

# Running the Risks:

The links between gang involvement and young people going missing

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catch  
22

In partnership with:

missing  
people

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# Foreword

**Chris Wright,  
Chief Executive, Catch22**



The growing public concern around child sexual exploitation (CSE) has led to a focus on the link between CSE and going missing and this is now beginning to have an impact on policy and practice. The link between gang involvement and young people going missing from home and/or at risk of CSE has not had the same policy attention. This report shows that too often children and young people are still being criminalised rather than safeguarded, and the needs and risks surrounding gang-involvement not recognised.

Our findings highlight the coercion and exploitation affecting children and young people who become involved with gangs. We found evidence of young people both overtly coerced and more subtly exploited into travelling to unknown areas to sell drugs for weeks at a time in what has been described as 'county lines'.

For girls involved with gangs, the risk of going missing was linked to child sexual exploitation (CSE) as well as the illegal drugs market. There is currently no national data available to gauge the prevalence of this issue, it is an unseen problem, hidden from services and with damaging consequences for children and young people.

Our research highlights the need for all professionals working with this group, regardless of their sector to be trained to understand the safeguarding needs of those affected by gangs. In order for this to happen, multi-agency working that bridges the gap between safeguarding and criminal justice is essential.

Promising approaches are clear in areas such as Greater Manchester and Greenwich where services are working in partnership to ensure that safeguarding is prioritised alongside a criminal justice response. However, with no specific Government guidance on the link between gang-involvement and going missing this is happening in isolated pockets rather than on a national scale.

Only through multi-agency working across Local-Authority boundaries, and across all sectors will we be able to understand the scale of the problem and address it effectively.

## Catch22

A forward-looking social business, Catch22 has more than 200 years' experience of providing public services that help people turn their lives around. We work with troubled and vulnerable people, helping them to steer clear of crime or substance misuse, do the best they can in education or employment, and play a full part in their family or community.

Catch22 missing and runaways services work alongside children, young people, their families and the police to find out what has caused them to run away and prevent them from running away again in the future.

The Catch22 Dawes Unit brings together research, policy and practice in order to understand how to reduce the harm caused by gangs and gang-related crime.

[www.catch-22.org.uk](http://www.catch-22.org.uk)



## **We would like to thank Missing People for their support in the production of this report.**

### **Jo Youle, Chief Executive, Missing People**

It's hard to imagine the fear and hurt of a child coerced into a gang and subject to abuse and exploitation. We know that children and young people find it hard to reach out for help from such a dark place.

I hope that all of us, professionals across a wide range of sectors, and those in positions of policy influence, will heed the recommendations in this report. We must not make judgements between children who some believe are 'genuinely' exploited and those who people think make a 'choice'. I call on us all to commit to working together, and working better, to safeguard vulnerable children and young people.

When a young person returns from being missing this is not the end of the story. It's an opportunity for learning and understanding what happened whilst they were missing. It is a time for care and support. Each and every missing incident gives us an opportunity to reach out to a young person, to find out what's going on, and to offer them the help and support they desperately need.

### **Missing People**

Missing People provides free, 24-hour confidential support, help and advice by phone, email, text and online. We listen in confidence, and support missing people and their families to explore their options and, where possible, to reconnect. For those left behind we provide specialised support to ease the heartache and confusion, and help search for their missing loved ones. The charity coordinates a UK-wide network of people, businesses and media to join the search for the estimated 250,000 people who go missing each year.

116 000 is the number for advice, support, help and options if you, or someone you care about, goes missing. Call or text the charity Missing People on 116 000 – it's free, 24 hour and confidential.

**[www.missingpeople.org.uk](http://www.missingpeople.org.uk)**

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# executive summary

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## I. Executive summary

Children and young people experiencing gang involvement and going missing are at risk of sexual exploitation and serious violence. This research provides an overview for the first time of a group who are rarely reported, and often misunderstood. The report explores some of the key links between gang involvement, those who go missing from home and/or are at risk of child sexual exploitation (CSE), and the overarching issues affecting this group. The report examines the extent to which the experiences and needs of this group are distinct and present specific challenges for the provision of support.

### I.1 Research context

The UK Missing Persons Bureau estimates that as many as 160,000 children and young people are reported missing every year.<sup>1</sup> Research from the Children's Society over the past decade has shed some light on this issue and the recent spotlight on CSE has pushed the issue of children and young people going missing up the political agenda. However, the link between gang involvement and going missing from home is still very much unknown, with no specific research or national data collected indicating how many are affected.

Using a survey of professionals from a wide range of regions and sectors, along with interviews and focus groups with professionals and young people, this research provides an overview of current policy and practice in this area. Challenges regarding the current approach to support are explored, focusing on issues around relocation and care placements, under-reporting and the need for a safeguarding approach. The report also highlights promising approaches and good practice in working with this group.

## 1.2 Key findings

- **Services throughout the country have been in contact with children and young people going missing who are also involved with gangs.** 125 of 160 respondents to our national survey had been in contact with this group.
- **Exploitation and coercion are overarching themes linking all the factors pushing or pulling gang-involved children and young people to run away.** Overt coercion affects young people at the same time as far more subtle exploitation through the 'pull' factors of money, affection and status.
- **The market in illegal drugs is a key activity for gang-involved children and young people.** Children and young people are being recruited to travel to areas away from home to sell drugs. In the worst cases this can be a form of child trafficking as young people find themselves in unsafe environments, completely isolated and with no means of contacting anyone for support.
- **Missing episodes linked to relationships and sexual exploitation tended to be specific to females.** Missing episodes linked to the drugs market, debt and fear can be experienced by both genders.
- **Children and young people go missing as they are forced to pay off debts to gang members.** Running away is seen as a way of escaping the problem.
- **The link between gang-involvement and going missing is a problem that goes across county lines.** To address it, agencies need to work across as well as within Local Authorities.

