

BOLTON'S RESPONSE TO RUNAWAYS

1. BACKGROUND

1.1 Nationally

Running away is a dangerous activity that puts children and young people at risk. It is a problem that affects approximately one in nine young people before the age of 16 years, from a broad range of backgrounds. Approximately 20,000 runaways a year (around a quarter) are under the age of eleven.

Runaways are young people with a range of problems. They are:

- Five times more likely than their peers to have drug problems;
- Three times more likely to say they are in trouble with the police;
- Three times more likely to be truanting; and
- Seven times more likely to have been physically abused.

One quarter of runaways will sleep in unsafe places, putting them at serious risk of harm. As many as 1 in 14 children and young people who run away, around 5,000 a year, survive through stealing, begging, drug dealing and prostitution. These young people will need more intensive support.

Clearly not all children and young people who experience problems in their lives resort to running away. Children and young people are more likely to run away when:

- They have no-one to talk to;
- They don't know what else to do;
- They don't know where to go for help; or
- The help they need is not available.

Existing research suggests that young people who run away or go missing can come from a range of different social classes and racial backgrounds, and that a 'running career' develops over time. The children's society notes that approximately 100,000 children run from home or care in one year, more than 100 children running from home each day. Comprehensive research on young runaways carried out by the Home Office noted that one fifth of the respondents argued that they were "forced" to leave home, implying that even if they wanted to return, they would not be welcome.

If the running career evolves so that the young person moves from the immediate area into an unfamiliar city, they become increasingly vulnerable to exploitation and violence. While girls particularly can experience a range of different forms of violence in both public and private places, movement into an unfamiliar area means that previous coping mechanisms, based on local knowledge, become

redundant.

1.1.1 Information for children

Some children will receive information about the underlying problems that might lead to them running away while they are in school, usually through PSHE and Citizenship lessons.

Whilst schools have a duty to increase knowledge and skills on certain key issues which can contribute to running away, such as bullying, relationships, drug and alcohol abuse and family conflict, there are no specific requirements relating to running away.

Teachers can feel poorly equipped to teach sensitive subjects. Research for the Rough Sleepers' Unit found that, while teachers had information relating to homelessness, "some were afraid that raising the subject more comprehensively might expose them to requests for help or advice that they would be unable to meet".

1.2 LOCALLY

The need for a response to Young Runaways was identified eight years ago through the Area Child Protection Committee (ACPC). At this time there were specific concerns raised by the Police particularly about repeat runaways and young women from minority ethnic backgrounds.

The ACPC developed a framework to respond in a more coordinated way to these needs working closely with the Police, Social Services and the Youth Service, who provided a small resource to the more vulnerable young people through GAP. The experience of all organisations was that young runaways would not engage with the Police or Social Services due to their role and that this type of service would be best delivered by a dedicated resource in the voluntary sector.

At the same time the ACPC and the Prostitution Forum jointly developed a sub committee of professionals concerned with young people who were at risk of becoming sexually exploited. It was quickly recognised that for all of these young people running away was a significant factor in them becoming sexually exploited. National research added weight to our findings locally clearly linking running away with exploitation, homelessness, drug use, disconnection from education and criminal behaviour.

A bid was submitted to The Children's Fund to develop a project run by Urban Outreach Bolton to work preventatively through schools and to work with all children and young people who run away and their carers to prevent engagement in risky activities. The Bid was successful in receiving two years funding and R.U'r.N.A. (Remember You Are Not Alone) was established. During this period the project provided a broad range of services for vulnerable, hard to reach children and young people.

As part of the project workers were engaged in delivering preventative messages through an education pack in primary and secondary schools. This work has highlighted the connection between non attendance and running away. The project delivered prevention lessons to over 4500 children and positive feedback has been given by pupils, staff and head teachers.

It raised awareness of the risks to young runaways with professionals and children through the production of information in various, accessible formats, e.g. key rings, pens for children, a briefing sheet for professionals and carer information. This awareness includes the need for schools and other key agencies to identify potential child runaways so that referrals could be made. The project worked to prevent children and young people from entering more intrusive systems, i.e. Child Protection, Looked After, Youth Offending, etc, and/or to link children to appropriate services, e.g. Play and Leisure, Youth Services activities, Young Peoples Substance Misuse Services (360°), GAP, etc. and provides outreach services in conjunction with other developments (360°, Street Life, Youth Service)

The project worked closely with the Police who provide information about all children and young people reported as missing. The project wrote to these children and families offering support following the first incident of running. The second incident was followed up by a phone call and a letter offering support and the third reported incident ensured a home visit and an interview with the child if at all possible.

