Findings and Recommendations

Focus Group Research

RADAR (Running Away: Drivers, Awareness, and Responses) is a European project on running away coordinated by Missing Children Europe and launched in March 2020. The ultimate objective of the project is to achieve genuine progress in the awareness, understanding, and responses for children running away and to provide them with better protection and care across the EU.

Focus groups were conducted with 28 children and young people who have experience of running away or of being at risk of running away in Belgium, Greece, Poland, and Portugal. The aim of the focus groups was to understand the key drivers and Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs) that lead to running away in each country and to identify the specificities that relate to gender differences. We wanted to further explore the ACEs that young runaways are exposed to while away from home and to understand how child protection systems can support resilience after a first episode of running away.

Key findings

Understanding why children runaway

- Running away is frequently a symptom of a combination of one or more Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs) present in their lives. The most common ACEs identified are violence, abuse, and mental health. The top three contexts identified where ACEs are most likely to occur are the family home, the care home, and school.
- Two main trajectories are identified when researching the motivations behind running away that can also shed light on existing ACEs, these trajectories are running *from something* and *running towards something*.

The trajectory of running from something

- Running away is a means to distance themselves from a challenging situation, it is a call for help, an attempt to draw attention and raise awareness about a problem in the hopes that it will bring change.
- For young people living in care homes, it is an attempt to obtain love and attention from the staff in their home, and an attempt to find out if someone will worry and look for them.
- For young carers, specifically runaway girls, it is an attempt to get away from their caring responsibilities that have become too heavy to bear. Young runaways who follow this trajectory often express feeling guilt and worry towards the siblings that they left behind.

The trajectory of running towards something

- Running away becomes an attempt to fulfill their desire to get closer to a person or a situation that appears more desirable than their current situation, as well as a desire for empowerment and a yearning for an independent way of life.
- For young people living in care homes, running away becomes an attempt to rejoin their family or somebody close to them. This trajectory bears more weight against the backdrop of the pandemic where contact and visitation with family will have been limited or restricted altogether for children in care.

Other experiences that lead to running away

- Young people's mental health is a strong motivator for running away. For many of them, leaving is identified as the only possible response to their uneasiness and troubling state of mind. For this group of young people, running away may exacerbate existing or new mental health issues, mainly episodes of depression and suicidal thoughts.
- Children living in care homes expressed the difficulties of communal life and the tensions created by sharing their living environment with a large number of other children. Young people who follow this trajectory expressed that running away was a way to signal their distress and discontent, rather than a means to escape forever.

While away from home or care

- Running away is a source of confusion, stress, and anguish for many young people. Anger is also described as a common emotion, directed in particular at their parents or caregivers. The sense of guilt for leaving siblings behind but also people who they knew cared about them was identified.
- Runaway children did not always perceive the risks they were exposed to while away from home but could, in hindsight, put their experiences into perspective at a later time. However, some children, particularly runaway girls, described feeling afraid of sleeping outdoors due to fear of who could approach them.
- Young people identified significant challenges in accessing basic needs such as food, water, and shelter, in particular the young people who left home for several consecutive days.
- Young people acknowledged their increased risk of exploitation and abuse while on the streets and described being offered food or shelter by people unknown to them in exchange for other things.

Returning home or to care

- The return home is identified as a delicate stage in the trajectory of runaway children which requires careful attention on behalf of families and professionals. Young people identified the 'moment of return' as a significant step influencing their decision to run away again or not.
- The determining factors include ways in which young people are received upon returning home and whether running away has brought about the desired change or attention to their situation that was sought. Responses such as indifference, rage, and rejection on behalf of caregivers and professionals can significantly strengthen the desire to run away again. Likewise, if young people return to the same situation they left from, they are more likely to reattempt at bringing about awareness and therefore run away again.
- Young people who were motivated to run away because of their mental health struggles described experiencing intense mental health challenges long after returning home, mainly episodes of depression and suicidal thoughts.

Barriers to accessing services

- Issues of trust between young people and adults form a significant barrier in accessing help. Causes for the lack of trust include the fear of being judged, concerns around professional confidentiality, previous negative experiences with adults and professionals, and the fear of not being believed.
- The fear of being judged is closely related to the feelings of shame described by young people. Feelings of shame are brought about by the stigma of being a victim of abuse or of facing increased challenges.
- Young people identified not being familiar with the support services available within their communities and described a sense of hesitation at the idea of reaching out to services they are not familiar with, in particular authoritative institutions such as police and social services.
- The timeliness of support services and the lengthy processes of multi-agency protocols are also key barriers in the decision of runaway children to access help.
- The fear of returning home or being sent back home also constitutes as a barrier, and young people described actively putting strategies in place to avoid drawing attention to themselves and hide from adults who were looking for them.

