



## Children who go missing from care: A participatory project with young people as peer interviewers



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## Summary

*Byron: You see your information is going to be analysed and they [the research team] are going to take on this information and then they're going to try and see what they can do with it. But obviously it's going to all be correlated and then if they can, they will make a change because of what you've said. FG2*

There is a need for a better understanding of practice to prevent looked after children running away in order to avoid a pattern of unsafe experiences and placement disruptions<sup>1</sup>. Looked after children are significantly more likely than all children to go missing, with those in residential care an estimated three times more likely to go missing<sup>2</sup>. These children face a significant risk of harm, and are likely to be exposed to the risk of alcohol and drugs, criminal and sexual victimisation including prostitution, sexually transmitted diseases and arrest<sup>1 3</sup>. Research identifies some of the factors which may reduce the likelihood of looked after children going missing. However it is acknowledged that greater understanding of effective practice is needed to help prevent those at risk going missing.

The aim of the study was to work with young people with experience of going missing from care to identify the:

- Issues that contributed to them running away;
- trigger factors that prompted episodes of going missing;
- Support received during or following instances where they went missing;
- Factors that might prevent future absconding.

This was an exploratory study and therefore we used a qualitative design<sup>4</sup>. Young people's experiences were captured using the Critical Incident Technique (CIT), which involved asking respondents to recount *actual* incidents. Research on children's experiences is often reported from the adult's perspective, rather than allowing children to have a voice<sup>5</sup>. We therefore recruited two young people to collaborate with the researchers as peer interviewers, supported throughout by an experienced research assistant.

The young people interviewed for this study told the peer interviewers that the primary reasons for running away were: authority and power; friction; isolation and environmental issues.

Authority and power invested in others are considerable issues for young people in care and were closely associated with friction. Perhaps unsurprisingly, isolation was a considerable source of distress for the young people in care and separation from family – exacerbated by feelings of helplessness – sometimes resulted in young people running away. Environmental reasons highlighted in this study as antecedents to running away, were primarily concerned with boredom and lack of boundaries.

Young people were asked about what happened to them after a period of absconding. The consequences varied, but some described different sanctions. Being 'grounded' and having shoes removed (to prevent further running away) were common-place. Lack of support on return was reported and criticism of lack of boundaries and consequences.

Young people with a history of absconding from care were asked about the most appropriate ways to prevent this among their peer group. They were keen to offer advice to young people themselves and to key workers/social workers. Talking to someone and staying busy were highlighted as important, preventative strategies. Unsurprisingly given the issues of power and authority that influence young people in care, a significant emphasis was placed on the need for young people to

be treated with respect. Being able to exercise autonomy and agency were important. Provision of activities to address the environment risk factors were also highlighted. Rather than punitive measures, young people wanted an empathic, helpful response. Discussion – adult to adult – was cited a number of times as a key preventative strategy. When workers get this right, the impact on young people can be considerable.

Young people in care are adolescents with additional challenges. Being listened to and feeling someone cares are crucial. Although they rebelled against authority, they appreciated structure and boundaries. They are especially vulnerable around birthdays and festive holidays.

The conclusions and recommendations arising from the study can be framed around three areas: reasons; relationships and responses.

#### Reasons

- a. It is Important to understand why young people may go missing
- b. Young people must have the freedom and support to have their views heard

#### Relationships

- c. Young people want someone to talk to, who can empathise and listen
- d. Safety is important
- e. They need space to explain their concerns

#### Responses

- f. Young people value boundaries and clear structure: these need to be communicated and understood
  - g. Approaches to responding to young people who go missing should be supportive and facilitative, rather than punitive
  - h. Empathic, understanding responses are needed
-

## **Background**

United Kingdom statistics indicate that approximately 10,000 children go missing from care in a year<sup>6</sup>. There is a need for a better understanding of practice to prevent looked after children running away in order to avoid a pattern of unsafe experiences and placement disruptions<sup>1</sup>. Looked after children are significantly more likely than all children to go missing, with those in residential care an estimated three times more likely to go missing<sup>2</sup>. These children face a significant risk of harm and are likely to be exposed to the risk of alcohol and drugs, criminal and sexual victimisation including prostitution, sexually transmitted diseases and arrest<sup>1 3</sup>. Perhaps unsurprisingly then, children and young people in care are deemed to be amongst the most vulnerable in society<sup>7,8</sup>. Research identifies some of the factors which may reduce the likelihood of looked after children going missing. However it is acknowledged that greater understanding of effective practice is needed to help prevent those at risk.

The UK Government has noted that practice needs to be improved<sup>9</sup> and although a majority of local authorities have protocols for children missing from care<sup>10</sup>, these vary from area to area. Little attention has been devoted to the reasons *why* the child goes missing<sup>11</sup> and there remains concern at 'lack of awareness among care staff of the serious risks to looked after children who go missing'<sup>11</sup>. Although some of the warning signs of running away, such as a history of going missing, are already visible to practitioners, they are not always recognised<sup>12</sup>.

