who go missing or runaway can be at risk, and return interviews are a way in which this – or any actual harm – can be uncovered and dealt with. One study found 11 per cent of young people said that they had been 'hurt or harmed while away from home on the only or most recent occasion' (Rees, 2011:16). The same study found one in five young people said that they had stolen, begged or done 'other things' whilst away in order to survive (Rees, 2011:16). A separate study suggested that one in every eight young people who are reported missing have been physically hurt and one in nine have been sexually assaulted while away (Biehal et al, 2003:32).

Statutory guidance on children who run away or go missing states that when a child is found they should be offered an independent return interview (DfE, 2014:14). Whilst much literature on return interviews focuses on those for children up to 18 years old, the Association of Chief Police Officers (ACPO) suggest that return interviews are 'relevant to all missing persons' regardless of age (NPIA, 2010:55).¹

What is a return interview?

The Department for Education (DfE) describes return interviews as in-depth discussions and their purpose is to 'identify and deal with any harm the child has suffered... understand and try to address the reasons why the child or young person ran away, help the child feel safe and understand that they have options to prevent repeat instances of them running away [and] provide them with information on how to stay safe if they run away again, including helpline numbers' (DfE, 2014:15). Local authorities are responsible for ensuring protocols are in place to enable return interviews to be undertaken, and the guidance states that it is advantageous for these to be conducted by an 'independent person'; that is, someone not directly involved in the care of the child or young person.

1. DfE statutory guidance and NPIA guidance only apply in England and Wales.

The Children's Society defines a return interview as a 'conversation that a trained professional has with a young person following a running away episode. It aims to establish what has caused the young person to run away, what experiences and individuals the young person encountered while away and what could help resolve the issues that the child identifies' (2013:1).

Whilst both are conducted when the missing person is found or returns, it is important to note that a return interview is distinct from a safe and well check. A safe and well check is undertaken by the police as soon as possible after a child is found, and is intended to check for harm against the child or young person. This is in line with the police's duty to 'to protect life and investigate crime,' and so within a safe and well check officers will explore 'where and with whom they have been; and to give them an opportunity to disclose any offending by or against them' (NPIA, 2010:54).

Following both the safe and well check and the return interview, statutory guidance states that the police, local authority children's services and voluntary services should collaborate to try and fully understand: why the missing incident occurred; what happened whilst the children or young person was away; where they were and with whom, and; what support they need (DfE, 2014:15-6).

What are the benefits of return interviews?

The government states that 'return home interviews are a valuable and important opportunity to engage with the young person' (Home Office, 2011:18). The key benefits are to: identify children and young people at risk; understand the risks and issues faced by the child whilst missing; reduce the risks of future episodes of missing or running away, and; equip them with the resources and knowledge of how to stay safe if they do choose to run away again (DfE, 2014:15).

The information ascertained in the interviews can be used to identify any support the child requires moving forward and, in the case of children in care, contribute to their care planning and decisions about the extent to which their placement remains appropriate. An evaluation of return interviews in Scotland found that a key benefit was that they provide 'an opportunity to obtain information about the young person that may not otherwise be available' (Burgess et al, 2010:8). This was particularly the case for young people who did not have statutory support, where the interview 'was often the first opportunity they had to discuss problems they were experiencing and allowed onward referral to social work and/or another relevant service' (2010:8).

The Children's Society research suggests that return interviews are 'an effective way of identifying children at risk of significant harm' and help to 'reduce, and even prevent, further episodes of running away by helping children understand the risks of being away from their families and carers.' Additionally, in cases of child sexual exploitation, return interviews can help disrupt the 'exploitation or abuse and provide evidence for prosecution' (2013:1).

In terms of young people's views themselves, the Scottish evaluation found that young people's experiences of return interviews were 'positive...they felt that they were listened to by the interviewer, were able to confide in them and found it useful to be able to talk to someone about their problems' (2010:8).

When should a return interview take place?

Return interviews should take place within 72 hours of a child or young person being found or returning from running away or going missing, according to statutory guidance (DfE, 2014:14). ACPO guidance warns that 'delays in return interviews can result in retraction of statements and disclosures and loss of the child's confidence in the agency's response' (NPIA, 2010:57). Where a child is looked after, it is also advised that they are given the opportunity to talk before they return to their placement (2014:23).

Who conducts return interviews?

As mentioned above, statutory guidance suggests that it is advantageous for an independent person (that is, someone who is not involved in caring for the child or young person) to conduct the return interview (DfE, 2014:14). The cross government strategy for missing adults and children says that there is greater disclosure from children when return interviews are undertaken by an independent voluntary sector worker (Home Office, 2011:18). ACPO guidance also states that return interviews 'might be best provided by a professional from a voluntary agency' (NPIA, 2010:56).

Research suggests voluntary sector professionals are best placed to undertake return interviews (The Children's Society, 2013). For example, the Children's Society found that in some areas where independent, non-statutory agencies or trained statutory providers were involved the 'outcomes for young runaways were positive' in reducing repeat incidents and preventing risky behaviour (Evans et al, 2007:31).

There are several reasons as to why this is thought to be the case. Firstly, if a child goes missing from care it may be difficult to talk openly about issues with their social worker or placement with someone who is not independent. Secondly, in some cases where children have run away and been sexually exploited, independent staff with specific, specialist expertise may be best placed to identify possible victimisation and to develop the most effective response. Lastly, independent professionals may offer a degree of confidentiality that police and social workers do not (The Children's Society, 2013:20).

However, return interviews are currently delivered by a variety of providers. The Children's Society (2013) found that the majority of local authorities they questioned used social services, most commonly the child's social worker. The police also provided return interviews; this was more likely to be for children missing from home. Other providers included independent commissioned providers and 'advocacy, children's rights services or independent reviewing officers within [the] local authority' (2013:18), although together they provided a small amount. The statutory guidance issued in 2014 may lead to changes here however, with its emphasis on independent persons (DfE, 2014:14).

How should information from return interviews be shared?

In addition to helping to identify specific areas of concern for individual children who run away or go missing, when aggregated and analysed alongside information from other sources (such as school absence figures and time and duration of the missing incident), the data from return interviews can be used help to identify patterns of behaviour and 'hotspots' of activity and risk in local areas (DfE, 2014:18). DfE statutory guidance emphasises that such information sharing is essential and return interview data should be included in regular reports to the lead member for children's services and reports from the local authority to Local Safeguarding Children Boards (2014:18).

How regularly are return interviews offered to children and young people?

To date, the provision of return interviews is inconsistent, with many children and young people not being offered them. The emphasis on return interviews detailed in the 2014 DfE statutory guidance on children who run away or go missing from home or care may result in more universal provision over time.

Ofsted's evaluation of local authority safeguarding measures for children at risk of going missing or running away found a 'failure to undertake and record interviews with children after they had either been found or had returned home' (2013:15), with return interviews taking place in only 11 of the 50 cases investigated. They also found that looked after children living in children's homes were more likely to have had an interview than looked after children in foster care.

Recent research by The Children's Society (2013:2) found that out of 134 local authorities surveyed 21 local authorities did not offer return interviews in 2012 to children missing from home and six local authorities did not offer return interviews to children missing from care. The same report found that the majority of local authorities used social services to provide return interviews (102 out of 134).

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