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Prompt Briefings

Children and young people missing from care and vulnerable to sexual exploitation

In recent years there have been a number of high profile incidents of children and young people (CYP) going missing, particularly from residential care, who are at risk or victims of sexual exploitation. This has led to the increased attention of commentators and policymakers on this subject.

A whole systems approach to protecting vulnerable children is required by local authorities and partners, which includes specific consideration to reduce the risk of looked after children running away and becoming more vulnerable to sexual exploitation.

Aim of this briefing

This briefing provides an overview of research messages. There is a paucity of research which looks both at children missing from care *and* sexual exploitation, which requires us to examine recommendations from policy and research into why CYP go missing from care, what they do when they are missing and how that relates to research and policy on the separate but linked topic of sexual exploitation.

These findings underpin the practical self-reflection tools accompanying this briefing that have been developed to support Local Safeguarding Children Boards (LSCBs) and professionals commissioning, designing services and working directly with children in care at risk of going missing and/or sexual exploitation.

The self-reflection tools can be downloaded at www.rip.org.uk/prompt-missingCYP



1. Children who run away from care and child sexual exploitation: the links

Background

There is a substantial body of data highlighting the higher rate of missing incidents among looked after children, compared to the rest of the population. The rate appears higher for CYP in residential care than foster care, though data on missing incidents from foster care is less robust (Biehal and Wade, 2000).

Being missing from a placement puts CYP at risk of sexual and other exploitation by adults and peers, and may also be an indication that sexual exploitation is already taking place (CEOP, 2011; Ofsted, 2013). Although, in total numbers, most CYP who are sexually exploited are living at home, CYP in care are disproportionately at risk. CYP who are looked after for reasons of abuse, neglect or family breakdown are particularly susceptible to sexual exploitation. There is significant overlap in risk factors and indicators for CYP who go missing, including from care, and those who are sexually exploited.

There are pending recommendations from the Office of the Children's Commissioner (OCC) Inquiry into Child Sexual Exploitation in Gangs and Groups (due autumn 2013) and that of the All Party Parliamentary Group's inquiry into children who go missing from care (final report, June 2012). The Department for Education's (2013) Report of the Expert Group on the quality of children's homes includes the Government's plans to reform children's residential care.

The vast majority of the perpetrators of this terrible crime [sexual exploitation] are male. They range in age from as young as fourteen to old men. They come from all ethnic groups and so do their victims – contrary to what some may wish to believe. The failure of agencies to recognise this means that too many child victims are not getting the protection and support they so desperately need.

[Office of the Children's Commissioner Inquiry into Child Sexual Exploitation in Gangs and Groups: Interim Report](#)

Why do CYP in care go missing?

Guidance (DCSF, 2009) defines a missing child as *'children up to the age of 18 who have run away from their home or care placement, have been forced to leave, or whose whereabouts are unknown'*. Looked after children say they run away for a range of reasons. It is important to understand these reasons as they present different risks and require a range of preventative measures and responses. These can be described as 'push' and 'pull' factors.

Push factors include disliking the placement they are in, not getting on with carers / staff, or fear of violence.

Pull factors include running to family and friends (and, in some cases, perpetrators of sexual exploitation) and wanting to feel safe.

Characteristics and risk factors

The risk factors for going missing from care and for sexual exploitation are similar, and describe a good many of the most vulnerable CYP, both in care and those living with birth families.¹

Characteristics and risk factors of CYP who go missing from care and CYP who are at heightened risk of sexual exploitation:

- > those who have poor attachments, lack a stable home environment and may have disrupted or chaotic family backgrounds
- > those who have previously suffered abuse and neglect
- > those who have been excluded from school
- > those in residential care
- > CYP who use drugs and alcohol, or self-harm, as a reaction to previous traumatic experiences
- > vulnerable CYP transitioning into adulthood (CEOP, 2011; OCC, 2012; Scott and Skidmore, 2005).

Repeat incidents of going missing, even for short periods of time, are strongly linked to sexual exploitation. CYP who go missing for longer periods and become detached from adult support are at increased risk of violence and sexual assault and coercion to use drugs and alcohol (Smeaton, 2009). Missing incidents can be both a cause of sexual exploitation and a symptom – CYP who are being groomed or sexually exploited may go missing to be with their abusers.

