



UNIVERSITY OF  
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CHILDREN MISSING FROM  
CARE, RETURN INTERVIEWS  
AND CRIMINAL  
EXPLOITATION IN ENGLAND  
National Youth Advocacy Service

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## Introduction

This review was commissioned by NYAS (National Youth Advocacy Service) to better understand the issues relating to looked after children who go missing, and the role of return interviews in monitoring risks and preventing children and young people becoming repeat runaways.

The report 'inquiry into out of area care placements for looked after children and young' highlights the link between missing children and care. It reveals some crucial deficiencies in the care system, and reveals that 'looked after children' are more likely than others to run away repeatedly (Twomey, 2019, p.3). There are various factors identified that contribute to this. They are likely to have previously experienced anti-social carers, have poor mental health, are more likely to struggle with poverty, and more likely to leave education earlier. Such factors may push young people to run away from their carers. Moreover, young care leavers face massive risks whilst missing, including increased vulnerability to county lines activity, where they risk being exploited and made to transport drugs, or forced into other criminal activities. A UK government report (2014, p.4) indicated that there are no approximate statistics for the number of young people who go missing or runaway, but estimates suggest that the figure is no lower than 100,000 within the UK. Furthermore, approximately 25 (25%) percent of young people and children that are known to have gone missing are at risk of serious harm. The total number of young care leaver is enormous, and as a demographic are more likely to run away and fall victim to different forms of exploitation. The government report (2014, p.4) indicates that missing children are particularly vulnerable to being exploited, and 'looked after children' are particularly vulnerable where they go missing from their placements.

The return interview is an essential process for children when they are found, as it aims to capture the reasons that young people are choosing to run away, as well as the risks and issues that they have faced. The main benefits of return interviews are that they address the problems in order to reduce the risks of children go missing repeatedly: to understand the issues that they may be facing; and to offer useful resources and knowledge to the children should they run away again. Furthermore, the statutory responsibilities that exist within England are different to the other nations within the UK. The local authority is required through statutory guidance to commission an offer of a return home interview. Children must be offered an individual interview, but they do have the right to reject the option of taking an interview up.

## Aim of the review

The aim of this review is to gain a further insight into return interviews, in order to identify key issues and essential problems that cause looked after children to escape from placements, and also to understand the risks and dangers faced whilst they are away from home. There are three different parts to the review. Firstly, an in-depth analysis of statistics from various local authorities which exposes valuable data relating to the number of youths who go missing in various regions. Secondly, to establish the linkage between missing children and criminal exploitation risks. County lines and gangs are also discussed with the intention of understanding how children are pulled into county lines activity. Thirdly, return interviews are analysed in relations to issues such as the police, guidance, practice, consistency and outcome. This review will reveal what is needed to improve the quality of life of children missing from care and how we can better protect those young people who are potentially at risk. There are also some recommendations made on behalf of NYAS (National Youth

Advocacy Service), that if implemented would keep vulnerable young people from mental and physical damage.

## Part 1 – Information related to missing children and child criminal exploitation

According to statistics, the numbers of missing people has increased in recent years. Data from the National Crime Agency points out that more than 335,000 people were reported as missing in England and Wales in 2015/16, and the total number of missing people has increased by 15 per cent (15%) compared with data from last year (Rhodes, 2017). Children and vulnerable adults make up the majority of missing cases. Research shows that children are more likely to go missing than adults, as approximately two thirds of reports related to young people in 2009/10 (Home Office, 2011, p.7). Furthermore, once a child has gone missing, the probability of them going missing again is high. . Repeat incidents involve the same individuals going missing a number of times (Home Office, 2011, p.7). Numbers need to be reduced, even though many of those reported missing return back within 24 hours. It is estimated that approximately 80 per cent of all missing children return to placements within a day (Rhodes, 2017). The high return rate provides copious opportunities to understand the issues that are leading children to run away and the risks they face whilst missing.

