

Manifesto goal four: Children and young people need to understand the risks of running away and how to get help

Key Points

- Children and young people who go missing can find themselves exposed to a number of risks including sexual exploitation and violence
- Educating young people as to these risks, as well as how to access services and assistance once missing, would help to safeguard those at risk
- Personal, Social and Health Education (PSHE) within schools provides an ideal context in which this education can take place to equip young people with the information they need.

Overview

Approximately 250,000 people go missing every year in the United Kingdom. Estimates suggest roughly two-thirds of all missing cases relate to children and young people, meaning around 140,000 people under the age of 18 go missing each year (Home Office, 2010: 5).

Young people who have decided to run away or are forced to leave home can be vulnerable in a variety of ways relating to their age, education level and/or inexperience. They may feel the need to engage in risky behaviour whilst missing in order to get by on a day to day basis, and can at additional risk of violent crime and sexual exploitation amongst other potential problems.

Missing People believes that the government should ensure that all young people are educated about the risks of running away, and what help they can access to stay safe. The charity is calling for education about this issue to become a mandatory part of PSHE in schools to help safeguard children and young people.

Risks young people face when missing

Research into the experiences of people whilst missing has shown the types of risks that children and young people face. They may find themselves engaging in risky behaviour which can lead to further dangers; for example one in six (18 percent) young people reported sleeping rough or staying with someone they had just met whilst away (Rees, 2011: 16).

Statistics show that one in five (20 percent) young people adopted a survival strategy involving stealing, begging or doing 'other things'¹ to survive, with substantial overlap between all three

1. It was not considered ethical to ask children for further details about this

(ibid). Some young people were also exposed to violence, with one in nine (11 percent) reporting that they had been hurt or harmed during the only, or most recent, time they went missing (ibid).

In addition, sexual exploitation is a real risk, with the Child Exploitation and Online Protection Centre (CEOP) identifying a link between children going missing or running away and potential sexual exploitation (CEOP, 2011: 11). A study conducted by CEOP in 2011 found that those who are sexually exploited often exhibit multiple vulnerabilities, with going missing often being a part of their experience (ibid: 15). CEOP also stated that these vulnerabilities can be used by sexual offenders to maintain control over their victims (ibid). A further study has found that one in nine young people are sexually assaulted while away (Biehal et al, 2003: 32).

“Running away is not the best way of dealing with things because the more you try to run away from your problems the more problems you cause to yourself. The more vulnerable you are the easier target you are. It is good to find help” Mark

Whilst some young people have reported that running away gave them time and space to gather their thoughts, many more found the experience distressing (ibid: 33). Young people have also reported practical difficulties in being away from home such as having a lack of food or money and feeling frightened or lonely (ibid).

Given the number of children and young people who go missing every year, this means that there are tens of thousands experiencing risky behaviour and a range of substantial dangers whilst away from home.

The benefit of educational measures

In light of the potential risks young people may face if they go missing, it is of paramount importance that they are educated about these dangers and what help they can access to stay safe. Yet whilst there are already some excellent resources available about the risks of running away, many young people receive little or no education about these issues.

Evidence shows that children and young people are unlikely to look for help whilst missing; for example only six percent reported ringing the Missing People helpline (Biehal et al, 2003: 34 table 11). This shows young people’s significant lack of knowledge in this area which can have profound consequences on their vulnerability whilst missing.

Educating young people about where help is available would both raise awareness of services open to them and enable them to reduce the potential of further risks developing. This should cover statutory and non-statutory organisations, such as charities that are in a position to offer support to young people. For example, Missing People runs a free, confidential 24/7 helpline which enabled the safeguarding of more than 1,500 children in 2013/14. If there was greater awareness of services such as this, young people may be able to more easily identify a person or organisation they feel safe to speak to about their problems, in turn allowing them to be

reconnected with a place of safety more easily.

If young people are aware of, and understand, risks and sources of help, the chances of them being supported to tackle their problems before they reach crisis will be increased. Discussing these issues within a classroom setting would additionally equip young people with the language to identify and explain what may be happening outside of school, or help them to spot warning signs amongst friends. This would enable the safeguarding of more young people before they decide to run away or are forced to leave home.

Education on running away as part of PSHE

Missing People believes that PSHE lessons would be the best place for education on running away to take place. Firstly, this would fit well with the overall aim of PSHE to give children the knowledge, understanding and skills they need to manage their lives.² Secondly, it would support schools in fulfilling their duty to safeguard and promote the welfare of children in their care according to s175 of the Education Act 2002.³

An Action for Children poll published in May 2014 found that one in four of their sample group of eight to 16 year olds had thought about running away, and that one in five knew another child who regularly spent the night away from their family home because of problems experienced there. This indicates that running away is a widespread risk amongst all children, further evidencing the necessity of education on the topic. Missing People believes it would be most appropriate for this education to take place during Key Stage Three as the vast majority of missing incidents for young people involve 12-17 year olds (UK Missing Persons Bureau, 2013: 15 figure 3).

Education on running away should link in with lessons on related issues such as sexual exploitation, forced marriage and homelessness. Furthermore, as teachers may be the first professionals to become aware that a child or young person is at risk of going missing or has gone missing, it is important that teachers are also educated on how to respond to help safeguard and support their students.

Missing People supports making running away and surrounding issues a statutory subject if this is necessary to ensure that it is covered in PSHE lessons with all young people.

Manifesto for Missing People

Missing People is calling on the government to ensure that all children are educated about the

2. As stated on the PSHE Association's website at:
<https://www.pshe-association.org.uk/content.aspx?CategoryID=1043>

3. This states that 'The governing body of a maintained school shall make arrangements for ensuring that their functions relating to the conduct of the school are exercised with a view to safeguarding and promoting the welfare of children who are pupils at the school.'

risks of running away, and what help they can access to stay safe.

This call to action is part of the charity's Manifesto for Missing People, which calls for changes to be implemented by the next government in respect to four key issues affecting missing people and their family and friends, by way of improving support.

Information on each of the four calls, and the Manifesto in its entirety, can be found at www.missingpeople.org.uk/manifesto.

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

References

Missing Persons Taskforce (2010) *[The Missing Persons Task Force: A report with recommendations for improving the multi-agency response to missing incidents](#)* (London: The Home Office)

Rees, G (2011) *[Still Running III: Early findings from our third national survey of young runaways](#)* (London: The Children's Society)

Biehal, N., Mitchell F., and Wade J. (2003) *[Lost from View: Missing Persons in the UK](#)* (Bristol: The Policy Press)

Child Exploitation and Online Protection Centre (2011) *[Out of Sight, Out of Mind](#)* (London: CEOP)

UK Missing Persons Bureau (2013) *[Missing Persons Data and Analysis: 2011-12](#)* (London: SOCA)