

Running the Risks:

The links between gang involvement and young people going missing

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Research Context

The UK Missing Persons Bureau estimates that as many as 160,000 children and young people are reported missing every year.¹ Research from the Children's Society over the past decade has shed some light on this issue and the recent spotlight on CSE has pushed the issue of children and young people going missing up the political agenda. However, the link between gang involvement and going missing from home is still very much unknown, with no specific research or national data collected indicating how many are affected.

Using a survey of professionals from a wide range of regions and sectors, along with interviews and focus groups with professionals and young people, this research provides an overview of current policy and practice in this area. Challenges regarding the current approach to support are explored, focusing on issues around relocation and care placements, under-reporting and the need for a safeguarding approach. The report also highlights promising approaches and good practice in working with this group.

¹ UK Missing Persons Bureau (2014) Missing Persons: Data and Analysis 2012/2013. London: National Crime Agency.

Key findings

- **Services throughout the country have been in contact with children and young people going missing who are also involved with gangs.** 125 of 160 respondents to our national survey had been in contact with this group.
- **Exploitation and coercion are overarching themes linking all the factors pushing or pulling gang-involved children and young people to run away.** Overt coercion affects young people at the same time as far more subtle exploitation through the 'pull' factors of money, affection and status.
- **The market in illegal drugs is a key activity for gang-involved children and young people.** Children and young people are being recruited to travel to areas away from home to sell drugs. In the worst cases this can be a form of child trafficking as young people find themselves in unsafe environments, completely isolated and with no means of contacting anyone for support.
- **Missing episodes linked to relationships and sexual exploitation tended to be specific to females.** Missing episodes linked to the drugs market, debt and fear can be experienced by both genders.
- **Children and young people go missing as they are forced to pay off debts to gang members.** Running away is seen as a way of escaping the problem.
- **The link between gang-involvement and going missing is a problem that goes across county lines.** To address it, agencies need to work across as well as within Local Authorities.

Areas for improvement

- **There is currently no specific government guidance regarding the link between gang involvement and going missing.** Local authorities have no specific duties and there is no national data collected to shed light on the national picture.
- **Multi-agency working is a varied picture.** Without specific government guidance a specific focus and leadership are required to bring organisations together nationally and locally.
- **There is a clear tendency to criminalise children and young people, and regard repeated missing episodes as evidence of lower risk rather than a need for safeguarding.** Similar to the findings of investigations into CSE, professionals made distinctions between those who were ‘genuinely’ exploited and those who were perceived as making a ‘choice’ to engage in criminal behaviours.
- **Whilst missing incidents for children and young people are generally under-reported, this is particularly acute for gang-involved young people.** In many cases parents were reluctant to report missing incidents to the police due to the guilt, shame and fear surrounding gang involvement.
- **Lack of engagement is a key barrier to providing effective support.** There is a clear role for specialist services with the expertise and understanding to support children and young people.
- **There is evidence of gang-involved children and young people placed into care out of area with little care planning or support.** Placing gang-involved young people in areas affected by gang-related crime can draw them back into the same activity they are leaving behind

Promising practice

- **Relationship building and working with children and young people to build up their resilience has had an impact in helping them to lead more positive lives.** Specialist gang intervention services provided by the voluntary and community sector enable children and young people to open up and for plans to be put in place to support them.
- **Where multi-agency arrangements bring together gang and missing services this has allowed informed decisions to be made about the best person to work with those affected by these issues.** In Greater Manchester, the Children’s Society works with the Integrated Gang Management Unit and VCSE gang intervention projects to ensure the most appropriate professional works with each young person who goes missing.
- **Police forces with a police missing persons co-ordinator role in place have been able to make the connections between missing episodes and gang involvement as well as CSE.** In Margate, the police missing persons co-ordinator is able to map children and young people affected by gang-involvement and going missing and coordinate a multi-agency response.
- **Where Local Authorities commission return home interviews on a cross-local authority basis, this has allowed better use of resources as well as better safeguarding young people.** Catch22’s Pan-Cheshire Missing and Child Sexual Exploitation Service works across four local authorities, but under one police authority, overcoming some of the challenges in multi-agency working across local authority boundaries.

Conclusions and Recommendations

Our research indicates that adolescent-specific risks such as going missing from home, gang involvement and CSE need new approaches in terms of safeguarding, interventions and social care. Children and young people who experience these risks are too often criminalised rather than receiving a safeguarding response, and the risk-taking behaviour that is an inherent part of adolescent development is interpreted as a ‘choice’ with young people ‘putting themselves in harm’s way’. It is essential that criminal justice, gangs and children’s social care services do not work in silos but work in partnership to provide the most effective response. Our recommendations include the importance of:

- **Understanding and using data:** Police forces should collect and use data on children and young people going missing and involved with gangs, they should work across county boundaries to share information and join up plans where appropriate. Local safeguarding children’s boards (LSCBs) should undertake mapping locally in partnership with local criminal justice boards (LCJBs). Police and Crime Commissioners should drive forward a joined-up approach to collecting and sharing this data in partnership with LSCBs and LCJBs and ensuring that joint actions are agreed to improve policy and practice.
- **Early identification and intervention after missing incidents:** LSCBs should work with police, local authorities, and VCSE organisations to ensure that those working with missing children and young people are trained to understand the risks and needs of gang-involved young people, and that information from return interviews is shared quickly and effectively to inform interventions.
- **Safeguarding:** Government, LSCBs and LCJBs should work together to ensure that national and local guidance bridges the gap between community safety and safeguarding to drive better multi-agency working. Police and Local Authorities should use co-location of services where possible to encourage effective partnership working.
- **Building relationships to drive change:** Local Authorities should ensure that all interventions and support for gang-involved young people prioritise strong relationships, ensuring consistency, persistence and time to build trust. Professionals from all sectors working with young people affected by gang-involvement and going missing should be trained to understand and support this group effectively.
- **Relocation and the care system:** Government should fund research into the way the care system works for those affected by gangs, CSE and going missing. Government should work with Local Authorities and the VCSE to promote innovation in the care system for this group and investigate the use of specialist foster placements for gang-involved children and young people.

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