### ***Project aims and objectives***

The aim of the study was to work with young people with experience of going missing from care to identify the:

- Issues that contributed to them running away;
- Trigger factors that prompted episodes of going missing;
- Support received during or following instances where they went missing;
- Factors that might prevent future absconding.

The purpose was to use the findings to inform service delivery, policy development and future research. The study was funded through the 2011 annual research award from the British Association for the Study and Prevention of Child Abuse and Neglect (BASPCAN) and was undertaken in 2012.

## ***Project team***

This study was a collaboration between the National Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children (NSPCC), Quarriers and the University of Dundee. The NSPCC has been operating as a registered charity since 1884 and over recent years has become the most well known charity in the UK. Its 2,500 staff are based in the UK and the Channel Islands and whatever work they are involved in, all are working towards one common objective - to end cruelty to children. Quarriers is a Scottish charity providing practical care and support for children, adults and families at any stage of their lives across Scotland and England. Quarriers has offered a diverse range of services which transform lives over the last 140 years and has more than 150 sites nationwide. The University of Dundee School of Nursing and Midwifery has a research commitment to vulnerable populations. Professor Julie Taylor (JT), University of Dundee (on secondment to NSPCC) was the Principal Investigator. Helen Hunter (HH) (Quarriers) and Tom Rahilly (TR) (NSPCC) were co-investigators. The final research team undertaking the work also included Dr Caroline Bradbury-Jones (C-BJ), University of Dundee; Kate Sanford (KS), Quarriers; Nayla Ibrahim (NI), peer interviewer; and Byron Carruthers (BC), peer interviewer.

## **Methodology and methods**

This was an exploratory study and therefore we used a qualitative design<sup>4</sup>. Young people's experiences were captured using the Critical Incident Technique (CIT), which involved asking respondents to recount *actual* incidents. CIT has been found to be a quick, simple and flexible research approach<sup>13</sup>.

## ***Ethical approval***

Ethical approval was gained through the independently chaired NSPCC Research Ethics Committee which adheres to the Government's Social Research Unit Guidance<sup>14</sup>. Whilst the risks in this study were minimised as much as possible, we used participatory methods with vulnerable young people and appreciated additional consideration by the ethics committee. The study was a partnership between NSPCC and Quarriers and our sample of young people was recruited from those who use Quarriers support services. Although there may have been a potential risk that because the young people would be familiar with workers in the organisation, they may have felt an obligation and pressure to take part, Quarriers does have significant experience of offering young people a wide

variety of opportunities with which they are able to engage or decline as they wish. However, to avoid any risk of coercion, Quarriers circulated invitations to participants widely, rather than canvassing the engagement of *individual* young people. Also, we offered a small token of appreciation to the young people who took part. We deliberately did not inflate this because we considered it a 'thank you' gesture, rather than an incentive to participate.

The research team acknowledged the importance of informed consent. All participants were given a written information sheet in accessible, appropriate language. The content of the information sheet was presented orally by CB-J at the beginning of each focus group to re-state the parameters of the interview. All participants were informed that they could withdraw from the discussion at any time without risk of reprisal. Written consent was sought from all participants. The main ethical issue related to this study is the sensitive topic area and the relative vulnerability of participants. The team acknowledged the emotive topic area and that sharing experiences may be upsetting for some participants. We considered it important to put in place supportive mechanisms. For this reason we allowed time from de-briefing/discussion at the end of the focus group discussions for any participants who wanted to take this opportunity. The presence of the peer interviewer added an additional layer of support to participants. However, acknowledging that the peer interviewers were themselves exposed to the discussion, they too were encouraged to take part in the de-brief discussions. Each focus group was attended by a highly experienced researcher with extensive experience as a registered nurse and health visitor (CB-J). She was attuned to the nuances of interactions; alert to any upset among participants; and competent to deal with any situations as they arose.

Risks to researchers were minimal. However, like the research participants, there was a chance that the researchers on this project may be upset as a result of being exposed to the experiences of the children who take part. It is for this reason that the team set up regular meetings as an avenue not only for planning, but also for de-briefing and support. We extended our responsibility for protection to all those who are exposed to data. We used a transcription service that we have used to transcribe other raw data, including focus group interviews with abused women. We alerted the transcription manager of the potentially upsetting interview material in a bid to protect those exposed to it.

Finally, we did not ignore the chance of disclosure of issues which may include child abuse. The team was sensitive to those possibilities, well-rehearsed with child protection procedures and would have followed the set procedures for responding to suspected abuse if such instances arose.

## ***Peer interviewer recruitment***

Research on children's experiences is often reported from the adult's perspective, rather than allowing children to have a voice<sup>5</sup>. Using young people as researchers has been useful in gaining meaningful insights from respondents of a similar age who have shared common experiences. Using a participatory research method can address this imbalance<sup>15</sup>. We therefore recruited two young people (BC & NI) to collaborate with the researchers as peer interviewers. An experienced research fellow (CB-J) was also appointed to train and supported BC and NI throughout the project. CB-J ran a two-day, bespoke training programme for them at the beginning of the project (Appendix 1).