## 1.3 Areas for improvement

- **There is currently no specific government guidance regarding the link between gang involvement and going missing.** Local authorities have no specific duties and there is no national data collected to shed light on the national picture.
- **Multi-agency working is a varied picture.** Without specific government guidance a specific focus and leadership are required to bring organisations together nationally and locally.
- **There is a clear tendency to criminalise children and young people, and regard repeated missing episodes as evidence of lower risk rather than a need for safeguarding.** Similar to the findings of investigations into CSE, professionals made distinctions between those who were 'genuinely' exploited and those who were perceived as making a 'choice' to engage in criminal behaviours.
- **Whilst missing incidents for children and young people are generally under-reported, this is particularly acute for gang-involved young people.** In many cases parents were reluctant to report missing incidents to the police due to the guilt, shame and fear surrounding gang involvement.
- **Lack of engagement is a key barrier to providing effective support.** There is a clear role for specialist services with the expertise and understanding to support children and young people.
- **There is evidence of gang-involved children and young people placed into care out of area with little care planning or support.** Placing gang-involved young people in areas affected by gang-related crime can draw them back into the same activity they are leaving behind.

## 1.4 Promising practice

- **Relationship building and working with children and young people to build up their resilience has had an impact in helping them to lead more positive lives.** Specialist gang intervention services provided by the voluntary and community sector enable children and young people to open up and for plans to be put in place to support them.
- **Where multi-agency arrangements bring together gang and missing services this has allowed informed decisions to be made about the best person to work with those affected by these issues.** In Greater Manchester, the Children's Society works with the Integrated Gang Management Unit and VCSE gang intervention projects to ensure the most appropriate professional works with each young person who goes missing.
- **Police forces with a police missing persons co-ordinator role in place have been able to make the connections between missing episodes and gang involvement as well as CSE.** In Margate, the police missing persons co-ordinator is able to map children and young people affected by gang-involvement and going missing and coordinate a multi-agency response.
- **Where Local Authorities commission return home interviews on a cross-local authority basis, this has allowed better use of resources as well as better safeguarding young people.** Catch22's Pan-Cheshire Missing and Child Sexual Exploitation Service works across four local authorities, but under one police authority, overcoming some of the challenges in multi-agency working across local authority boundaries.

## 1.5 Conclusion and recommendations

Our research indicates that adolescent-specific risks such as going missing from home, gang involvement and CSE need new approaches in terms of safeguarding, interventions and social care. Children and young people who experience these risks are too often criminalised rather than receiving a safeguarding response, and the risk-taking behaviour that is an inherent part of adolescent development is interpreted as a 'choice' with young people 'putting themselves in harm's way'. It is essential that criminal justice, gangs and children's social care services do not work in silos but work in partnership to provide the most effective response. Our recommendations include the importance of:

- **Understanding and using data:** Police forces should collect and use data on children and young people going missing and involved with gangs, they should work across county boundaries to share information and join up plans where appropriate. Local safeguarding children's boards (LSCBs) should undertake mapping locally in partnership with local criminal justice boards (LCJBs). Police and Crime Commissioners should drive forward a joined-up approach to collecting and sharing this data in partnership with LSCBs and LCJBs and ensuring that joint actions are agreed to improve policy and practice.
- **Early identification and intervention after missing incidents:** LSCBs should work with police, local authorities, and VCSE organisations to ensure that those working with missing children and young people are trained to understand the risks and needs of gang-involved young people, and that information from return interviews is shared quickly and effectively to inform interventions.
- **Safeguarding:** Government, LSCBs and LCJBs should work together to ensure that national and local guidance bridges the gap between community safety and safeguarding to drive better multi-agency working. Police and Local Authorities should use co-location of services where possible to encourage effective partnership working.
- **Building relationships to drive change:** Local Authorities should ensure that all interventions and support for gang-involved young people prioritise strong relationships, ensuring consistency, persistence and time to build trust. Professionals from all sectors working with young people affected by gang-involvement and going missing should be trained to understand and support this group effectively.
- **Relocation and the care system.** Government should fund research into the way the care system works for those affected by gangs, CSE and going missing. Government should work with Local Authorities and the VCSE to promote innovation in the care system for this group and investigate the use of specialist foster placements for gang-involved children and young people.





# introduction

## 2. Introduction

The UK Missing Persons Bureau estimates that as many as 160,000 children and young people are reported missing every year.<sup>2</sup> Analysis of a series of large-scale self-report surveys of young people conducted by the Children's Society suggests that between 80,000 and 100,000 children aged under 16 years run away overnight every year.<sup>3</sup> Research from the Children's Society over the past decade has shed some light on the issue and the recent spotlight on CSE has pushed the issue of young people going missing up the political agenda. However, the link between gang involvement and going missing is still very much unknown. To date there has been no research exploring this link specifically, and there is no national data collected which could indicate how many children and young people this issue affects.

Given the lack of attention to the issue it is unsurprising that there is no government guidance on addressing this group of children and young people. However, this research comes during a period of national focus on child safeguarding, partly due to the numerous high-profile inquiries on CSE.<sup>4</sup> This debate foregrounds the need to acknowledge that all young people up to the age of 18 are children and must be safeguarded by society. Whilst adolescents may have different risks and needs, these are just as important and dangerous as those affecting younger children. When these issues are viewed within this context, and seen as involving adolescent-specific risks and exploitation that works both overtly through coercion and more subtly through the pull factors of money, affection and status, it is clear that there is already a relevant national discussion.