The interview attempts to establish the reason for the absence and focus on ways of resolving the cause. An assessment is completed and the child and family helped to access with appropriate services. The project provides support and advice to children and their carers assessed at all levels of vulnerability, following the Child Concern Model.

Cases are referred to Children's Social Care Services following repeated incidents of running away which have led to serious concern about the child's safety.

The opportunity for the project to intervene earlier, make contact with a child, undertake an assessment and link the child and the family to appropriate services helps diminish the possibility of serious problems developing in the future.

Unfortunately, the funding ended two years ago and despite attempts to find alternative sources the scheme is currently not funded. Urban Outreach now provide a much reduced service, having initially employed three members of staff they now fund one full time equivalent and senior management in the charity give a great deal of support.

3. CURRENT ISSUES

There were 760 missing reports taken by the Police in 2005, this was a reduction of 130 on the previous year and relates to 422 individuals. See Appendix 1 for more detailed information.

The project staff maintain a level of service to schools in a preventative capacity helping staff to deliver the shelter education pack, meeting with runaways in school and highlighting the dangers of risky lifestyles.

The project staff member is an essential part of the operational and strategic group dealing with sexual exploitation of children. Their knowledge of the networks of adults and young people involved in this activity has proved vital in preventing an escalation of risk and in providing intelligence to the Police to pursue criminal charges:

Lack of funding means that many young people and their families do not receive a visit from the project.

More early intervention work could be undertaken therefore preventing problems from escalating.

Young people are at risk of becoming sexually exploited.

4. RISKS

Of the 200 street sex workers in Bolton, when asked about their route into prostitution running away was cited as an early expression of something wrong. This led to exclusion from school and the development of other risk taking activities such as experimenting with drugs culminating ultimately in sex work. Many of the women recalled that they had begun sex work before their 16th birthday out of necessity for shelter and food as a result of homelessness. Locally we have had two young women involved in prostitution killed and many more assaulted.

5. FINANCIAL COSTS

Greater Manchester Police have estimated it cost approximately £1000 each time a young person is reported as missing. For Bolton that equates to £760,000 per year in Police time. In addition to the initial £1000 any child running twice or becomes more vulnerable, as they become harder to find Police have to spend more time looking therefore the cost goes up. For those most vulnerable the cost rise expedientially, in some cases Police time can cost up to £10,000 per person.

Children and young people involved in running away will usually be receiving services from several organisations. Some place themselves at such risk that they will become looked after and often need to be placed out of Bolton in very expensive accommodation for their own safety.

6. CONCLUSION

Young runaways are an extremely vulnerable group, although there were a large number i.e. 760 children reported missing to the Police in 2005 (a reduction of 130 on 2004) it is clear that this is a significant under reporting. Some children are particularly vulnerable being reported missing on a weekly basis.

Early intervention and prevention is the key to reducing risks for children and costs for my organisation.

Raising awareness of the risks of the activity with children and young people through schools, appropriate information, publicity campaigns etc should be an important aspect of the strategy to keep children safe.

There needs to be early follow up with children who run away and there is a need to ensure that children and families receive appropriate, timely services to reduce the likelihood of repeated incidence and the potential for children to become disaffected with school and involved in anti social behavior, crime, substance misuse and prostitution.