## ***Access to sample and recruitment***

Quarriers recruited young people from across Scotland to participate who have had experience of the care system and homelessness. A total of 28 young people were recruited (see Table 1 for details). Experiences of the care system ranged across foster and residential care settings across the UK. After reading the Participant Information Sheet (Appendix 2), written consent was gained from each participant.

*Table 1: Focus Group composition*

	Ethnicity	Female	Male	Total
Group 1	2 BME	3	4	7
Group 2	All white	0	4	4
Group 3	All white	2	3	5
Group 4	All white	2	0	2
Group 5	All white	2	2	4
Group 6	All white	4	2	6
Totals		13	15	28

## ***Data generation***

Data were generated through six focus groups each comprising 2-7 participants. The peer interviewers (BC and NI) facilitated each group discussion. CB-J was present, but did not take part in the data collection process. Data were generated using CIT interviews<sup>16</sup> according to an interview schedule (Appendix 3). All interviews were recorded on a digital voice recorder with participants' consent.



## **Data analysis**

All data were transcribed using a confidential transcription service. Data analysis was undertaken using an inductive classification system designed for CIT<sup>17</sup> and enhanced by framework analysis<sup>4</sup>. To enhance consistency, CB-J analysed all the interviews. To ensure reliability however, analysis was also undertaken independently by BC, NI and JT. The team then came together and emerging categories were discussed and revised until consensus was achieved. The agreed categories were subsequently mapped to the project aims and objectives as shown in Appendix 4. In the findings section, each focus group is coded 1-6, for example focus group five is FG 5. Any potential identifiers such as proper nouns have been removed to protect anonymity of participants.

## **Key findings**

Our findings could be grouped under three main headings: reasons for running away; the consequences of running away; and participants' views on what might work as preventive strategies.

### **1 Reasons for running away**

The young people interviewed for this study told the peer interviewers that the primary reasons for running away were: authority and power; friction; isolation and environmental issues.

Authority and power invested in others are considerable issues for young people in care as illustrated by the participants in the following focus group discussions:

*Participant 1: I was just getting angry because people weren't telling me what was going on and I was ... I didn't know where I lived and nobody's telling me what's going on and I was going like "Where's my family?" "Why are they not here?" and "Who are you?" and they were saying "Oh you can trust us" but you know, I didn't really. FG3*

.....

*Participant 1: It's just authority isn't it? Authority.*

*Participant 2: See when they get a bit of power, they...*

*Participant 1: Aye. Folk always try to tell you what to do. FG5*

.....

Perceived power and authority of others is closely associated with friction:

*Participant 1: You see like I've been here all my life, I know you don't tell social workers but it's just one thing I've got to live with... They look at you as if you're a piece of shit on the bottom of their shoe.*

*Participant 2: I looked up to them.*

*Participant 3: Honestly I hate them so much. FG3*

.....

*Interviewer: Did you ever run away?*

*Participant 1: Aye... One of the reasons was like... locking you in the room and all that. Normally if you are kicking off and all that they put you in the room and they shut the doors to stop you getting out... and they restrain you.*

*Participant 2: that just escalates the situation worse. See they say 'I know how you're feeling'. No they don't! See if they had been in care, fair enough, they'll know how you're feeling, but these one's who don't... they are right in your face and you are like 'get the f\*\*k out of my face' FG 6*

.....

Perhaps unsurprisingly, isolation was a considerable source of distress for the young people in care and as the following excerpts show, separation from family – exacerbated by feelings of helplessness – resulted in young people running away:

*Interviewer: So was there something about the home that made you run away?*

*Participant 1: It was just... Home is where the heart is, you know what I mean, and that's why I just wanted to be home, you know what I mean? See my ma and my family... make sure they're all right. FG1*

.....

*Participant 1: I've never really had anyone to talk to about anything that really bothers me. I've tried speaking to my social worker but she's just up you're arse man, doesn't listen to me and believes everyone else.*

*Participant 2: When I had a social worker, they would tell you - they didn't ask you, they never ask you. They never asked you if you wanted home leave, which I did. I wanted to see my mum, but no. They didn't listen to me. FG3*

.....

*Participant 1: It was boxing-day. They wouldn't let me go and see my family and because on Christmas day I didn't see my family I decided... I'm away and then I was away until New Year's Eve*

*Interviewer: Where did you go?*

*Participant 1: To my pals*

*Interviewer: So what was the reason?*

*Participant 1: Because they stopped me from seeing my family and that. I wanted to see my wee brother and sister and they wouldn't let me, so...so they just made the situation worse. FG 6*

.....

*Participant 4: When I first went into care I went into foster care so it was it new for me and that...and then me and my brother got split up and I got put in a residential unit so I was like running away to go and see him FG 6*

.....

*Participant 1: Me and my sister was in there but my sister didn't want to be moved out and I didn't feel right about leaving my sister*

*Interviewer: Isolation and all that?*

*Participant 1: Aye and that caused me to run away more, run to my sister.*

*Interviewer: So...did you tell your social worker this? How you were feeling and that?*

*Participant 1: No I didn't talk to anybody about it. I just keep it inside me. FG1*

.....