This research provides an overview of this issue for the first time, highlighting a group of children and young people who are rarely reported missing

and are often misunderstood. The report explores some of the key links between gang involvement and going missing from home or care, as well as the overarching issues affecting this group. It examines the extent to which the experiences and needs of this group are distinct and present specific challenges for the provision of support.

Using a survey of professionals from a wide range of regions and sectors, along with interviews and focus groups with professionals and young people, this research provides an overview of the current policy and practice in this area. Challenges and difficulties with the current approach to support are explored, focusing on issues around relocation and care placements, under-reporting and the need for a safeguarding approach. The report also highlights promising approaches and current good practice in working with this group. Missing episodes, when understood and responded to quickly, can prove to be a key warning sign and an opportunity for effective intervention, but too often rather than being safeguarded, children and young people receive a criminal justice response and their exploitation is ignored.

The research points to a wider issue with support for children and young people, as professionals struggle to deal with adolescents who are pulled towards risky situations. Approaches that go against the grain of adolescent development and growing autonomy, diverging into criminal or heavy-handed child protection responses, can do more harm than good.<sup>5</sup> There is a need to bring services together around a safeguarding response where professionals have the time, expertise, understanding and credibility to engage successfully and create relationships with children and young people to drive change.



## 2.1 What do we know about gang-involved children and young people going missing from home?

### Definitions

#### Association of Chief Police Officers/College of Policing definitions

**Missing:** 'Anyone whose whereabouts cannot be established and where the circumstances are out of character or the context suggests the person may be the subject of crime or at risk of harm to themselves or another.'<sup>6</sup>

**Absent:** 'A person not at a place where they are expected or required to be.'<sup>7</sup>

**Gang:** A relatively durable, predominantly street-based group of young people who (1) see themselves (and are seen by others) as a discernible group, and (2) engage in a range of criminal activity and violence.

They may also have any or all of the following features:

- (3) identify with or lay claim over territory
- (4) have some form of identifying structural feature
- (5) are in conflict with other, similar, gangs.<sup>8</sup>

### How might gang involvement and going missing be associated?

Reports over the last decade about children and young people going missing have provided a detailed picture of why young people go missing from home or care and the risks they face while they are away. In general, gang involvement has not been linked to this issue therefore the question of whether these groups overlap is difficult to explore. This chapter assesses the extent to which the same children and young people are affected by both issues and the direction of the risk relationship.

There are some key similarities between these groups in terms of demographics and risk factors. First, the peak ages of running away and of becoming involved with gangs is the same, at 15 years old.<sup>9,10</sup> Second, risk factors linked to parenting and difficult family environments are predictors of both going missing and gang involvement.<sup>11</sup> Children in care are three times more likely to run away than other children, with 10,000 children estimated to go missing from care each year.<sup>12</sup> For those living at home, recent family change is a key factor, with children and young people who have experienced a change in the adults they live with three times more likely than average to run away. Those living in low warmth–high conflict environments are also far more likely to run away, which indicates the importance of the quality of family relationships.<sup>13</sup>

Research on the risk factors for gang involvement associated with family environment and parenting is plentiful, therefore here the focus is on UK-based research. Recent longitudinal research from the University of Manchester explored the risk factors linked to gang involvement.<sup>14</sup> This showed that parents who knew their children's peers were less likely to have children who joined and remained in a gang, indicating that parental supervision and monitoring is an important risk factor for gang involvement. The Centre for Mental Health used data from point of arrest screening initiatives to

explore the factors that lead girls to join gangs.<sup>15</sup> They found that young women involved in gangs had a threefold greater risk of health and social difficulties than the average youth justice entrant. This included risk factors linked to family-based vulnerabilities such as neglect, conflict and violence.

The Centre for Mental Health also found a greater prevalence of risk factors linked to educational underachievement, poor mental health and emotional well-being amongst girls who were gang-involved. Again this indicates similarity to those adolescents who go missing from home, as in the 12 months before going missing those affected often have a low quality of life, including poor-quality relationships with friends, poor connections with school and low subjective well-being.<sup>16</sup>

### Do gang involvement and going missing act as risk factors for each other?

Research also indicates that experiencing one of these issues may increase the risk of experiencing the other. On the one hand, the Centre for Mental Health found that in comparison to average youth justice entrants, girls in gangs were just over four times more likely to have histories of going missing and they were also twice as likely to have been homeless.<sup>17</sup> On the other hand, research has also shown links between going missing and risk-taking behaviour such as offending. Young people who said they had been in trouble with the police were found to be significantly more likely to have run away in the Children's Society report *Still Running 2*.<sup>18</sup>

In her work on 'detached' young people (those who are away from parents and carers, are street involved and/or experience living on the streets for four weeks or more) Emily Smeaton found links to gang involvement in that half of all males she interviewed self-identified as belonging to a gang.<sup>19</sup> She identified a pull towards gang involvement for young people who are already detached, and found

that gang activities could trigger existing conflict with parents and carers, and lead to running away. Smeaton found that in some cases being part of a gang eased the process of leaving home and support was then provided by fellow gang members in the form of a place to stay, along with emotional support and physical protection. Gangs were also found to be a survival strategy for young people already on the streets, often providing protection from other gangs and groups.

A worrying development that has received some attention in the media is the phenomenon of 'county lines', where children and young people are 'recruited' in large urban centres and used to help set up drug markets in provincial towns.<sup>20</sup> This involves children and young people going missing in order to ferry drugs to a new area and even being set up in accommodation to deal drugs for a period of time. A recent study by Windle and colleagues explores this issue, arguing that saturation in the drug markets in London has led to more entrepreneurial dealers migrating to less overcrowded and competitive towns outside of London.<sup>21</sup> This was described by a gang member in the study as like 'working away for two weeks'. Windle and colleagues argue that this issue raises significant risks to children and young people and has yet to receive sufficient policy, media or academic attention.