The Home Office indicated in 2011 that approximately two thirds of the risks missing children face differed with those faced by missing adults (Home Office, 2011, p.9). For instance, one of those was the risk of being caught up in county lines, where children and young people are forced into criminal activities where they risk being sexually exploited and are made to transport drugs. Care-experienced children are at a high risk of becoming a victim because they are targeted by county lines gangs. Both boys and girls are vulnerable to

this, including those aged ten to seventeen (The National Police Chief's Council, 2018, p.9). Criminal gangs utilise young people as runners to transport drugs in order to reach into new communities and create new markets. These children and young people are tied to them through debt bondage, coercion, violence and intimidation (Robinson, G et al, 2019, p.695). Once children go missing from placements, they face the risk of being groomed and exploited by criminal gangs. However, missing children cases are not always categorised as urgent. The case will not be considered urgent unless children are involved in serious crime or risk. All incidents of missing children are prioritised with a 'medium risk' indicator by police and other agencies, and the case would only be prioritised as 'high risk' if it meets certain requirements (HM Government, 2014, p.12).

## Part 2 - links between missing children and risks of criminal exploitation

Children and vulnerable young people can be criminally exploited as cheap or expendable labour. Transporting drugs and money from different places are one of the roles for children as runners, but they can also be forced to involve in other risky criminal activities. Children are often exposed to a high level of violence in order to be exploited and recruited for the purpose of criminal gain by the gang (The National Police Chiefs' Council, 2018, p.9). There is often also a reward system incentivising the child to work for county lines. For example, when children finish their work, they can receive various things as rewards such as money, credit, jewellery or drugs. Gangs are using this the reward system to manipulate children and to keep them working. Giving them rewards in exchange for their activities (The National Police Chiefs' Council, 2018, p.9- p.10). The exchange system is designed to delude young people into feeling that they are not being exploited but 'working'. This is how they groom missing children and initiate them as a spare member into the county line. This grooming is

systematic by, for instance, teaching them to store wrapped drugs in their body, in places such as their cheeks, rectum or vagina. A training system usually exists within a county line that gradually grooms missing children into become gang members. However, if children and young people disobey the orders from the county line or have the intention to leave the gang, they will normally face physical assault or even sexual violence. The punishment system is used to control the young people into complying. Additionally, other vulnerable adults who are working for county lines may cause damage to children and young people. These adults may have issues with substance misuse or poor mental health, and this will have left them vulnerable to also being exploited by gangs. There is evidence of harm to children that have been perpetrated by such vulnerable individuals (The National Police Chiefs' Council, 2018, p.10).

Furthermore, it is not for certain that children are able to rid the control of the county line after they are found. It is not necessary for gangs to have physical contact with these young people because of the many emerging means of digital contact. Children remain at risk of exploitation even when they have returned to their placement. Therefore, the risks of the digital world should be identified whether in response to a missing episode or not (HM government, 2018, p.48). Children returning to the placement is not always an indicator that they have broken free from criminal exploitation, which is one reason that return interviews can be crucial.

### Part 3 – Return Interviews

Return interviews are a useful approach for keeping children safe from the risks of harm that may befall them when they go missing. It provides opportunities for an interviewer to gain

information or offer advice to the returned children. This service is not only useful for young people who have been missing, but also for vulnerable children who have the potential to run away from a placement. It gives local authorities and support services a better understanding of the reasons why children go missing. Those councils have the ability to make changes for vulnerable children who are facing similar issues as the returned children and can intervene early to prevent them from running away. Local authorities can also provide better assistance for returned children depending on their needs, in order to prevent the likelihood of further missing episodes or continued exploitation.

