

Report summary

Missing children

Summary

Children represented approximately two thirds of the estimated 360,000 missing person incidents in 2009–10. Children in care are three times more likely to go missing from their home than children who are not in care. However, due to the unreliability of available data, it is likely that the true scale of the problem is not fully understood.

A number of recent high-profile court cases concerning child sexual exploitation and high-profile inquiries have highlighted the vulnerability of children who go missing, and the associated risks of sexual exploitation. The government published proposals to tackle child sexual exploitation in November 2011 and announced urgent action to look at the quality of residential care for looked after children in July 2012.

This report explores the effectiveness of arrangements to safeguard children and young people, including those who are looked after by the local authority, who are at risk of going missing or running away from home. Inspectors visited a sample of 10 local authority areas. The report draws on evidence from 105 cases and from the views of children and young people, carers, and professionals from the local authority and from partner agencies.

The complex and varied reasons identified on a national basis why children go missing were reflected in the nature of the cases seen by inspectors. Children's histories included inadequate parenting, past or current abuse, bullying and domestic violence. Some children who were looked after had experienced several placement moves. Children who went missing were subjected to considerable associated risk, most often from sexual exploitation, drug and alcohol abuse, and becoming the victim or perpetrator of crime.

Inspectors saw evidence of some tenacious partnership working across relevant agencies to safeguard children at risk of going missing. Information was generally shared effectively when children were reported missing and there were some persistent efforts by professionals to engage children.

However, some inconsistency and gaps in practice meant that professionals were not always fully attuned to the needs of children who went missing. For example, it was not often clear whether checks, usually undertaken by police officers, to ensure that children were safe and well after returning home had been undertaken. When they had been, the outcomes of the checks were often not routinely shared with carers and professionals. Similarly, more in-depth return interviews with children by an independent person to explore the reasons why they had run away and to identify any support needs were rarely evident. Updated risk management plans that identified specific actions to be taken to prevent children from running away and to keep them safe were rarely evident in the cases seen by inspectors.

The lack of routine attention to learning from the experiences of children also contributed to a generally weak understanding at a senior level of the reasons why children go missing. Strategic planning of services to reduce the number of children who go missing was underdeveloped in most local authorities and was hindered further by some poor record management and unreliable data systems. There was, however, an increasing awareness of several related issues, particularly sexual exploitation, which was supported by relevant training.

Nearly all of the cases tracked by inspectors displayed a sensitive and child-centred approach to protecting children who went missing. However, some evidence heard by inspectors about some professionals' attitudes suggests there is no room for complacency.

Key findings

- There is little or no reliable data on missing children, including numbers, characteristics and trends. In most areas and at a national level, the data on incidence reported by local authorities and that reported by the police are very significantly different.
- Common features of cases where the frequency of missing incidents had reduced and children's outcomes had improved were:
 - effective multi-agency cooperation
 - timely and persistent family support
 - continuity of workers
 - listening to and taking account of the views of children.
- Multi-agency working was embedded most strongly at an operational level and inspectors saw evidence of effective and tenacious joint working between professionals to keep children safe.
- A strategic approach to addressing the needs of missing children was less well developed. In nearly all authorities visited there was not a full understanding at a senior level of the reasons why children go missing. Most authorities were unable to evidence the impact of different interventions.

- Poor recording practices meant that local authorities struggled to collate and analyse children's views accurately in order to inform service planning.
- While most procedures and protocols were clear and in place, staff awareness and understanding of those procedures and protocols were variable. Compliance with procedures was generally not effectively tracked by managers.
- Reports to the police of incidents of missing children were shared with relevant agencies promptly.
- Safe and well checks, which should be carried out by police whenever a missing child returns or is found, were not always evident on case file records. In most local authorities visited, the outcomes of those checks that do take place were not routinely shared with all relevant professionals.
- In nearly all local authorities the limited evidence of effective return interviews with children undermined the capacity of professionals to learn more about the reasons and risks attached to children-missing episodes.
- In the cases seen, risk assessments and risk management plans were rarely evident. Those that were in place were often insufficiently specific or up-to-date.
- There was evidence in some local authorities of the effective use of legal action to safeguard children, such as harbouring notices issued to adults who might present a risk.
- Placement instability was a feature of at least a third of the 30 tracked cases where the children were looked after.
- The attention given within procedures to cross-boundary issues, such as looked after children placed out of authority, was variable. Information-sharing between professionals and placement providers based outside the local authority area was of variable quality.
- Reports about missing looked after children were not routinely provided to corporate parenting boards in all local authorities.
- Inspectors saw evidence of some imaginative preventative work, mainly in schools, but the degree of attention paid to prevention was variable.

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