Simon Harding begins to explore this phenomenon in his work *The Street Casino*.<sup>22</sup> He argues for conceptualising the gang as a 'social field' in which gang members are players in a lethal game. This conceptualisation is broad and structured, outlining the involvement of different 'tiers' of children and young people, including 'youngsters' (13–16), olders (16–21) and elders (21+). He uses the metaphor of a casino to illustrate how young people buy into the game and engage in gang activity as a way to build up 'street capital' or 'rep', which is the ultimate way to succeed and progress through the ranks. This field also puts gender centre stage, with girls a central part of the gang social field. He argues that:

'Olders and only very trustworthy youngers may transport drugs from SW9 to other parts of the UK, a process known as going "up country"'.<sup>23</sup>

This practice blurs the lines somewhat between the 'gangs' described above and organised criminal networks. The dispersed geographic location challenges the concept of gangs currently used, which relies on the concept of a 'street-based' group; it is also clearly organised activity rather than the fluid and dynamic groupings described by many gang researchers currently.

There is also a link between gang involvement and going missing by way of the connection to CSE. There is a well-known connection between CSE and young people missing from home or care.<sup>24</sup> Research from the Office of the Children's Commissioner (OCC) builds on the work of Carlene Firmin and the organisation ROTA that explored the experiences of girls involved with gangs.<sup>25</sup> This work showed the high risk of sexual exploitation faced by young women involved with gangs and the OCC work aimed to show the prevalence of CSE in gangs and groups at a national level. They found that 2409 children and young people were known to be victims of CSE by gangs and groups. Being missing from home or care is used as a key indicator of CSE for this research.<sup>26</sup>

To date, research aimed at understanding children and young people going missing has not addressed gang involvement and vice versa so it is not possible to estimate the overlap in these groups or assess the prevalence of those who are gang-involved going missing from home. However, these factors are similar in that they are adolescent-specific and involve engagement in, and even a pull towards, risky behaviours. The evidence indicates that there is likely to be overlap between the groups of young people going missing from home and those becoming involved in gangs. There are risk factors

in common as well as a seemingly two-way risk relationship in which going missing can be a risk factor for becoming gang-involved and vice versa.

### **What risks do children and young people face when they go missing or become gang-involved?**

The risks faced by children and young people who go missing and those who become gang-involved are explored in research, and it is possible that those who experience both of these factors experience compounded risk. For those who go missing, research focuses on the risks they face whilst they are away from home; one in six report sleeping on the streets or with someone they have just met for at least some of the time they are away.<sup>27</sup> Worryingly, one in nine young people report being hurt or harmed while away on the only or most recent occasion of running away.<sup>28</sup>

Children and young people also resort to survival strategies whilst away from home or care. Still Running 3 found that 12% of those who had been missing said that they had stolen in order to survive while away, 9% had begged and one in nine said that they had done 'other things' in order to survive. In total around 20% of those affected had used at least one of these three strategies whilst away.<sup>29</sup> Only a quarter of young runaways are likely to seek help while away, the most common sources of help being relatives, friends or friend's parents; only 5% of those who go missing overnight are likely to seek help from a professional.<sup>30</sup>

For gang involvement, research points to the immediate risks of being a gang member as well as the more long-term impact on a young person's life.<sup>31</sup> US research has shown that gang members are more likely to be both the subject of violent victimisation and to commit a violent offence.<sup>32</sup> Research by Pyrooz and colleagues found that gang

members are twice as likely to be both victims and offenders as non-gang members. This is accounted for due to the pattern of a single act of violence leading to violent retribution by the whole group. There is little UK research on this topic, although research by the University of Manchester contests the association between gang involvement and violence, finding that gang-involved young people were no more likely to be the subject of violent victimisation than non-gang members.<sup>33</sup>

There is more agreement on the fact that gang membership increases the chances of offending, antisocial behaviour and drug use.<sup>34</sup> Involvement in offending can have a long-term impact on a young person's ability to reach their potential, interrupting education and making a smooth transition into adulthood difficult. When a young person is affected by gang membership and also going missing, they should be regarded as seriously at risk.

## **2.2 The policy context**

Child safeguarding and the specific needs of adolescents have moved up the policy agenda in recent years due to the recent high-profile investigations into CSE in Rotherham, Rochdale, Derby, Oxfordshire and other towns and cities. These investigations have brought to public attention the experiences of exploited adolescents for whom the current child protection system is not working. As the details of these inquiries have come to light, questions have been asked about our approach to adolescent safeguarding in this country.

Louise Casey's report *Reflections on Child Sexual Exploitation* highlights overarching themes from the above investigations. She picked up on a culture of denial amongst professionals and the tendency to view children who are sexually exploited as having made a choice and therefore less deserving of

support.<sup>35</sup> These concerns reflect those in Professor Jay's inquiry into CSE in Rotherham, where those affected by CSE were described as 'putting themselves at risk'.<sup>36</sup> These reports also highlight concerns around the use of the care system to contain children's behaviour, as those affected were moved into secure accommodation in an attempt to disrupt their relationships, with very mixed results.

The Government's CSE action plan launched in March 2015 attempts to tackle some of these challenges.<sup>37</sup> Measures to address the culture of denial include a consultation on the extension of the offence of 'wilful neglect' to children's social care, education and elected lead members within local authorities, and the establishment of a national whistle-blowing portal. Local authorities have also been told to conduct a review of children's services assessment and decision-making tools, and to consider measures such as co-location and joint risk assessments to improve information-sharing practices.