Environmental reasons highlighted in this study as antecedents to running away, were primarily concerned with boredom and lack of boundaries:

*Participant 1: I was bored. Pure boredom... FG4*

.....

*I always used to run away from council units because they didn't really have much boundaries, they couldn't really do anything. FG4*

.....

## **2 Consequences of running away**

In this study, young people were asked about what happened to them after a period of absconding. The consequences varied, but some described different sanctions. Being 'grounded' and having shoes removed (to prevent further running away) were common-place, for example:

*Participant 1: and now they hid my shoes, like I went out in socks and she put like ketchup in my shoes like.*

.....

*Interviewer: What happened when you ran away?*

*Participant 1: Eventually they kept me in all day and then you went to school and that, they made you go in slippers.*

*Interviewer: Aye? For me personally that would make me want to run away again, you know what I mean?! So what do you think would have made that better, do you know what I mean?*

*Participant 1: Structure and that, you know what I mean? Something to do. FG 3*

.....

*Participant 4: We used to have kids they'd run away, they came back, they took their trainers, they ran away in their socks, they'd come back and they just kept running away because the fire exits didn't have anything on them or the windows didn't have bars, they were just climbing out. FG3*

.....

*Interviewer: See when you ran away, when you came back, what were the consequences?*

*Participant 1: I got grounded. Wasn't allowed out, supervised pocket money. I was more monitored and stuff. FG4*

.....

Lack of support on return was reported and criticism of lack of boundaries and consequences:

*Interviewer: See when you went back, was there any support for you?*

*Participant 1: No, they just asked me where I was and why did I run away and that, that was it, wasn't really any support. FG4*

.....

*Interviewer: Was there any support here when you came back, when you ran away from here?*

*Participant 1: No, they just asked me where I was.*

*Interviewer: So what happened when you got back? What were the consequences?*

*Participant 1: I didn't get a consequence*

*Interviewer: So nothing happened at all?*

*Participant 1: I just got into trouble and told to stop doing it. There was no consequence. I just think they should be more strict. If you run away you should get consequences... They need to be more strict and make rules and boundaries. It would help if they was more stricter and just don't let you away with it. FG 6*

.....

### 3 Preventative strategies

Young people with a history of absconding from care were asked about the most appropriate ways to prevent this among their peer group. They were keen to offer advice to young people themselves and to key workers/social workers:

#### Advice to other young people in care:

Talking to someone and staying busy were highlighted as important, preventative strategies:

*There is always something better than running away because it doesn't get you anywhere. You're just back to square one again. It doesn't solve any problems at all. It gets you back to square one. FG2*

.....

*Participant 1: My social worker asked me why I did do it [run away] and told me not to do it. That was it.*

*Interviewer: What could she have done to stop you running away?*

*Participant 1: there's not much she can do. It's up to you to be honest. If you want to you do, but if you don't then... you don't.*

*Interviewer: That's a good point because a few people have said that it's up to them. FG6*

.....

*Participant 1: You could teach them how to paint because there's not many young people know how to paint, they normally go get painters and decorators in. So you should be teaching them how to paint their rooms. FG3*

.....

Discussion in one of the focus groups was about damage limitation. In recognition that some young people will persist in running away, one participant advised of the need to stay safe:

*I would just tell them to make sure that they were going to be all right if they were going to run away, make sure that you're alright no matter what, do you know what I mean because for all you know, you could walk through a park and the next thing you know, you could be stabbed, you know what I mean? It is hard, it's hard. FG2*

.....

## Advice to workers:

Unsurprisingly given the issues of power and authority that influence young people in care, a significant emphasis was placed on the need for young people to be treated with respect. Being able to exercise autonomy and agency were important:

*Interviewer: What do you think would have made it better? Made you not run away?*

*Participant 1: To let us do what we want to an extent instead of saying 'you've got to be in at this time'. We're 16 years old. In my place I've got to be in at 9 o'clock. You know what I mean?*

*Interviewer: So, just a bit more independence?*

*Participant 1: Yes, that's all they talk about. 'Act like an adult' and when you do act like an adult they treat you like a 10 year old. FG 6*

.....

Provision of activities to address the environment risk factors already presented, were also highlighted:

*You need to keep them busy and keep a smile on their face, so that they don't want to run away and don't want to go out and get mad with it. FG4*

.....

Rather than the punitive measures already described, young people wanted an empathic, helpful response:

*Participant 1: I think when you come back [they say] right that's your computer banned now... but they should actually take you into a room and talk to them and ask "Why did you run away?" "Do you have a problem?" FG1*

.....

Discussion – adult to adult – was cited a number of times as a key preventative strategy:

*Interviewer: What would you say to staff?*

*Participant 1: Speak to them, talk to them.*

*Participant 1: Take the time to get to know them. Don't just judge. FG 4*

.....

*Interviewer: What do you think would work? What do you think would work as in help you?*

*Participant 3: Somebody to sit down and talk to you instead of trying to tell you what to do. FG5*

.....