It is important to remain aware that going missing is not a prerequisite for sexual exploitation (Jago et al, 2011). Sexual exploitation can occur online or by telephone and does not require physical contact (CEOP, 2011). It may occur during the day when CYP are not considered missing, but absent from school. Vulnerable CYP living with birth families are also at risk, underlining the importance of a local, integrated whole systems approach to protecting vulnerable CYP. Sexual exploitation can be committed by individuals, groups (two or more connected people) and by gangs – a street-based group of children, young people and young adults who see themselves, and are seen as, a discrete group (OCC, 2012).

Signs of sexual exploitation:

- > displays of inappropriate sexual behaviour
- > having unexplained gifts
- > disengagement from education
- > substance misuse
- > behavioural and emotional disruption

[Barnardo's, 2011](#); [CEOP, 2011](#)

¹ Appendix A reproduces in full the OCC 2012 warning signs and vulnerabilities checklist for sexual exploitation.



2. Developing a strategic response

The responsibilities of local authorities, their partner agencies and the LSCB regarding CYP who go missing from care and sexual exploitation are described in the Statutory Guidance on Children Missing from Home and Care (DCSF, 2008) and Statutory Guidance on Tackling Child Sexual Exploitation (DCSF, 2009).

Local Safeguarding Children's Boards

LSCBs have responsibility for reporting on and overseeing provision for all vulnerable children, including CYP who have gone missing and those at risk of sexual exploitation. There is a duty to work in partnership and the agencies who should be involved in the LSCBs' work include:

- > local authority services – including social care, youth services, youth offending teams, leisure services and housing
- > local police, probation and the Crown Prosecution Service
- > health services – including sexual health, mental health, designated looked after children professionals and Accident and Emergency Departments
- > schools, Further Education institutions and exclusion units
- > private sector organisations used by CYP, including leisure facilities and Internet Service Providers.

The role of the LSCB is to co-ordinate a 'joined up' multi-agency partnership and to challenge individual agencies. Recommended activities an active LSCB could pursue to reduce the risk of CYP missing from care and becoming more vulnerable to sexual exploitation include:

- > forming dedicated sub-groups focused on these issues to identify trends in missing incidents and cases of sexual exploitation
- > producing, maintaining and disseminating local policies and procedures regarding CYP who go missing and those at risk of sexual exploitation

- > ensuring cross-boundary procedures are in place where appropriate (between, for example, schools and care providers)
- > providing training to all relevant staff, and specialist training where required
- > ensuring multi-agency partnerships have appropriate strategies, including the appointment of lead professionals, to:
 - prevent missing incidents and sexual exploitation through education and early intervention
 - commission appropriate services for CYP who go missing and who are at risk of sexual exploitation
 - take appropriate action against perpetrators
- > involving the voluntary sector in local arrangements
- > using case audits and management information to ensure sufficient specialist services.

However, there are a number of challenges to taking a strategic approach on this agenda, which include:

- > a widespread lack of awareness, or belief that sexual exploitation is not a problem locally among senior decision-makers, frontline staff and families
- > agencies accustomed to dealing with abuse within the home struggle to tackle abuse occurring outside of this environment
- > poor data collection and analysis prevents a full understanding of the problem (Jago et al, 2011). National requirements for collecting this data are under review
- > variable staff awareness and understanding of procedures and protocols which are in place (Ofsted, 2013).

The Local Authority

For looked after children, the local authority is a corporate parent with particular responsibilities for CYP who go missing from care or who are at risk of sexual exploitation while looked after. These extend to a range of decision-making forums and activities, including:

- > commissioning placements for looked after children
- > writing care plans
- > informing those responsible for placements of the risks for the individual child
- > producing specific protocols for actions when CYP go missing from care
- > undertaking return interviews and placement reviews
- > commissioning services for all CYP who go missing or are at risk of sexual exploitation to ensure the needs of looked after children are considered (DCSF, 2008; DCSF, 2009).

These responsibilities are considered in the Service Planning and Direct Services section of this briefing.