These cases highlighted the link between CSE and missing incidents, and the need for better policy and practice around picking up on missing incidents as an indicator of vulnerability. The 2014 Ofsted thematic report into CSE found that local authorities were not using information about children missing or absenting themselves from school effectively, and that return interviews were not being conducted regularly or sufficiently exploring the risks linked to sexual exploitation.<sup>38</sup>

There has been a massive amount of scrutiny of policy and practice surrounding the issue of missing children and young people over the past three years, including the Joint All-Party Parliamentary Group (APPG) Inquiry on Children Who Go Missing from Care in 2012 and an Ofsted report in 2013.<sup>39</sup> The OCC reports are the most relevant to this work as they focus on those who are sexually exploited

in groups and gangs.<sup>40</sup> These have all reinforced findings around the safeguarding failures for young people that were highlighted through the CSE inquiries above. Some of the key findings for these reports are:

- erratic and poor-quality data collection, with little reliable data available on those who go missing from home or care
- a lack of effective multi-agency working to bring together services dealing with those at risk of going missing from home or care
- little evidence that return interviews or safe and well checks are taking place after missing incidents or that risk management plans are being developed or acted on for looked-after children
- issues around the quality and stability of care placements and the low quality of care planning for those placed out of area
- evidence of cross-boundary issues for looked-after children, with authorities not knowing how many children have been placed locally from other areas
- problematic attitudes of professionals towards children and young people where repeated missing episodes are not regarded as evidence of increased risk and incidents of sexual exploitation are regarded as a 'lifestyle choice'.

These reports were followed by a Government consultation on the statutory guidance for missing and runaways, and updated guidance published in 2014.<sup>41</sup> The current guidance puts a new emphasis on return interviews, stating that all children and young people should be offered one, preferably from an independent organisation, within 72 hours of them returning to their home or care setting. The new guidance also highlights the new 'absent'

category that the police have been rolling out since 2013, which refers to 'a person not at a place where they are expected or required to be'.<sup>42</sup> This category allows police to prioritise cases on the basis of ongoing risk assessment.

The policy and scrutiny focused on issues around missing children and young people has not touched on the issue of gangs and there are no specific policy recommendations or guidance on supporting those who experience both of these issues. The Ending Gang and Youth Violence (EGYV) initiative is a cross-Government project launched in 2011 in the wake of the riots.<sup>43</sup> This has been the main source of policy with regard to preventing and reducing gang involvement, supporting local areas to improve identification, multi-agency working and interventions. EGYV identified 33 areas initially and a further ten areas in 2014 that are particularly affected by gangs. A network of over 70 expert practitioners was created to work with local areas and provide 'peer reviews' analysing their current approach to gangs and how it could be improved. In addition, the Government provided funding for young people's advocates to support young women affected by gang-related violence or exploitation.

Policy addressing gangs and youth violence has not directly addressed the link between gang involvement and going missing, although recent guidance has begun to touch on the issue of county lines. The 2014 Mayor's Office for Policing and Crime Gangs and Youth Violence strategy does identify the issue of missing episodes within London, and highlights the need for multi-agency safeguarding hubs to identify missing episodes as a risk for gang involvement.<sup>44</sup> In addition, the most recent EGYV annual report addresses the link between gangs and organised crime, and the issue of county lines.<sup>45</sup> This programme has begun to address the issue for local areas through the development of a county lines toolkit and the provision of targeted support

to those areas affected by this issue. Nationally, work is going on with the National Crime Agency and national policing leads to develop a national intelligence assessment and response to the issue.

The work of the OCC is relevant to both of these cohorts, although the focus on sexual exploitation within a gang context is more relevant to girls and is narrower than the scope of this report. This work has developed the See Me, Hear Me framework for a child-centred approach to protecting children, and the principles for effective practice are the only piece of guidance which currently spans these two groups.<sup>46</sup> The principles outline a new way of working with and safeguarding children and young people through ensuring their participation, creating enduring relationships and support, making their interests the top priority and effective information sharing between agencies.

### Working with adolescents

An overarching theme of the scrutiny of police and practice in this area has been problematic attitudes to adolescents. The high-profile failures to safeguard adolescents experiencing CSE often seemed to revolve around not engaging with the those affected and not taking their experiences seriously. In Ann Coffey MP's report *Real Voices* she argues that far too often children who experience CSE are blamed for being a victim.<sup>47</sup> The need to change how we respond to the specific needs of adolescents is recognised at a strategic level by the Association of Directors of Children's Services (ADCS).<sup>48</sup> Rethinking support for adolescents in or on the edge of care is one of the driving forces behind the Department for Education Children's Social Care Innovation Programme, which is funding new approaches to improve outcomes for this age group.<sup>49</sup>

A recent report by the organisation Research in Practice assesses some of the issues with the care of adolescents in the UK, and finds a systematic failure to safeguard and support them.<sup>50</sup> In particular this report points to a number of inadequacies in the current system of support for adolescents, including:

- many still find it hard to disclose the risks they are experiencing
- authentic and sufficiently intensive long-term relationships are often not part of the service response
- the risks facing older young people are often minimised by professionals
- the risks that differ most significantly from those faced by younger children are often ignored by existing systems or inappropriate responses are applied
- interventions are often used which 'go against the grain' of young people's agency and development
- care placements too often place children and young people at risk and break resilience-promoting factors
- too few young people are offered effective support to recover from the impact of harm and to prevent re-victimisation
- system structures can result in young people feeling stigmatised and labelled.