When workers get this right, the impact on young people can be considerable:

*Participant 1: Seeing your senior support workers, senior drug representative. They're amazing, right? I went to see one of them, honestly she's brilliant. She's brilliant at her job. She actually listens to you about why...She gives you a chance FG1*

.....

*Participant 1: The key worker, she... she showed somebody a bit of love, you know what I mean? Obviously, it didn't need to be cuddling you, but showing affection. Somebody saying to you "You look well today" or "Oh that's good that you're doing well" and congratulating somebody.*

*Interviewer: A little positive?*

*Participant 1: Aye, that keeps me going, that keeps you going because you're not dead to the world. Do you know what I mean? It will get better. FG1*

.....

## Discussion

Work across the UK has highlighted the risks faced by children and young people who run away from care. However, despite repeated calls for action looked after children continue to be at significant risk and there remains a pressing need to improve the support provided to these children and young people. The young people in our study had a great deal to say about their experiences of running away from care, identifying how they can be better protected.

Central and local governments have raised the profile work to address the needs of looked after children. Following publication of the Joint All Party Parliamentary Groups (APPG) Report into Children who Go Missing from Care, the Westminster Government announced action to:

- improve the quality and transparency of data of the number of children who go missing from care;
- remove barriers that prevent Ofsted sharing information with the police;
- tackle out of area placements;

- and establish a working group to look at how to improve the quality of children's homes.

The publication on revised guidance on supporting runaways has been postponed until this work is concluded.

The Scottish Government has an aspiration of making Scotland the best place in the world to grow up. *Getting it Right for Every Child* (GIRFEC) aims to deliver better outcomes for and with children and young people, by developing an integrated approach to support that puts the child's needs at the centre of decision making<sup>18</sup>. The Scottish Government's child protection reform programme includes a list of demands children should feel entitled to make (the children's charter). Similarly a 'runaways charter' has been published recently by the Children's Society, and the broad principles give the same consistent message about listening and respecting and being trustworthy<sup>19</sup>.

The Scottish Government has made a commitment to addressing the significantly poorer health, housing, educational outcomes and employment prospects for looked after children<sup>20</sup>. 'These are our Bairns' provides guidance on improving local authorities aspirations, commitment and support for children and young people in their care, often termed 'corporate parenting', with a specific aim that there should be no discernable difference in outcomes between children and young people in the care system and their peers. Despite the existing robust policy framework that aims to ensure equality for looked after children, our study shows that significant improvements are still needed to improve support for children in care and prevent and address the risks of running away.

For the young people in the study, authority and power; friction; isolation and environmental issues were the primary reasons why they ran away from care. Actions of those in positions of authority, such as restraining the young person or locking them in a room as a 'preventative' measure, were seen by young people as exacerbating volatile situations. This is a far cry from the principles of respect, dignity and involvement with decision making highlighted in policy proposals<sup>18,21,22</sup>.

The issue of contact and re-unification for children in care has been acknowledged to be important in terms of why children run away from care<sup>7</sup>. The All Party inquiry into children who go missing from care reported that quality and stability of placements is a key issue<sup>8</sup>. It also highlighted the problem of many children – particularly older ones – being placed a long way from home, family and friends. In our study, separation from family was repeatedly cited as a reason why young people run away from care. The festive period was identified as a particularly risky time, with young people describing running away (back to their family) at Christmas and New Year.



In our study there appears to be a disconnection between the experiences of the young people and the notions of putting their needs at the centre of policy and practice decisions. The experiences of children and young people in the study can appear to run counter to the UNCRC<sup>23</sup> mandate that calls for respect for the right of the child to maintain contact with their parents on a regular basis, except if it is contrary to the child's best interests. Parental contact for looked after children presents significant challenges for practitioners working with children and young people in care. It could be that the participants in our study were unaware of the child welfare issues that resulted in separation from their family. However, from *their* perspective, they had no control and no voice. In this instance they were not so much running *away* from care, but rather, running *back* to family. Interestingly, Sen<sup>24</sup> noted that social workers are vigilant about the risks and distress that may occur during contact, but focusing on risk may mean that some of the therapeutic aspects of contact are ignored. This is an important point, supported from the findings of our study. It is clear that further work is needed to ensure effective and appropriate contact works for children and young people in care.

Young people in the study provided clear examples of bucking authority and rebelling against boundaries. It may appear paradoxical therefore, that they simultaneously yearned for boundaries and discipline. However, this study has highlighted the importance of getting this balance right. Punitive measures such as being grounded, having shoes removed or ketchup put in shoes (to prevent further running away) were commonly cited consequences of absconding and unsurprisingly, young people resented such measures. The reported experiences of young people in our study run contrary to the rights of children not to be 'subjected to torture or other cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment or punishment' UNCRC Article 37a<sup>23</sup>. Furthermore, such practices appeared ineffective as ways of preventing children in care from running away.