- > See the *LSCB self-reflection tool* to find out ways to develop a robust strategic response to reduce the risk of CYP running away from care and being more vulnerable to sexual exploitation.
- > See the *Service Managers' self-reflection tool* to support service planning to reduce the risk of CYP running away from care and being more vulnerable to sexual exploitation.

www.rip.org.uk/prompt-missingCYP

Where police, children's services and voluntary sector agencies have worked together, coordinated by the LSCB, to identify and address child sexual exploitation, a significant number of cases have come to light. However, very few cases are known in areas where agencies do not routinely engage victims and collect data.

Agencies which do not proactively look for child sexual exploitation will as a result fail to identify it. [Because of this], the majority of incidents of child sexual exploitation in the UK are unrecognised and unknown.

CEOP, 2011



3. Service planning

Service planning for looked after children should be integrated with service planning for all vulnerable CYP. Planning takes place at different times and levels and involves early intervention and preventative work as well as decisions regarding placements and how to respond when a young person returns from a missing incident.

Early intervention and prevention

Barnardo's has identified **three stages of sexual exploitation**, which are helpful when thinking about targeting interventions and planning services:

Inappropriate relationships

Peer and 'boyfriend' exploitation, which may be, but is not always, associated with groups and/or gangs

Organised sexual exploitation. This can be defined as trafficking under the Sexual Offences Act 2003, as it involves moving young people around towns and cities for sex, and sometimes the arranging of networks and exchange of money for sexual services

Based on Barnardo's (2011)

Early intervention can prevent CYP moving towards the more entrenched stages of sexual exploitation and missing behaviours. Early support can help CYP:

- > be informed about what is healthy and unhealthy
- > understand the risks involved with their actions, such as running away or inappropriate relationships
- > prepare strategies for reducing or avoiding risk
- > be aware of services that can help them while they are missing, a victim of sexual exploitation or when they return afterwards (Skidmore and Robinson, 2007).

Information can be distributed through schools, services which CYP come into contact with, or directly through placements such as residential homes and foster care agencies.

Considerations when designing early intervention and preventative support include:

- > education about risk-taking behaviour should address underlying emotional and psychological issues
- > school staff may require specialist help to address sensitive issues on sexual exploitation
- > school staff may benefit from awareness raising through participating in classroom sessions on behaviours which place CYP at more risk of sexual exploitation
- > undertaking preventative work in a range of settings, including residential children's homes, to include CYP who do not regularly attend educational provision (Barnardo's, 2011, Rees et al, 2005).

Bwise2 Sexual Exploitation is a practical resource developed and piloted by Barnardo's and funded by London Councils. It led to a preventative education programme running from 2008 to 2012 educating young people and professionals in every London borough. Core elements include training for multi-agency professionals on identifying and preventing sexual exploitation and delivery of prevention work sessions to pupils in mainstream school settings, pupil referral units and residential homes.

Women's Resource Centre, 2011

Placement decisions

Local authority decisions about placements and how looked after children are supported within the care system can decrease or increase the risk of CYP running away and/or being sexually exploited.

Placement decisions which increase risk

Placement moves and instability in care can leave CYP lacking a sense of identity or agency, which they may try to re-establish through running away. Changing school at the same time as changing placement may increase feelings of instability. CYP may form unstable relationships which place them at risk while missing, that do not require commitment or permanent attachments that the CYP are unable to form (Coy, 2009). Courtney and Zin (2009) showed that looked after CYP are most likely to run away in the very early stages of a placement when relationships are in their infancy.

Supporting carers to stabilise placements, making well matched placements in the first instance and forward planning to avoid emergency placements can all support placement stability. A CYP may require a series of planned moves which addresses their changing and developing needs as part of their journey to permanency. Better planning and coordination by local authorities is needed. For example, Ward (2009) found that seven out of ten (69%) of planned transitions were resource or practice-led, resulting in 'a lack of choice or inappropriate planning.'

Out-of-area placements can increase feelings of isolation, and increase the length of missing episodes and exposure to risk. There can be confusion about roles and responsibilities between host and home authorities, a longer time between visits and reviews from social workers and Independent Reviewing Officers and, consequently, action following return from missing episodes.