This report outlines a new approach to adolescents on the basis that the current child protection frame of reference was developed primarily for younger children. The risks facing adolescents are highlighted in this report to be complex, wide-ranging and qualitatively different to those affecting

younger children. The report argues that current systems de-prioritise adolescent risk, treating adolescents as more resilient and the risks facing this age-group as less harmful than those affecting younger children. In reality the risks affecting adolescents can be longer-term and more harmful than those affecting children.

Adolescence is a time of huge change for young people, when risk-taking actually becomes vital for learning and development. Social relationships are also changing and peers take on more importance at this time than at any other time of life. This report highlights the interaction between risk-taking and the peer group:

**‘The peer group can heighten vulnerability to risk. Sensation-seeking and peer pressure influence adolescent criminal behaviour, for example, but not that of adults.’<sup>51</sup>**

The report argues that growing autonomy, risk-taking and the peer group are all essential components of adolescent development. However,

current approaches tend to go against the grain of this development. The principles embraced by the OCC and those highlighted by the Research in Practice report above are an essential context to understand practice in this area.

Gang involvement and going missing are similar in the way that they affect adolescents, and fit into this pattern of growing autonomy and a pull towards risk-taking. They present a challenge to the traditional child-protection framework, and call for new and innovative ways of working with adolescents rather than ‘doing to’ them. The policy framework is currently at a pivotal point following the Munro review.<sup>52</sup> Initiatives like the Department for Education Innovation Fund are challenging the whole social care landscape and new ways of doing things are very much on the table. In considering adolescent-specific risks of going missing and gang involvement this is an opportunity to understand better some of challenges and difficulties the current system has in supporting adolescents, and how to move forward.

## Research questions

1. Are there links between gang involvement and going missing?
2. What forms does the relationship between gang involvement and going missing take? Does it vary according to gender?
3. What are the consequences if these children and young people do not come to the attention of services?
4. What are the challenges of working with children and young people experiencing gang involvement and going missing?
5. What would make it easier to work with children and young people experiencing gang involvement and going missing?
6. What are the examples of best practice in working with these children and young people?

## 2.3 Methodology

Given the relative lack of research in this area, a fairly exploratory, mixed-methods approach was taken to this project. There were five components to the work:

**1. Survey of professionals:** A survey was used to gather data on whether there are specific links between gang involvement and going missing from home, and what the push and pull factors were for children and young people. It also aimed to explore the challenges faced by professionals supporting young people, and their recommendations and thoughts about how to improve work in this area. It was necessary to have a wide net for the survey in order to maximise the chance of accessing professionals in contact with those experiencing gang involvement and going missing. The survey was sent out to professionals identified as most likely to have contact with the key children and young people in the 33 EGYV areas. This included agencies and services from a variety of sectors, including police, missing and runaways services, gang intervention services, local authority employees in community safety and social care, youth offending teams and the police. The survey was also sent out more broadly through pre-existing, subject-specific networks such as the National Working Group. Missing People also circulated the survey to police forces via their established networks.

The survey data was collected through Survey Monkey and then cleaned and analysed using SPSS. A limitation to this data is that it was disseminated as widely as possible without a clear sampling frame, therefore although the data can give indications of whether professionals are in contact with this group and their experiences and thoughts, it cannot provide evidence of the prevalence of this issue nationally. One hundred and sixty full responses were received and these are broken down below:

Table 1

Region	Frequency	%
<b>East Anglia</b>	4	2.5
<b>East Midlands</b>	18	11.3
<b>London</b>	23	14.4
<b>North</b>	20	12.5
<b>North-west</b>	16	10.0
<b>South-east</b>	17	10.6
<b>South-west</b>	5	3.1
<b>West Midlands</b>	29	18.1
<b>National</b>	3	1.9
<b>Not answered</b>	25	15.6
<b>Total</b>	<b>160</b>	<b>100.0</b>

Table 2

Service/Sector	Frequency	%
<b>Not answered</b>	7	4.4
<b>Dedicated missing and runaways support</b>	21	13.1
<b>Children/young people's service</b>	32	20.0
<b>Children's social care</b>	15	9.4
<b>Police</b>	33	20.6
<b>Family support</b>	5	3.1
<b>Gang intervention</b>	4	2.5
<b>Health/substance misuse</b>	12	7.5
<b>Housing</b>	6	3.8
<b>CSE</b>	10	6.3
<b>Youth offending team</b>	9	5.6
<b>Other</b>	6	3.8
<b>Total</b>	<b>160</b>	<b>100.0</b>

**2. Missing People analysed the data from their database:** In order to explore the extent to which there might be a relationship between gang involvement and going missing, all the missing person publicity cases opened in the year from August 2013 to July 2014, and which related to a young person aged between 12 and 25 years, were extracted from the charity's database and examined. This search resulted in 594 cases. Each case was inspected for possible evidence of gang involvement and allocated to one of five categories: involvement very likely, involvement likely, involvement possible, can't say, nothing to suggest gang involvement.

It is worth noting that, while gang involvement has a clear implication for the police risk assessment, it is not certain that this information will always be passed to the charity Missing People. Similarly, it is possible that informants (e.g. police officers or family members) may not be aware that an individual is involved with a gang. This means that any count of cases that mention gang involvement is likely to be an under-estimate of the overall total.

**3. Interviews with professionals:** Interviews were conducted with 17 professionals to explore whether they had been in contact with this group, and the kinds of push and pull factors affecting children

and young people who have experienced gang involvement and going missing. Interviews also explored the challenges of work in this area, how to provide effective support and how services could work together more effectively. Professionals were from the police, youth and gang specialist organisations, specialist missing and runaway services, and social care. Interviewees were from London, the West Midlands, the North-West, Yorkshire and the Humber, the East Midlands, and the South-East.