Rather than endure the humiliating acts of punitive action, young people advised of the need for firm boundaries, reinforced not with actions of power, but rather, empathy, understanding, support, respect and a listening ear: the very things that they ought to expect as a basic human right<sup>21 23 25</sup>. Both the Scottish<sup>22</sup> and the Children's Society's Runaways Charter<sup>19</sup> clearly state the importance of placing more value on relationships and attitudes than processes and events. This viewpoint is clearly supported by the findings of our study.

In their consideration of the priority areas for change in residential care for children and young people, Davidson and McKenzie<sup>26</sup> alludes to the 'culture of care'. Indicators of unhealthy cultures include a failure to listen to children and young people and the acceptance of 'macho' and violent ways of interacting<sup>26</sup>. They state that for young people to be treated with warmth, respect and

value, the workers themselves need to experience this from their managers. The young people in every focus group in this study stated the significance of feeling supported, listened to and understood. It is clear that this approach is important both in terms of preventing them from running away and in supporting and understanding them after an episode of absconding. It applies not only to social workers, but also to support workers and other agencies, such as the police<sup>20</sup>.

In this study we sought to understand the experiences of young people who run away from care. Our insights as detailed in this report are that many of their experiences are negative and that enduring issues of power and control render them as disempowered within the system that should have their interests at heart. There is much that we can learn to bridge the gap between the political rhetoric of what *ought* to happen to young people in care and the reality of what *actually* happens in too many cases. It is, however, also important to draw out the positive narratives of the young people who took part in the study. The reports of negative experiences need to be tempered by those that are more positive. The closing words in the findings section capture the significance of feeling 'loved'. For those who are in a supportive role to young people in care, acts of genuine concern, positive regard and sensitivity hold immeasurable impact in young people's lives that extend beyond the immediacy of that encounter.

## **Lessons learned**

The key lessons learned arise from the innovative study design that had at its core, the appointment of peer interviewers. Despite its many rewards, this also posed three main challenges. Firstly, a training programme needed to be developed and delivered. This had resource implications, particularly regarding time. We devised a flexible programme that was led by the specific needs of BC and NI. Thus, it evolved over the two days of the training, rather than being mapped out in advance. Lessons for the future are that this model of bespoke training works well, but it requires an experienced researcher who is able to respond flexibly to the unique needs of peer interviewers. Secondly, the issue of power imbalance between an experienced researcher (CB-J) and two young people (BC & NI) cannot be ignored. This could have resulted in the creation of a paradox, whereby the voices of BC & NI were dominated by that of CB-J by virtue of her relatively powerful position. It is necessary to be cognisant of the potential vulnerability of young people in such circumstances. In our study, all meetings, training and focus groups were held in Quarriers buildings, with a key worker present in an adjacent office. This provided security and familiarity for BC & NI regarding environment and the presence of a known and trusted support worker. Moreover, through her own reflexivity and experiences (as a researcher and as a health visitor, nurse and midwife), CB-J was able to be attuned to the power dynamics within the relationship. Finally, the issue of payment is a lesson

that other researchers who seek to adopt a similar approach need to bear in mind. Welfare benefits can be affected by direct payment and this was something that we wanted to avoid regarding remuneration for the peer interviewers. To circumnavigate this issue, we used supermarket gift vouchers, which was an agreeable solution to BC & NI as payment for their time given to the project.

The significant advantages of using peer interviewers far outweigh the challenges and there are several lessons learned. Our hypothesis at the outset of the study was that using peer interviewers would give voice to participants and provide a means of generating deeper insights than we might have achieved otherwise. This held true as evidenced by the strength of data presented in the report. A key lesson learned however, was the extent to which recruiting peer interviewers also gives 'voice' to them as individuals. Both BC and NI have cited the benefits of their involvement for their future, regarding educational and employment opportunities. Finally, the rewards of engaging with peer interviewers for the research team cannot be under-estimated. Being witness to the growth of two young people who seized a research opportunity with such enthusiasm and commitment is a lesson from which we can all learn.

## **Limitations**

This study has furnished us with insight into the experiences of young people who go missing from care. There are however, some challenges and limitations that need to be acknowledged. Firstly, this was a relatively small scale, qualitative study in Scotland. The insights gained from the young people who took part and the policies to which we have referred in this report are necessarily context specific. This means that findings might not be directly transferable to other contexts and countries.

Using young people as peer interviewers has without doubt yielded a level of insight that would have been difficult to achieve with an adult, 'outsider' researcher. However, as inexperienced researchers, this poses some challenges. It could be that a two-day training programme was insufficient to prepare them for the inherent intricacies of gathering qualitative data in a focus group environment. This may have influenced the quality of data generated. However, the peer interviewers adopted a critical, reflexive stance throughout the entire project, particularly regarding their new-found interview skills. An experienced researcher (CB-J) was present at every focus group to provide support or assistance – but this was never required. Ultimately, the competency of the peer interviewers in generating meaningful data is evident in the compelling accounts contained within this report.

Finally, the punitive actions experienced in some care settings are worrisome, but direct feedback to local authorities concerned was not possible as these were not identified by the young people. Even if it had been possible to ask, these may have been attributable to particular individuals and thus breached ethics permissions. However, we have presented the findings at stakeholder events attended by senior representatives of the public, private, voluntary and charity sectors and will continue to disseminate through professional and academic media.