However, some out-of-area placements offer protection for CYP and are necessary to remove them from localised risk and exploitative relationships. The government recently announced a plan to be in place by December 2013, subject to consultation, to ensure only senior officials have the authority to place a child far from their home.

Multiple resident placements can increase risk if some residents encourage others to go missing or put themselves at risk of sexual exploitation. Children's homes can become targets for perpetrators of sexual exploitation, due to the vulnerability of the residents (OCC, 2012). There has been some suggestion that the geographical clustering of children's homes makes these CYP particularly vulnerable to being targeted by exploiters (APPG, 2012). In the future, there will be a requirement for children's home providers to carry out a risk assessment of the area in partnership with the police and the local authority. Registration will be refused or suspended where the area is deemed unsafe (DfE, 2013).

Leavers placed in bed and breakfast accommodation or hostels report feeling unsafe and having their vulnerabilities preyed upon by other residents (OCD, 2012; APPG, 2012) leading to the recommendation that no care leaver should be placed in bed and breakfast or hostel accommodation (OCC, 2012).

Placement factors which reduce risk

Staff attitudes are critical to the culture and atmosphere in placements for looked after children. CYP value:

- > consistent attitudes to anti-social behaviour and missing episodes
- > having someone to talk to
- > frequent activities involving staff and residents (Berridge et al, 2011; Berridge et al, 2012).

The Care Inquiry (2013) emphasised the quality of relationships between CYP and people that care for them as mattering more than anything else in building CYP's resilience and wellbeing.

The messages from young people who have experience of running away is that they are less likely to do so if they have good staff who organise activities for them, deal well with bullying, and are good at talking, listening and helping young people to sort out problems and to cope with pressures. They are less likely to run away from problems again if, when they return, staff take time to talk things through with them at the young person's own pace, and help to deal with things that led to running away in the first place.

Office of the Children's Rights Director, 2006

Assessing risk

This is a vital element in preventing and responding to sexual exploitation and running away. Therefore, it is essential that carers and staff within residential homes have a good understanding of the individual case histories of CYP in their care.

Multi-agency risk assessments should include input from youth offending teams, education providers and welfare officers. Risk assessments of individuals and placements should be reviewed after every missing incident. Multiple episodes of running away could indicate a CYP is at more risk of sexual exploitation.

Returning from going missing

CYP say they are more likely to go missing again if:

- > the problems they ran away from remain
- > there is no one to talk to on their return
- > they disclose problems but no action is taken.

The attitudes of carers in placements on CYPs' return was a significant factor in how long CYP stayed away, and how likely they were to run away again. Training and skills can support carers to provide the most appropriate support. The Government is carrying out a comprehensive review of the training, qualifications and career pathways for existing and new staff working in children's homes, which will inform the development of a training and qualifications framework for the sector (DfE, 2013). Many looked after children resented being looked for by the police and being told off, or ignored, on their return to the placement (OCD, 2006).

Understanding what CYP do and where they go when missing is critical - both in providing for any additional needs and in identifying trends that might indicate sexual exploitation. How this information is gathered, recorded and shared is important. Not all children who run away will be ready to talk on their return. Staff undertaking interviews need strong listening skills to encourage disclosure of harm while away.

This is particularly true of experiences of sexual exploitation, where a trusted relationship may be required before disclosure (Barnardo's, 2011). Ofsted have noted that the statutory 'safe and well' checks which should be carried out by police whenever a missing CYP returns or is found are not always on case file records and the outcomes of these checks are not routinely shared with all relevant professionals (Ofsted, 2013).

In addition to 'safe and well' checks, return interviews are a statutory requirement after a CYP runs away but are more focused on exploring why the young person ran away and their welfare more generally. Guidance states return interviews should be carried out by an independent person, i.e. not someone directly involved in a CYP's care. This needs to be someone who is known and trusted by the young person, such as an advocate or someone who is suitably skilled and can follow up necessary actions (Ofsted, 2013). The dual aim is to gather intelligence for the disruption of the perpetrators of sexual exploitation and prompt support for the CYP concerned (CEOP, 2011).