**4. Focus groups with professionals:** Six focus groups were carried out with professionals from the police, voluntary sector missing and runaways services, CSE services, community safety, voluntary sector youth organisations, specialist gang intervention projects and child and adolescent mental health services (CAMHS). These groups were carried out in London, the South-East, the East Midlands and the West Midlands.

**5. Interviews with young people and family members:** The last component of the research involved interviews with three young people and one family member. The lack of engagement with this cohort by professionals in general made this population particularly difficult to sample as few young people who are both gang-involved and going missing from home or care are engaged by services. Those who are engaged by services tend to be those who are particularly entrenched and very reluctant to disclose their actions to an unknown individual. The experiences of the young people interviewed have therefore been supplemented by case studies from professionals. The interviews with young people used the narrative method, giving the young people an opportunity to recount their experiences within their own relevance framework.



# the relationship between gang involvement and going missing

## 3. The relationship between gang involvement and going missing

Our research highlights a number of connections between gang involvement and missing episodes. Whilst in practice there are a multitude of connections, this chapter explores some of the key push and pull factors acting on gang-involved children and young people. The section has been divided into themes which relate to relationships and CSE, debt, fear and repercussions, relocation and the care system, and the illegal drug market.

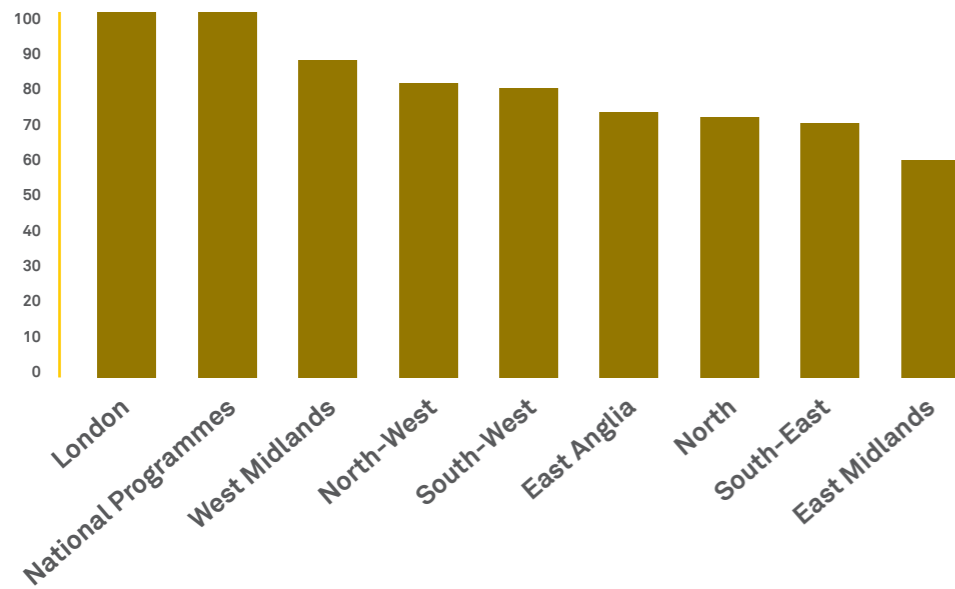
Exploitation and coercion are overarching themes which provide the linking thread between the key push and pull factors. These children and young people are all affected by some level of exploitation, but this can work in very different ways; overt coercion acting at the same time as far more subtle exploitation through the pull factors of money, affection and status. The temptation for professionals to distinguish between those who are making a 'lifestyle choice' and those who are genuinely coerced is therefore to fundamentally misunderstand adolescent support needs. In order to understand the experience of this group of young people and provide effective support it is essential to understand the complexity of the concept of exploitation, and engage with underlying causes and motivations.

### 3.1 Contact with children and young people who have experienced gang involvement and going missing from home or care

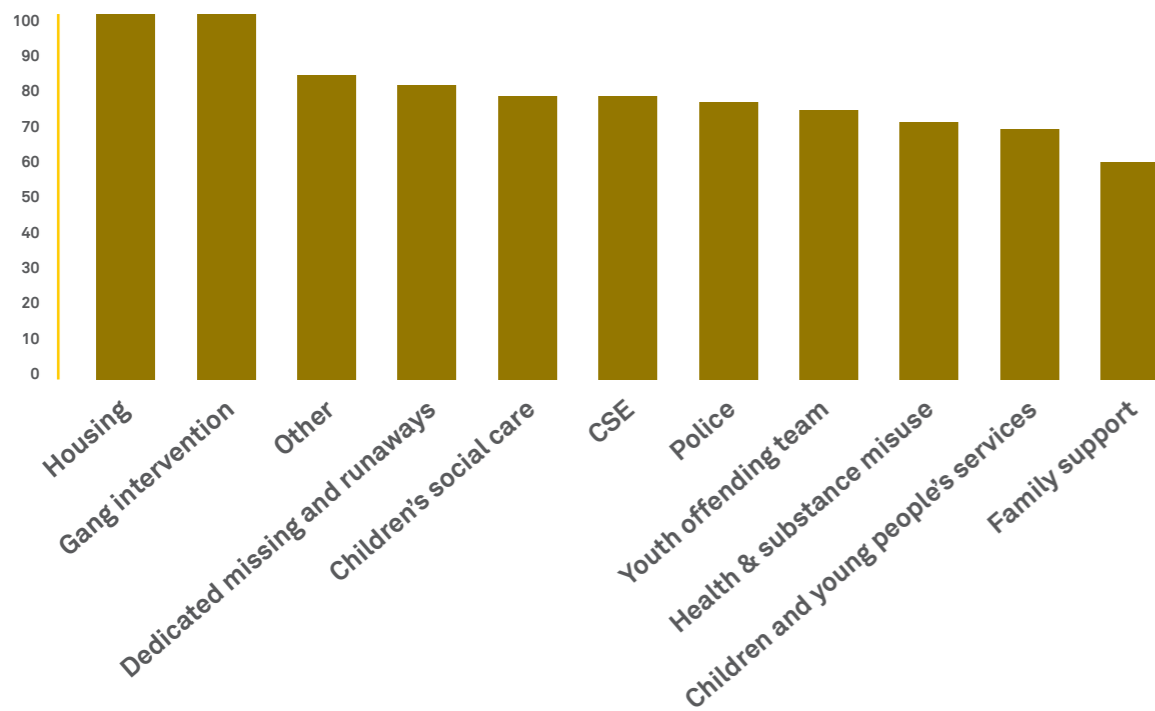
National data are not currently collected to indicate the prevalence of this issue, therefore it is not possible to map national patterns or trends. To begin to provide indications of this national picture, data from all the missing person publicity cases opened in the year from August 2013 to July 2014, and which relate to a person aged between 12 and 25 years, were extracted from the Missing People database and examined (N = 594). Two per cent of these cases were found to be 'very likely' linked to gang involvement and a further 6% had 'possible' links. However, this is likely to be a very conservative estimate as it is not certain that police would always share information about gang involvement or that other informants would be aware of it.