## Conclusions and Recommendations

The conclusions arising from the study can be framed around three areas: reasons; relationships and responses (Table 2).

*Table 2: Understanding the issues relating to running away*

<p><i>Reasons</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>a. It is Important to understand why young people may go missing</li><li>b. Young people must have the freedom and support to have their views heard</li><li>c. Maintaining contact with family (particularly siblings) is important to young people</li></ul> <p><i>Relationships</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>d. Young people want someone to talk to, who can empathise and listen</li><li>e. Safety is important</li><li>f. They need space to explain their concerns</li></ul> <p><i>Responses</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>g. Young people value boundaries and clear structure</li><li>h. Responses to absconding should be supportive and facilitative, rather than punitive</li><li>i. Empathic, understanding responses are needed</li></ul>
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The reasons why young people abscond are complex (and individual). However, at a fundamental level, going missing is a key indicator that something is not right in a child's life<sup>8</sup>. This study has shown how freedom, support and having views heard, are important for young people. Maintaining contact with family (particularly siblings) is important and where it is safe to do so, facilitation of effective contact needs to be improved. Moreover, it is crucial that young people are involved and informed with decisions regarding such processes and contacts.

Relationships are often fragile and fragmented for young people in care. The study has highlighted the importance that young people place on having someone to talk to, who can empathise and listen. They need space to explain their concerns and to sense that they have some control over what can appear to them to be a helpless, disempowering situation. Safety is important and young people in one of our focus groups offered pragmatic advice regarding staying safe *if* young people choose to run away. Finally, in terms of responses, although they may appear on one hand to rebel against them, young people *do* value boundaries and clear structure. It is important that these are communicated, understood and agreed. Finally, approaches to responding to young people who go missing should be supportive and facilitative, rather than punitive, underpinned by empathic, understanding responses.

In this report we have highlighted a gap between what *ought* to happen to young people in care and the actual experiences of some young people. We have also reported on the positive impact of getting it right, often brought about by the most simple of caring acts by those who seek to support young people in care. The anticipated Children & Young People Bill<sup>27</sup> aims to ensure that all public bodies in Scotland recognise their duties as corporate parents and fulfil their obligations. This is a welcome piece of legislation and developments across the UK in response to cases highlighting the needs of children and young people in care demonstrate that there is a political will to improve support for young people in care. However, like other policies it will only make a difference to the lives of individual young people and influence their decisions regarding absconding from care, if the rhetoric, and intention, becomes reality. It is not inevitable that children and young people should go missing from care. For the participants in our study, going missing appeared to be a normal part of living in care. Rather than inventing methods of punishing and restraining children, workers might find it more productive to invest time, energy and creativity in addressing the underlying issues, thereby eradicating the desire to run away. Some of the solutions may be complex and challenging, such as balancing the need to protect children with their need to have contact with their families. But other approaches will be far simpler and involve such basic skills as the ability to discuss issues with, and listen to, children. We must proactively build our relationships with children in care and do all we can to alleviate their worries. Much could be learned by acknowledging and accepting that children themselves often know what is needed.

Running away from care can have a dramatic and dangerous effect on the lives of children and young people in care. For too long efforts to understand children and young peoples' needs and improve the support available them have been insufficient. It is critical that we use this opportunity for change.

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## Appendices

### *Appendix 1: Peer Interviewer Training Schedule*

<b>DAY 1 (3<sup>rd</sup> April 2012)</b>	
<b>Introductions</b>	Who we are
<b>About the Study</b>	Background Study plan
<b>Using focus groups</b>	What they are The principles Why we use them How we will use them in the study
<b>The role of peer researchers</b>	Why use peer researchers What the peer researchers will do
<b>Ethics and confidentiality</b>	Ground rules Ethical issues Consent Keeping safe
<b>Close</b>	

<b>DAY 2 (4<sup>th</sup> April 2012)</b>	
<b>Reflection and re-cap on previous day</b>	Revised proposal hand out for peer researchers

<b>Interview schedule</b>	Discussion and revisions
<b>Examples of focus group studies</b>	What real data look like Data analysis Report writing
<b>Putting it into practice</b>	Practical exercise on facilitating the focus group Asking questions
<b>Opportunities and challenges</b>	Benefits and opportunities Worries/potential difficulties Overcoming the challenges
<b>Close</b>	

## **Appendix 2: Participant Information Sheet**



### **Why do the NSPCC and Quarriers want to involve me in this study?**

We have been awarded a small grant to look at why children go missing from care. We want to understand better what issues lead up to children running away from care, what things help in going back to care and what kinds of things might stop them from going back.

If we can hear directly from young people aged 16-24 who have been in care, then we might be able to help others better in the future.

### **How do I take part in the study?**

To help us understand why children go missing from care and what helps them or doesn't help them, we are asking you to take part in a small discussion group with other young people. There will be a maximum of six in the group and you may know some of them. A young person who has been in care themselves will ask you some questions about your understanding of these issues. We will also have another more experienced interviewer to help out. The researcher will be present throughout the discussion.

