

Missing children

Summary report for children and young people



Ofsted inspects services for children such as schools, children's homes and foster care services.

Ofsted inspectors recently looked into what 10 local authorities and other organisations in their area were doing to help children who go missing or are at risk of running away. This summary explains what the inspectors found and what Ofsted says needs to be improved.

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Introduction

According to police figures, around 360,000 children run away each year, although the real number is likely to be more, as not all cases are recorded. Children in care (sometimes called 'looked after children') are three times more likely to run away than other children.

Most children are safe and happy where they are living. However, some children are very unhappy where they are. Sometimes they miss their family and friends if they are living away from their home area. Some children feel they have to get away from upsetting problems, or from people that are harming them. Children who go missing, however, are often at risk of further harm.

Ofsted, which inspects services for children such as schools, children's homes and foster care services, has published a report called *Missing children*. Inspectors explored what 10 local authorities and other organisations were doing to help children who go missing or are at risk of running away. Inspectors examined 105 cases. They also listened to the views of children and young people, carers, and professionals from the local councils and other organisations, including the police.

This summary explains what the inspectors found and what Ofsted says needs to be improved. It includes a few examples of what young people told inspectors. These are in blue boxes.

What is being done well?

Inspectors saw some very good examples of services working well together. Professionals often tried very hard for a long time to help children who had run away or who were at risk of going missing.

Children who went missing tended to be helped the most when:

- the different organisations worked well together
- there was good support to the family or carers
- there were not many changes of workers
- children and young people were listened to.

Inspectors found some other things that were done well.

- Reports to the police of missing children were shared quickly with the people who needed to know.
- Some local councils had used legal action well – like issuing warning notices to adults about criminal offences they could be committing by having missing children staying with them. (This is called 'harbouring'.)
- Some councils had set up regular meetings between professionals who could share information about children who were most at risk of going missing, or help identify places and situations that could be risky for children

- Some good work was done, mainly in schools, to help children who might be thinking about running away. However, more could be done to warn children about the risks.

'I get on really well with my social worker; we 'click'... not like my previous social worker who I only saw at meetings. I hardly saw her.'

What needs to be improved?

- Too many local councils didn't know *how many* children go missing. Information systems were often unreliable and record-keeping was not good enough in most areas.
- Too many local councils didn't fully understand the reasons *why* children go missing. The views and experiences of children were not taken into account enough when planning services to help children who run away.
- The police didn't always share with other professionals what children told them during 'safe and well checks' to make sure a child was safe at home. It wasn't always clear to inspectors that these checks had been done.
- Inspectors didn't find enough evidence of professionals speaking to children after they returned home to find out more how they could help them to stay safe. These are called 'return interviews'.
- 'Safe and well checks' and 'return interviews' should always be carried out when a child returns home or is found after going missing.

'The staff at the children's home tried to talk to me about why I went missing. The more I went missing, the less they tried.'

- It was not always clear exactly what should be done to help specific children who were thought to be at risk from going missing.
- In children's homes, staff weren't always fully aware of the written instructions about what to do when children go missing. Managers didn't always make sure that procedures were being followed.
- Reports about looked after children going missing were not always shared with the local 'corporate parenting boards'. Corporate parents (for example, councillors) should know about issues and problems facing children who are in care.

Recommendations

The Ofsted *Missing children* report made four recommendations about things the inspectors thought should happen.

The government should:

- make sure that a single, nationwide system is in place to keep accurate, reliable and up-to-date information about incidents of children and young people going missing.

Local councils and the other organisations they work with should:

- look urgently at how well children at risk of running away or going missing are being helped
- then agree a plan of how best to help children at risk of running away or going missing
- make sure they keep their understanding of issues about missing children up to date. In particular, they should listen to, and take notice of, what children and young people have to say.

'When a child runs away they're running away from a problem, from a person, or something that's going on in the family. The social worker needs to ask questions, and listen to the answers.'

The full report of what the inspectors found was published on 8 February 2013. If you would like to look at this, you can find it at: www.ofsted.gov.uk/resources/120364.

You may also be interested in this report from the Children's Rights Director, published by Ofsted in 2012: *Running away: young people's views on running away from care*. You can find this at: www.ofsted.gov.uk/resources/120022.