In England, return interviews are a statutory entitlement for care-experienced children and young people. Where such children are found, they have to be offered an independent return home interview. The statutory guidance requires that all missing children and young people have to be offered a return home interview upon their return (Chetwynd and Pona, 2017, p.24). The return home interview is a valuable opportunity for local councils to identify any factors that may bring harm to the child and an opportunity to give some useful advice to them. It is multifunctional, and also brings a range of benefits for both sides. The independent return interview must be offered as soon as possible for children when found, it should be carried out within 72 hours of them returning to placement; as the aim of return interviews is to uncover information that can assist in protecting young people from risk factors in their placement and from the dangers that they may have been experienced while missing (Department for Education, 2014, p.14).

In addition, there are strict conditions for selecting the interviewer. Whilst there are various reasons for young people going missing, they are often considered vulnerable. As a result, they need to be treated with appropriate care throughout the whole interview. The interviewer

is not only required to have training experience in order to create a friendly and reassuring atmosphere for conducting a smooth conversation with the young person, but also required to have the ability to handle any emergency or answer unpredictable questions. The return home interview should be carried out by an independent person who is trained appropriately and capable of reflecting on information and taking action (Chetwynd and Pona, 2017, p.24).

People can become a qualified interviewer if and only if they have all skills and knowledge needed to connect with vulnerable children.

There is a guidance for the interviewer to help them elicit valuable information when they conduct the return interview. The priority of the interview is identifying any harms or risks that young people have experienced either before they go missing or whilst they are missing (Department for Education, 2014, p.15). Secondly, the reasons for the child running away should be addressed and understood. Addressing the issues and solving the problems of the young person is the only method for preventing the child going missing repeatedly. Young people have a high probability of going missing repeatedly as long as the issue remains.

Information gained can also shed a light on those children who may potentially run away. The interview aims to understand and address the reasons for young people going missing from their placement (Chetwynd and Pona, 2017, p.24). Thirdly, the interviewer is required to give advice to returned children. The interviewer can assist young people, in understanding that they have options other than running away and encourage them to take positive steps themselves if possible, to deal with any issues that they are facing. To help children feel safe and recognise that they have options is one of the key processes of interviews (Department for Education, 2014, p.15). Crucial information that can help the child be kept safe whilst missing can be obtained during return home interviews, as the interviewer needs to provide

children with suggestions on how to protect themselves from risks and dangers if they go missing again (Department for Education, 2014, p.15).

Return home interviews can be conducted by independent organisations, but only if they are commissioned to do so by the local authority. Therefore, the local authority has the right to decide which organisation is best suited to deliver return interviews. I have acquired data from different local authorities under the Freedom of Information Act 2000, and this data provides insight into the real situation return home interviews between April 2018 to March 2019. There were 139 local authorities from England that responded to my request, and only 55.4 percent of local authorities, 77 out of 139, have commissioned external organisations to deliver return home interviews. The total number of return home interviews that were offered from these local authorities in England last year stood at 90,225 cases, spread over 110 towns in total. However, there was a gap between the number of interviews offered and the number of interviews delivered. There were only 59,369 interviews delivered to children, 65.8 percent. Furthermore, children may raise child criminal exploitation as an issue whilst missing, but differences in recording practices make valid analysis difficult. Most local authorities responded to the question about criminal exploitation as either exceeding their upper limit of 18 hours to gather under the Freedom of Information Act or said that the information was not collected. There were only 38 local authorities that provided relevant information, and the data shows that there were 2,069 children who raised child criminal exploitation in their interview.

The groups of children that are eligible for return interview are inconsistent across England. Firstly, return home interviews are only offered to looked after children by local authorities in some places, so other groups of children and vulnerable young people are ineligible for return

interview. There were nine out of one hundred and ten responses, 8.18%, which reported that local authorities offer return home interviews for looked after children only. Secondly, some local authorities offer return interviews for all young people who go missing. The FOI shows that approximately 90 percent, 89.1%, of local authorities surveyed in England, are offering return home interviews for every child who runs away, 98 out of 110 authorities. Thirdly, there are some local authorities with other 'requirements' for missing children. Children must satisfy the conditions to have the interview. For example, one local authority required that only children went missing two or more times, or for longer than 24 hours are to be offered a return interview. The local authority changed this requirement on 1<sup>st</sup> September 2019, and now a return interview is currently offered to every child who is reported as missing. Fortunately, that approach was taken by the majority of local authorities in England. The FOI data shows that only three local authorities use different conditions to judge return children in considering whether they should be offered an interview or not.