We will record all the discussions so that we can capture exactly what has been said. But these will be private tapes and no-one else will know what you said in the group. Also, because the discussion is in a group, it is up to each person to decide how much to say – there is no pressure to discuss anything that you do not want to.

We will arrange the group discussions at a time and place that make it as easy as possible for you. The interviews will last about an hour.

### **Do I have to take part?**

No, you do not have to take part in the study, it is completely voluntary. The service you receive from Quarriers will not be affected by whether or not you choose to take part in this study. If you decide to take part, but later change your mind that's fine. Just tell your worker, you do not have to give a reason why.

### **How we look after the information you give us?**

The information you give to the research team will not have your name or address and you will not be identified in any reports that come from this study. The information you provide us will be used only to work out what might help other children from going missing from care. When we have finished the study, which could take up to two years, we will publish a report and a journal article, but these will not use any names so no-one will know that you have taken part in the study or been involved with Quarriers. We will give you a copy of the report if you would like it and we will publish

short summaries on the websites of NSPCC, Quarriers and our funders (an organisation called BASPCAN).

If, during the session, you provide information that makes us think that you or other children or young people are at risk, we may need to tell other professionals, but we will share this with you first.

**What happens if you agree to take part in the study?**

If you would like to take part in this part of the study and agree to us using your information then please read each of the sections on the consent sheet provided. Tick the box if you agree with the statement and then sign the form at the bottom. You will be given a copy of this form.

We will give you a shopping voucher worth £20.00 to say thank you for taking part.

**Is there anyone not involved in the research I could discuss this with?**

Of course. Sandra McFadyen is one of our service managers at Quarriers. She knows all about the research but isn't involved in it. If you want to talk to her about it, you can ring her or email her on 01505 616000 or [sandra.mcfadyen@quarriers.org.uk](mailto:sandra.mcfadyen@quarriers.org.uk)

**What should I do if I am worried about this study or if I wish to make a complaint?**

The research is headed up by Professor Julie Taylor who should be contacted in the first instance if you are concerned about any part of the study. You can get her by email or telephone: [Julie.Taylor@NSPCC.org.uk](mailto:Julie.Taylor@NSPCC.org.uk) or 0131 651 6486

## **Appendix 3: Focus Group Interview Schedule**



1. Introduction
  - a. Self
  - b. CB-J
  
2. Ground rules
  - a. Consent forms
  - b. Confidentiality/anonymity
  - c. Right to leave
  - d. Recording
  
3. Prompt questions:
  - a. Byron and Nayla give examples of their own situations
  - b. Can one of you tell me about a time when you ran away? Tell us about what happened.
  - c. What happened before this?
  - d. What happened afterwards? (focusing on support)
  - e. How did you feel?
  
  - f. What about everyone else? Can someone else tell us about their experiences?
  - g. What advice would you offer young people who are considering absconding from care? What advice would you give to us as the research team so that we can influence the system?
  
4. Close
  - a. De-brief
  - b. Help lines
  - c. Thank you (give out thank you gestures)

## Appendix 4: Data Analysis Framework

Theme	Category	Sub-category	Total
<b>Reasons for running away</b>			
	Authority/power of others		
		Rules and restricted time	5
		Lack of freedom	3
		Confined and restrained	2
		Treated like a child	1
	Friction with others		
		Arguments with key workers	3
		Arguments with parents	3
		Friction with other young people	1
	Isolation		
		Wanting to be with friends	4
		Missing the family	4
	Environmental		
		Boredom	5
		Peer pressure	4
		Lack of privacy	1
<b>Patterns of running away</b>			
	Where we go		
		Friends	6
		Walk the streets	2
		Home to family	1
		Festive period time of risk	2
	What we do while away		
		Roam the streets	4
		Take drugs/alcohol	4
		Steal	1
<b>Consequences</b>			
	Authority/power of others		
		Supervised pocket money	4
		Being locked in	2
		Being grounded	2
		Letters and calls withheld	1
	Discussions initiated		
		Police talk to us	3
	There were no consequences		3
<b>Actual strategies used to prevent absconding</b>			
	Authority/power of others		
		Being locked in	2
		Others standing guard	2
		Confiscating shoes	2
	Discussions initiated		
		Being talked out of it	2

		Being listened to and not judging	1
<b>Potential strategies to prevent absconding</b>			
	Authority/power of others		
		Not being 'in your face'	4
		Being talked to, not told	4
		More freedom with time	3
		There should be more rules and boundaries	2
	Preventing friction		
		Having a good role model	2
		Insight/attunement of staff	2
	Preventing isolation		
		Feeling like people care about you	5
		Contact with family/overnight stays	3
	Environment		
		More activities	4
		Respecting privacy	2
<b>Advice for young people</b>			
	Isolation		
		Talk to somebody	3
	Environment		
		Stay safe	1
		Keep busy	1
<b>Advice for workers</b>			
	Authority/power of others		
		Treat young people as adults	2
	Isolation		
		Talk to young people	2
	Environment		
		Provide activities	1