

Reducing misery and saving money – how partners can make a difference in reducing the incidence of young runaways

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KEY WORDS

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ABSTRACT

This article describes a practice initiative to reduce the incidence of young people running away from home or care. Such individuals are at risk of exploitation, offending and victimisation. The cost of dealing with runaways is also assessed. Partnership initiatives are described that achieved significant reductions in the number of running away incidents and cost savings.

Although issues surrounding young runaways have been routinely reported these have rarely captured the misery or scale of the problem. For a number of years the government have explicitly voiced their intention to make running away less likely and to ensure the runaways' needs are safely met (Social Exclusion Unit (SEU), 2002). However, although the gap between aspiration and implementation can be immense, this paper argues that a clear moral and financial case exists for public and private agencies to prioritise these issues and by working together, such incidents can be reduced significantly.

It is perhaps the moral issues surrounding young runaways that have been most widely publicised. The Social Exclusion Unit report (SEU, 2002) clearly articulated the vulnerability of those who run away from home. Such young people were more likely than peers to have serious problems with alcohol and illegal drugs, be more likely to get in trouble with the police, and possess a criminal conviction. Parents of such children are three times more likely to be concerned that their child is stealing, indeed nearly half of all sentenced prisoners report having run away as children. The SEU report over 5000 young people every year surviving on the streets through stealing, drug dealing or prostitution. Similarly with a quarter of all runaways sleeping in unsafe places it is not surprising they are equally likely to become victims as offenders. Evidence shows they are more likely to be physically or sexually assaulted and whereas homicide makes the headlines, road death or suicide is not uncommon.

The level of misery for repeat young runaways is immeasurable. Whilst missing, they can be sexually exploited, lured into prostitution or substance abuse or become victims of crime. As a consequence they engage in behaviour, which will, in effect, ruin their life chances.

The financial perspective is also stark. The infrastructure costs in providing public, private and voluntary agencies with the capacity and

capability to react to such issues is immense. Although the actual prevalence of young runaways has been difficult to pinpoint due to the lack of accurate record keeping, the Social Exclusion Unit state that every year approximately 1 in 9 children under the age of 16 run away from home or care overnight. A study reported this year by The Children's Society within South Yorkshire, which interviewed 2000 young people found one in ten admitted running away at some stage in their life, only two thirds of such incidents being reported to the police.

However, there is evidence to suggest that these figures are conservative. The Lancashire Constabulary is one of 43 police forces in England & Wales and covers a population of 1.4m mainly within the conurbations of Preston, Lancaster, Blackburn, Burnley and Blackpool. It borders the metropolitan areas of Merseyside to its south and Greater Manchester to the east. During 2003 the Constabulary placed all reports of missing people on a computerised system, which allowed subsequent analysis. The Constabulary discovered that approximately 9000 people were reported as missing, 77% of whom were below 18 years of age.

Lancashire Police also found that approximately 25% of those reported missing were located

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almost immediately, however for the remaining 6000 a significant investigation takes place. Finding someone who wishes to evade discovery requires considerable resources and meticulous record keeping is also necessary to evade duplication of effort and deal with accountability requirements. Actions that are routinely taken generally involve:

- dealing with the initial call appropriately
- visiting the scene and confirming that the missing person is not hiding or injured within the confines of the building or grounds
- obtaining a recent photograph of the missing person and possibly arranging publication
- checking relevant systems for information about the missing person
- conducting a detailed risk assessment of the case
- check addresses the person may have fled to
- possibly make house-to-house enquiries

- possibly notifying local hospitals, employers, schools, local taxi firms, CCTV operators
- follow up leads from diaries, internet, email and mobile phones
- when appropriate monitor financial transactions
- become involved in searches, sometimes involving air support or other specialist land and water search teams.

Lancashire Police contend that each case involves on average 20 separate tasks, costing approximately £1000 in opportunity costs per case, or £6 million per year. This figure is a small percentage of actual costs. For instance it does not include the additional work resulting from the missing person being involved as a victim or offender. Neither does it account for the effort of other agencies: social services in terms of support; health services in relation to treatment for assaults, sexually transmitted diseases or drug abuse; or of course for the later burden on public services such as probation and the prisons.

A PARTNERSHIP APPROACH TO REDUCING THE INCIDENCE OF REPEAT RUNAWAYS

As with many other aspects of human behaviour, young runaways show patterns in their activities. Analysis of the Lancashire data

missing from home

showed a significant number of prolific runaways. One young person was reported missing 78 times in a year and during 2004 over 330 young runaways went missing on more than 3 occasions. Of these 81% emanated from care establishments such as local authority or private children's homes.