Where there is an effective return home interview and follow up support services work together, it can not only decrease the number of missing episodes, but also stop children from running away in some cases (Chetwynd and Pona, 2017, p.25). Statistics demonstrate that the number of missing episodes can reduce over a year as a result of effective return home interview provision. For example, the number of young people who go missing has reduced by 30 percent (30%) in Worcestershire where there are interventions made by local services (Ofsted, 2013, p.18). Moreover, return interviews can also lead to financial savings for local authorities. Police services spend massive expenditure every year in helping and searching for missing children. The reduction of missing episodes also decreases the total police time spent on missing children, and Railway Children estimate that police services may save over £2,400 per avoided missing episode (Railway Children, 2015, p.32).

However, the DfE statutory guidance does not apply in Wales and Scotland, because the social care and education policies are devolved (English Coalition for Runaway Children, 2018, p.3). The return home interview is not a statutory requirement in Wales and Scotland. With that in mind, the statistics of return home interviews from Wales and Scotland that were collected by my FOI request were limited. There were only eleven local authorities in Wales that responded, and only seven of them provided usable information. The number of offered return home interviews stood at 649 cases, from seven local authorities, and the number of return home interviews that were actually delivered in Wales stood at 589. In contrast, the number of local authorities that responded to my FOI request in Scotland were fourteen, and eight of them shared usable data. There were 912 return interviews that were offered from April 2018 to March 2019 within those eight Scottish local authorities, and the number of delivered interviews stood at 796. The percentage of interviews that were accepted by the child when offered amounted to 87.3%. Any information about child criminal exploitation was rare because of inconsistent recording, so less than 20 cases in both Wales and Scotland were reported as relating to child criminal exploitation during a missing episode.

## Conclusion

In conclusion, return home interviews are a necessary and valuable strategy for preventing children from going missing. It not only enables the possibility of identifying risks faced whilst children are missing and before they run away, but also helps us to understand the reasons that they go missing. Simultaneously, it also gives an opportunity to provide young people with information on how to keep safe if they face the same danger or risk again. This valuable information helps local services to intervene early where young people are at risk of

going missing. It also prevents children from going missing repeatedly by addressing the individual needs of the child. However, the FOI data leads to two recommendations for local authorities and organisations when they deliver return home interviews in future. Initially, more consistency on questions and recording of child criminal exploitation should be ensured in interviews across the UK. Many return home interviews still deliver without questions about child criminal exploitation. Children might not realise that they are being targeted by county lines and do not know how to protect themselves from gangs. Moreover, structured support should be offered in interviews to help children break free from criminal exploitation. As a final point, children must not only be protected in the physical world, but also in the digital, because child criminal exploitation can continue without any physical contact.

## Annex

Under the Freedom of Information Act 2000, individuals have a right to access to information held by public authorities.

The Freedom of Information questions were requested:

- 1) Which organisation (if any) does the local authority commission to deliver Return Home Interviews for children who have been missing?
- 2) How many Return Home Interviews were *offered* by your local authority (or commissioned service) from 1<sup>st</sup> April 2018 to 31<sup>st</sup> March 2019?
- 3) How many Return Home Interviews were *delivered* by your local authority (or commissioned service) from 1<sup>st</sup> April 2018 to 31<sup>st</sup> March 2019? (i.e. the child was actually interviewed)
- 4) How many times was child criminal exploitation (CCE), such as county lines, raised as an issue in these Return Home Interviews?
- 5) Are Return Home Interviews only offered to Looked After Children, or are there other groups that are eligible for Return Home Interviews? If so, please list eligible groups.

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