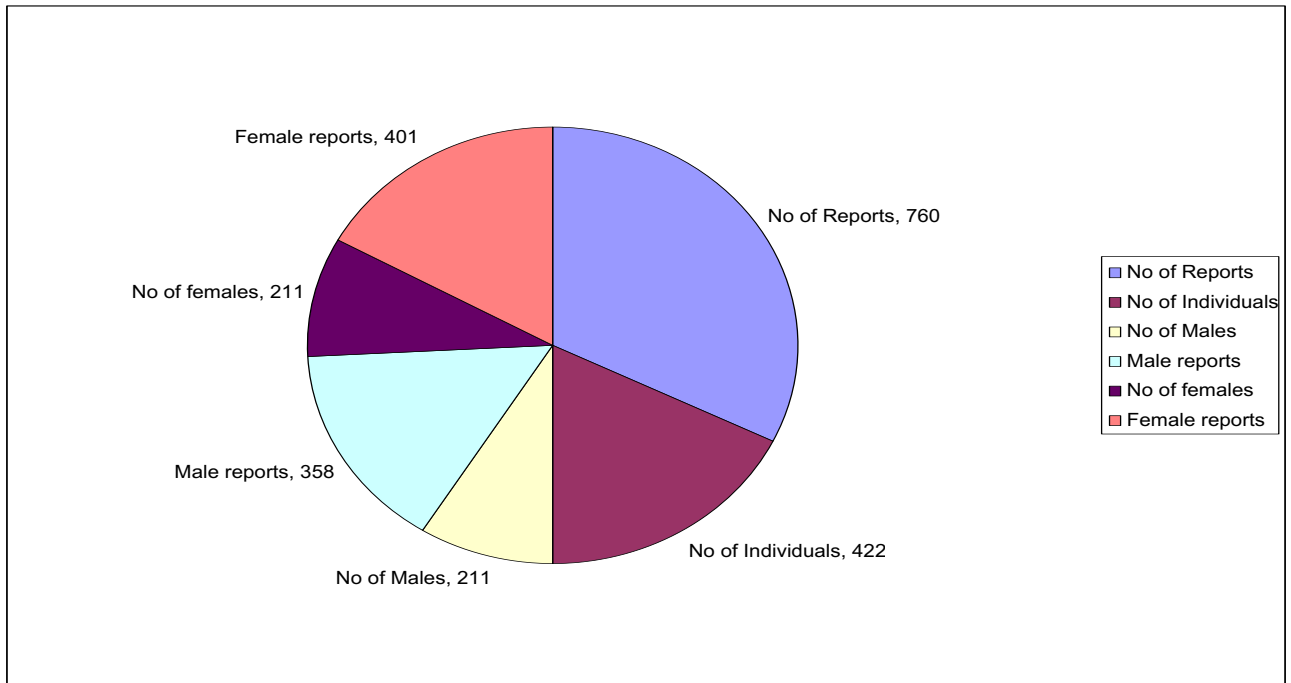
Most runaways need general information, advice and emotional support from people they can trust and who understand them and their situation. Some runaways will need more intensive support due to their level of vulnerability or because of the risks they take while they are missing.

We currently rely on a very small scale, unfunded response from colleagues in the voluntary sector within Urban Outreach Bolton who are experienced and extremely committed to the work to provide some early intervention and prevention approaches and who work tirelessly in partnership with all organisations to reduce the risks for children and young people.

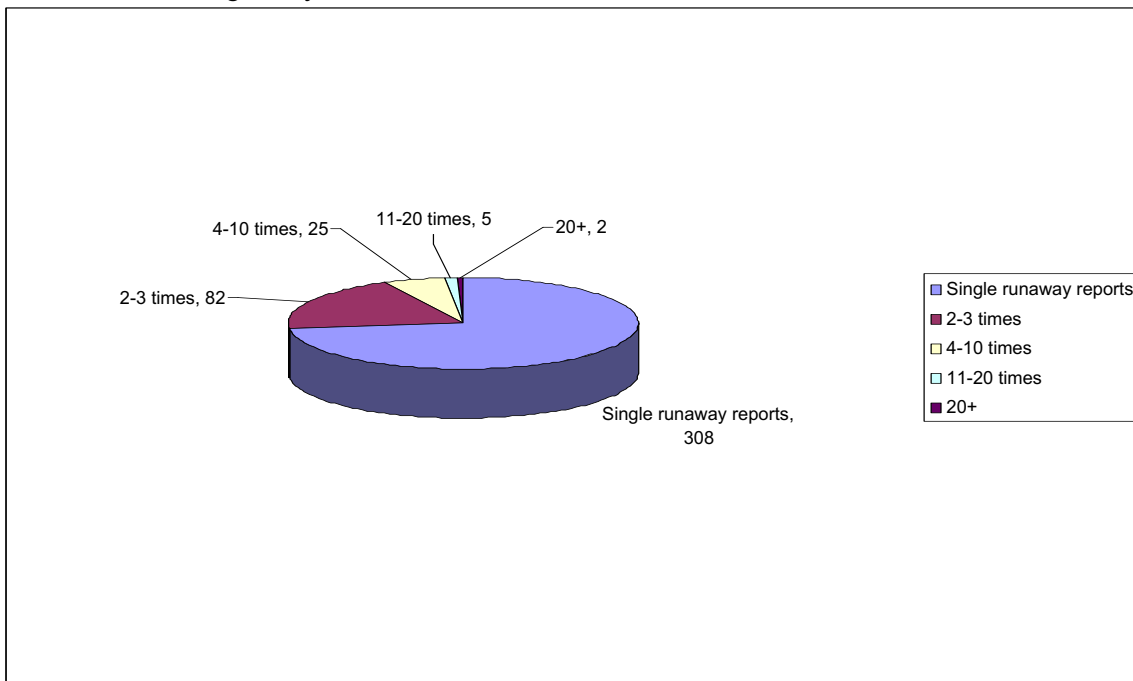
The Local Authority is required to address the issue of young runaways. In Bolton we have a great deal of knowledge and expertise gained over the past six years. We have a number of services that aim to meet this need however we lack a clear agreed and resourced strategy to meet that need.