Interventions for prevention and support

- Caregivers and families remain the most important context for prevention and support work. Pillars that form a supportive environment for young people are identified as being open communication, listening and understanding, and a caring and compassionate relationship.
- Schools are considered a prime location for the diffusion of valuable information for runaway children and to achieve prevention on a large scale.
- Teachers are identified as professionals well placed to identify children at risk of or experiencing Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs) and acting as trusted adults to turn to. However, some young people call for more proactive accountability and efforts from schools and their staff.
- The identification of a 'trusted adult' is raised on numerous occasions. Young people seek a figure that is defined as 'their person' and identify them as someone who is available to them when they are in need. Key characteristics of the trusted adult closely resemble those of a parent and include non-judgmental attitudes, stability, and openness.
- Child hotlines and helplines as well as relevant NGOs are assessed as positive by young people, however their services and potential role in the lives of runaway children are not always clear.
- Police and law enforcement are identified as figures that can be involved in support and prevention by some young people but are regarded with reserve by others (this can depend from country to country). The boundaries enforced by police and judicial staff can be positive and helpful, however the timeline of intervention is identified as too lengthy and not proactive enough for runaway children.
- Peers are not always considered trustworthy figures due to their age and maturity, and because of the fear that they may share information disclosed to them with someone. Runaway children seeking support tend to perceive adults as more capable of helping them and protecting them.
- The need to establish a social link and to be part of a social fabric is identified as an important need for runaway children. This finding is closely linked with the need for an 'anchor' in their lives that can help prevent running away.
- Outreach services that help provide runaway children with shelter and basic needs are considered among the most important responses. For some young people, outreach services can be expanded to include emotional and psychological support which can help reintegration into family and social life.
- Dialogue and communication remain factors with significant influence on a young person's decision to run away.

Key recommendations

The following recommendations were put forward by the young people who participated in the focus groups and by the research team:

For interventions on prevention and support

- Including young people who have experience of running away in prevention programs and interventions. These 'Life-Experts', as defined by young people, serve to encourage runaway children to share their experiences and support other children in similarly challenging situations. This recommendation is closely linked to the recommendation of creating peer groups and peer mentors for runaway children by runaway children.
- Expanding resources for child hotlines and helplines and NGOs to help them improve the dissemination of valuable information for runaway children. On top of this, increasing efforts to connect children with these services is strongly called for.
- Investing in prevention work to begin at an early age so children can build up a 'toolbox' of valuable information.
- Creating awareness raising campaigns targeted at parents.
- Offering mediation for runaway children and their parents or caregivers.
- Improving the identification of children at risk of or experiencing Adverse Childhood Experiences is strongly recommended as a means to prevent running away.
- Improving the timeliness of responses by police and improving training by including topics on how to relate and interact with children and young people in difficult situations.
- Improving multi-agency working among professionals by reviewing the length of procedures in place and including public transport and other community services in multi-agency responses.
- Developing and raising awareness about safe spaces to which children at risk of running away can turn and which can serve as an alternative to running away. Such "preventative shelters" allow children to access support through their services, and help reduce the number of children going missing, as children can safely be "away" from home, while their whereabouts are known.
- Improving research on the connection between runaway children and gang involvement.
- Using social media platforms to develop creative messages and videos for the dissemination of information and campaigns.

For children living in care homes

- Maintaining regular contact between children in alternative care and their families and ensuring that any visitation or contact schedules are co-developed and agreed upon with the child.
- Improving the quality of alternative care by strengthening the role of staff members in care homes as trusted adults for children, reducing the number of children living together in a care home and creating a child-centered, participatory and inclusive environment where children are consulted and invited to participate in developing house rules and protocols.
- Investment in deinstitutionalization and quality, family-based alternative care.

For children of the LGBTQ+ community

- Increasing dissemination of valuable information for children of the LGBTQ+ community, whether through child hotlines and helplines, schools, or social media.
- Including organizations working with the LGBTQ+ community in the development of prevention strategies for runaway children and support interventions.
- Training relevant professionals on the different trajectory of runaway children from the LGBTQ+ community, reducing stigmatization or unconscious bias amongst professionals.

Findings and Recommendations

The Delphi Study

The RADAR (Running Away: Drivers, Awareness, and Responses) project is a European project on running away coordinated by Missing Children Europe and launched in March 2020. The project aims to achieve genuine progress in the awareness, understanding, and responses for children running away and to provide them with better protection and care across the EU.