Indeed during 2004 the 6 most prolific runaways generated:

- 201 missing from home investigations
- 78 arrests
- 60 detected crimes
- 9 incidents of the young runaway being the victim of violent crime
- numerous other incidents of the runaway being involved in drugs, sexual exploitation and firearms incidents.

The analysis also corroborated other research in showing how 'push' and 'pull' factors aggravated the problem. A push factor is one where an issue at the person's home is the root cause of the disappearance eg, the child is being bullied. Conversely a pull factor is something that lures the child away from his or her home, for example a child in care who misses the relationship (however abusive) of a parent or relative. By focusing on these areas of predictability significant reductions in running away may be possible.

Although some would perceive

the police solely as crime fighters, traditionally crime accounts for only a quarter of calls received from the public, who require assistance on a diverse range of issues, including missing persons. Since the advent of the *Crime and Disorder Act* public agencies have been encouraged to look more widely at opportunities to enhance community safety through joined-up approaches.

Most recently the definitive government document *Every Child Matters* has identified the positive outcomes it desires for young people covering the areas of health, safety, achievement, contribution and economic well-being. It is apparent that young runaways are the antithesis of these aspirations and it is incumbent on agencies such as education, police, health, social services, and employment to pro-actively intervene. Whereas the police may not feel they have particular influence on the underlying causes they are a critical partner as not only do they currently pick up the burden of reacting to these issues they have considerable knowledge of the children and areas they frequent.

The initiative in Lancashire has shown that each agency can improve their response, however it has also shown that much bigger rewards are available for those agencies that work together. Eight main areas of practice have evolved, which are:

- formal acknowledgement that the responsibility for a missing person is shared between the care establishment and the police
- clear information-sharing protocols between the police and care establishments
- the provision of a police liaison officer to work in partnership with each care establishment in an effort to achieve the reductions
- prior to placements, risk assessments are conducted concerning the likelihood of the individual going missing so that pro-active preventative measures can be applied
- graded response being implemented so that carers are encouraged to act in the same way as responsible parents would and where appropriate (such as the child staying out late, rather than running away) attempt to find the missing person themselves
- return interviews to be conducted, ideally by an independent member of staff, for the purpose of preventing a future reoccurrence
- as the frequency of a person's missing episodes increase, the interventions to be conducted at an increasingly senior level by both police and partners
- the implementation of a multi agency performance

management framework, which receives and discusses information on missing from homes, specifically repeat individuals and locations, on a quarterly basis.

The philosophy is not to condone the child's behaviour but to understand and prevent future occurrences. Each individual case needs its own problem solving approach and practitioners have been amazed at the success of some simple partnership interventions. These have involved:

- short-term placements outside the area to break the 'missing' habit and to remove young people from 'pull' factors
 - field work interventions such as asking the field social worker to assist with the missing persons family if they are repeatedly running to family members
 - occasionally the police warn or act against those harbouring the missing person or enticing them into illegal activities
 - rewarding young people with diversionary activities as an incentive for not going missing
- administering a simple police warning or on other occasions negotiating acceptable behaviour contracts
 - working on situational factors such as the design of locations or surroundings that often facilitate someone disappearing without notice
 - identifying and addressing 'push factors'.

In the first year of the initiative a multi-agency partnership in one policing area reduced the incidence of frequent young runaway cases by 32%, whilst the rest of the Constabulary area rose by 7.5%. In the second year reports of frequent runaways have so far reduced by a further 18%. Following the success of the pilot all agencies agreed to support the initiative, which was commenced in January 2005. In the first quarter the Lancashire area saw a 27% reduction of frequent young runaways (from 683 cases to 497). If results are sustained at this level for the Constabulary alone it will mean efficiency savings of £873,000 on the costs of repeating repeat cases.

However the real benefits must be in the lives of the vulnerable young people as underneath all the statistics are individual stories. One of the many successes involves two 13-year-old girls who had been missing from care a total of 56 times. They had come to the notice of police as they were involved in prostitution drugs and crime in a neighbouring red light district. An intervention was made that involved police and social services and resulted in a short-term placement outside Lancashire to break the 'missing' habit and to split the girls up. They were then given separate placements in different care homes, one returning to a home within Lancashire. Staff continued to work with them. The missing episodes have stopped and their carers report no further problems. The girl's futures are certainly looking brighter.

Reference

Social Exclusion Unit (2002) *Young Runaways*. London: Social Exclusion Unit. Available from: www.socialexclusionunit.gov.uk (accessed June 2005).