- > See the *Service Managers' self-reflection tool* to find out ways to develop robust procedures and practice to reduce the risk of CYP running away from care and being vulnerable to sexual exploitation.
- > See the *Social Workers' and Residential staff and Foster Carers' self-reflection tools* to develop practice to reduce the risk of CYP running away from care and being vulnerable to sexual exploitation.

www.rip.org.uk/prompt-missingCYP



4. Specialist services for CYP who go missing and/or are sexually exploited

Due to the shared risk factors and characteristics of this group, there are common principles that underpin specialist services designed to support them.

Underlying principles of services for CYP missing from care and/or sexually exploited:

- > being child-centred
- > accommodating the chaotic lifestyles and mistrust of professionals often exhibited by these CYPs
- > prioritising the importance of offering stable, trusting adult relationships
- > taking a multi-agency approach
- > being clear about confidentiality (Rees et al, 2005; Barnardo's, 2011).

Services for CYP who run away

Services for CYP who run away may exist for all CYP regardless of whether they are looked after. Very few CYP access services while they are missing because they do not know what services are available or they fear statutory service intervention. This suggests that promotional work is needed and also that independent services may be more successful in working with this client group. Voluntary sector organisations may be better placed to provide these services as they can be more flexible in their approaches and thresholds.

Useful elements of services for CYP who have run away include:

- > Provision of appropriate emergency accommodation other than a police cell, to keep CYP safe while missing (DCSF, 2009; Rees and Lee, 2005). Looked after children say they would value a place of safety to go to while they are missing, that will not require them to return if they do not want to (OCD, 2006 and 2012)
- > Referral mechanisms to services for CYP who go missing should not rely on a police referral following a missing

person's report. Many CYP who run away are not reported missing and may not meet social care thresholds for other services (Rees et al, 2005). Self-referral mechanisms such as a helpline and assertive outreach can help CYP access support (Starks et al, 2012)

- > **Timing of support** – looked after children are more likely to engage with services for those who go missing on their return than other CYP. However, those who have experienced sexual exploitation are less likely to access services designed for missing children (Rees et al, 2005)
- > **Links to other services** – strong links are needed to address underlying factors in missing episodes, including family support, provision of accommodation and re-engagement with education.

Services for sexually exploited young people

Barnardo's evaluation of their sexual exploitation services for vulnerable children found that their services were effective at reducing the occurrence of sexual exploitation, as well as related risk-taking behaviours such as missing incidents, substance misuse, engagement in education and housing status (Barnardo's, 2011a).

Useful elements of services for CYP at risk of sexual exploitation include:

- > **Accessibility** – including the provision of a single key worker
- > **Flexibility** – including out of hours access
- > **A model of aggressive outreach** – going to where CYP at risk are and trying to engage with them over a period of time, including using text messages and telephone calls to keep in contact
- > **Support over a long period of time** – these CYP require a service and professionals that take a long term approach (Barnardo's, 2011).



- > See the *Service Managers'*, the *Social Workers'* and the *Residential Staff and Foster Carers' self-reflection tools* to find out ways to develop robust policies and practice to reduce the risk of CYP running away from care and being more vulnerable to sexual exploitation.

www.rip.org.uk/prompt-missingCYP



5. Investigating sexual exploitation

I don't think we understood the extent that the abuse was systematic and it was organised. It was only when we sat down, pooled our information with that of the social workers, that we began to piece together the picture which explained what was happening in terms of this criminal network in Oxford.

Chief Constable Sara Thornton, Thames Valley Police, speaking after seven members of a sex trafficking gang were convicted in Oxford in May 2013

Multi-agency action

Information sharing is crucial to investigating and prosecuting sexual exploitation offences. A Serious Case Review into sexual exploitation of two looked after young women in Derby highlights the role of the police investigation in bringing the otherwise hidden issue to the attention of other agencies and prompting multi-agency action (Galley, 2010). The National Action Plan on Sexual Exploitation highlights work by the Home Office to better track sex offenders, and the statutory guidance on CYP missing from home and care recommends connecting with the multi-agency public protection arrangements (MAPPA) (DfE, 2011; DCSF, 2009).