As part of the research that informs RADAR, a Delphi study was conducted in two rounds with professionals from 15 European countries. The countries represented are: Austria, Croatia, Denmark, Estonia, France, Greece, Italy, Lithuania, Luxembourg, the Netherlands, Poland, Slovenia, Spain, Ukraine, and the United Kingdom. The areas of work of the participants vary and include social care, law enforcement and security, education, and charity. Around 95% of participants work on a regular basis with (institutions that support) runaway children.

Key findings and recommendations

The following key findings and recommendations were identified by participating Experts in the Delphi study.

Key finding 1:

Runaway children are frequently subject to stigmatisation by professionals and may loose the opportunity to receive support as a result. Children with multiples incidents of running away are identified as those most likely to experience stigmatisation by professionals. Underlying causes are listed as:

a. Provoking a feeling of failure and frustration among professionals (particularly when working with repeat runaway children).

b. The misconception that runaway children are to blame for running away and for the risks they are exposed to during the episode of running away.

c. The belief that runaway children will not change their behaviour and there is little that can be done to support them.

d. Runaway children are sometimes not perceived as minors at risk.

Recommendations:

• Initiating a process of de-stigmatisation of runaway children and children at risk of running away will help change the existing perception. Proposed steps to achieve this include campaigns for prevention on larger scales, and developing ethical and anti-stigma policies for professionals in local authorities, public bodies and organisations.

• Continuing education and training on new risks and research should be a necessary requirement to enhance professionals' ability to understand why children run away. Proposed training needs for professionals are Trauma and dissociative processes, Adolescent Psychology, Detection of abuse, and Mental health. Another key training area proposed is to ensure they can effectively respond to the rapid evolvement of new technologies used for grooming.

Key finding 2:

Runaway children of different groups (i.e. runaway migrant children, runaway children in care, etc.) are likely to experience different trajectories and be exposed to different risks. For example, girls who runaway and runaway children from the LGBTQ+ community are identified as a group at increased risk of sexual exploitation, compared to other groups of young runaways. Among young people more likely to runaway, children in alternative care were identified as one of the most at-risk groups of young people with increased probability of running away and experiencing difficulty in accessing help.

Recommendations:

• Raising awareness and including training among professionals of the different at-risk groups of runaway children and how these influence their runaway trajectories. Applying the element of *training to train others* was proposed to help professionals disseminate the information and skills acquired. Training to train others provides professionals with the tools to raise awareness and develop skills of caregivers, children and other professionals involved.

• In addition to investing in deinstitutionalisation and in family-based alternative care, we need to improve security and comfort in children's homes to make them smaller, child-centred, and to help young people find stability in the place they live. For children living in care homes, this includes maintaining a continuous link with the same social worker over time and reducing the number of moves from placement to placement.

Key finding 3:

A barrier to accessing help for runaway children is the lack of trust between young people and the adults in their lives. The lack of trust is considered to be a consequence of different factors, including the child's history with professionals, contextual factors, or factors related to adolescence.

Recommendations:

- Creating and strengthening the bond of trust between runaway children and adults. A key element to this is improving the training of professionals on skills that involve effectively listening to and communicating with children.

- Promoting access to help and to professionals through online platforms and existing technologies that increase accessability to all children and young people, and help overcome barriers.

- Introducing Life-Experts (young people with past experience of running away) to act as mentors for children currently experiencing similar problems, or as spokespersons in interventions and campaigns.

Key finding 4:

Schools have an important role to play in prevention and in supporting youth at risk, and the expectation that teachers should be trusted adults for young people was reinforced by participants. However, participants also highlighted that schools cannot replace the role of families which remains for many of them the first place for intervention to prevent running away.

Recommendations:

- Focusing on family support work as a key element for effective prevention work, this should include training and awareness raising for caregivers on the topic of Communicating with adolescents and supporting children's mental health and wellbeing? running away, improving communication within families, and encouraging parents to seek support through a non-judgemental approach.

- Strengthening the relationship between students and teachers to help them become trusted adults, and introducing counsellors or staff with mental health training as regular school members.

Other key recommendations:

- Developing prevention campaigns that focus on a positive message. The use of television, social networks and schools are considered the most effective channels for the dissemination of campaigns. The use of true stories by runaways and indicating the support that is available to build a sense of trust with professionals are proposed themes. Where possible, campaigns should be developed in close collaboration with runaway children, caregivers and professionals.

- Improving the quality and access to reception centres so young people have a safe place to stay during their episode of running away. More in-depth recommendations on how to improve such centres were made in the report and include (but are not limited to) building staff capacity and financial resources, encouraging ongoing contact with families, and the involvement of (ex-)runaway children.