APPENDIX 1

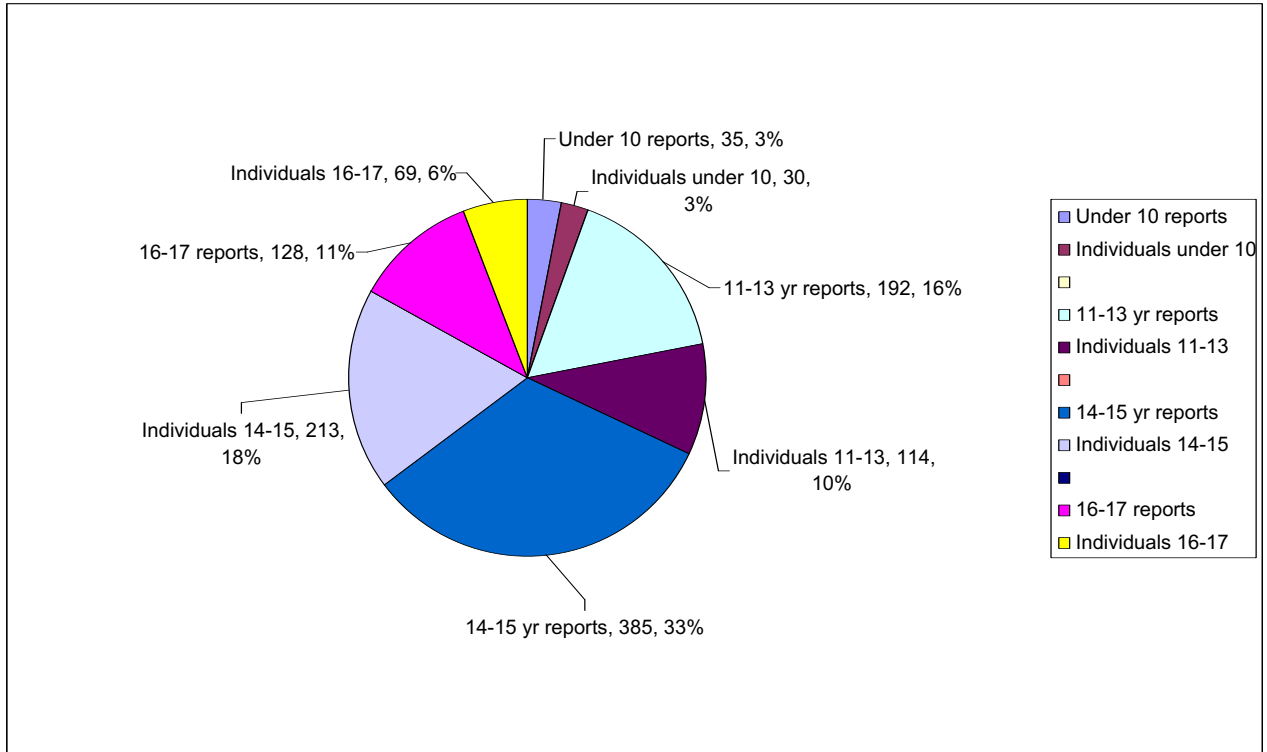
Number of individuals relating to reports including the gender breakdown



Number of running away Incidents



Age breakdown linked to the number of **times** they ran away



Where young people ran away **from** and the numbers of young people