There are challenges to investigating sexual exploitation:

- > police child abuse investigation units tend to focus on risks from the family and are less focused on identifying risks of sexual abuse outside the home
- > it is very difficult to investigate and bring prosecutions in sexual exploitation cases when victims are not willing to make accusations or give evidence against their abusers due to a fear of violent retribution against self or family members and/or due to continued feelings of misplaced loyalty towards the perpetrator(s)
- > the Crown Prosecution Service may not believe a credible case can be made (Barnardo's 2011; CEOP 2011).

Making improvements

There are procedures in place to investigate sexual exploitation which do not require victim cooperation, such as the use by police of Child Abduction Warning Notices (served as a formal indication of a parent/carer's wish that they do not want the child to associate with or visit a named person) or the bringing of trafficking charges. Where covert surveillance operations to gather evidence exist, they need to include a regularly updated multi-agency assessment which balances the need to gather evidence but also the consequences for CYP who may be at risk (Galley, 2010). Lastly, the investigation and, where relevant, the prosecution process should involve on-going support for victims of sexual exploitation regardless of the outcome of any attempt at prosecution, both to ensure the continued safety of the young person and to continue to gather evidence (CEOP, 2011).

The way sexual exploitation is investigated is changing. In March 2013 the Director of Public Prosecutions announced changes to the way the criminal justice system tackles child sexual abuse. This includes the decommissioning of existing policies and the introduction of one overarching and agreed approach to investigation and prosecution of sexual offences applicable in all police forces and agreed by the Crown Prosecution Service. Changes also involve specialist training in handling child abuse allegations for police and prosecutors.



Appendix A: Sexual exploitation warning signs and vulnerabilities checklist (taken from OCC, 2012 interim report)

The following are typical vulnerabilities in children prior to abuse:

- > Living in a chaotic or dysfunctional household (including parental substance misuse, domestic violence, parental mental health issues, parental criminality)
- > History of abuse (including familial child sexual abuse, risk of forced marriage, risk of 'honour'-based violence, physical and emotional abuse and neglect)
- > Recent bereavement or loss
- > Gang association, either through relatives, peers or intimate relationships (in cases of gang associated child sexual exploitation only)
- > Attending school with young people who are sexually exploited
- > Learning disabilities
- > Being unsure about their sexual orientation or unable to disclose sexual orientation to their families
- > Friendships with young people who are sexually exploited
- > Homelessness
- > Lacking friends from the same age group
- > Living in a gang neighbourhood
- > Living in residential care
- > Living in a hostel, bed and breakfast accommodation or a foyer
- > Low self-esteem or self-confidence
- > Being a young carer.

The following signs and behaviours are generally seen in children who are already being sexually exploited:

- > Missing from home or care
- > Physical injuries
- > Drug or alcohol misuse
- > Involvement in offending
- > Repeat sexually-transmitted infections, pregnancy and terminations
- > Absence from school
- > Change in physical appearance
- > Evidence of sexual bullying and/or vulnerability through the internet and/or social networking sites
- > Estranged from their family
- > Receipt of gifts from unknown sources
- > Recruiting others into exploitative situations
- > Poor mental health
- > Self-harm
- > Thoughts of, or attempts at, suicide.

Evidence shows that any child displaying several vulnerabilities from the above lists should be considered to be at high risk of sexual exploitation. However, it is important to note that children without pre-existing vulnerabilities can still be sexually exploited.

Therefore, any child showing risk indicators in the second list, but none of the vulnerabilities in the first, should also be considered as a potential victim, with appropriate assessment and action put in place as required.

Resources / tools

Department for Education, 2012.
Step by step guide to tackling sexual exploitation.
www.rip.org.uk/prompt-missingCYP-stepbystepguide

University of Bedfordshire, 2012.
Child Sexual Exploitation Data Monitoring Tool.
www.rip.org.uk/prompt-missingCYP-datamonitortool

University of Bedfordshire, 2012.
'Self-Assessment tool' to assess progress in protecting children from sexual exploitation.
www.rip.org.uk/prompt-missingCYP-selfassessmenttool

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