The survey conducted for this project in the summer of 2014 provides some exploratory data to illuminate the issue. Respondents from this survey came from a variety of sectors and regions, and a majority of the professionals who responded to the survey from each region of the UK have been in contact with this group. Overall 125 out of 160 respondents have been in contact and only a fifth of respondents in total said they had not been in contact.

**Graph 1**  
**Levels of contact with children and young people who have experienced gang involvement and going missing by region**



**Graph 2**  
**Levels of contact with children and young people who have experienced gang involvement and running away by type of service**



The message is the same when the results are broken down by service; a majority of respondents from each type of service have been in contact with children and young people who have experienced gang involvement and going missing. Examining the results by type of service, gang intervention and housing services have the highest proportion of respondents in contact with this group. However, these categories represent a smaller number of respondents than many of the other service types.

Whilst this survey cannot provide clear evidence of the prevalence of this issue in the UK, it does indicate that it is an issue for a wide range of professionals in almost every region of England.

## 3.2 Illegal drugs market

### *It's like a big fat chain*

'You're on an estate, there are a million and one people, go see the people that make the money, and then the older boys started deciding to make money, say, for instance, they run this area, they want to go into another area like [City x] and there are like two or three boys that are like, yeah I wanna make money, they're like, cool, I'll give you £150 a day just to work in [City x]. It's not your area, but you'll have your hotel paid for, your food paid for and you'll get your wages at the end of the day, and then they'll go out there thinking, yeah it's a new area. But what the older boys are thinking is, this little boy don't know no one around there, no one knows him. If a police officer sees him, they're not gonna be none the wiser, so he can do it for a week, and they'll take them for a week or two weeks. Leave them in the hotel room. Go see them at the end of every day, collect the money, give them what they need to give, and then the kids are left. They carry on, they do

it for time, they do it for weeks on end and make a lot of money. I think that's where kids decide to think, yeah I'm gonna go country and make £800, 900 or a grand in a week. I'll come back and I'll be happy. But then as soon as they get back, they've gone and seen their friends, and they spent all that money in five minutes and thinking, I spent all that money now, I wanna go out, so then they go and do the same thing again. It will just be a continuous circle, until that youth realises he's a older boy now, he's 18, 19 and he can't really be somebody else's running kid so he'll think, ah instead of me being a running kid, this guy that I'm working for, I know all the clients, so I'm gonna go to all the clients and give them my number so that they can call me, so then he'll be doing it on his own. So he'll try to do it for about a year or two on his own and then he'll start broadening out, trying to do the same thing that everybody else is doing, so it's like a big fat chain.'

(Young Person)

The link between the drugs market, gangs and missing episodes was a strong theme throughout the research. There is speculation in the literature as to the connection between street gangs and the drugs market, with some academics finding little connection between them.<sup>53</sup> The evidence collected for this report from a wide range of sources indicates that the market in illegal drugs is a key activity for gang-involved young people. In the survey, factors relating to 'criminal activity and financial gain' were the most common response to an open question about pull factors for gang-involved children and young people to go missing from home or care. This activity seemed to connect to missing episodes in a number of different ways, much of it coalescing around what have been called 'drug lines' or 'county

lines'. This describes drug markets stretching from urban centres into provincial towns as gangs broaden out their activity into areas with less saturated markets and less police activity.

County lines seem to link to missing episodes for children and young people in a number of ways. In some cases this involves individuals being recruited to travel to areas away from home and sell drugs for a period of time, in others they may be used to transport packages from one area to another, and in some cases missing episodes are linked to selling drugs in the local area. Research participants indicated that although the involvement of young people in drugs lines is currently only starting to come to light, it may have a long history:

'County lines ... they've probably been around for a long time, and people have probably been talking about it for years. The use of children in those, maybe that was just not understood.'

(Police officer)

The examples of children and young people with frequent and extended missing episodes in connection with drug lines came predominantly from London and the South-East. However, this may also reflect that fact that professionals working in those areas were the most aware of the issue. A common theme with much of this activity was that those affected were being used in order to go more easily under the police radar.

### **Karim** (Name has been changed to ensure anonymity)

Karim talked about being involved during his summer holiday:

'My mum still doesn't know about it to this day! I'd still be a dead man if I told her now. It was in the summer holidays, I was about 15, everyone was out, there was loads of illegal raves going on ... but you can't go to those raves unless you've got money ... So one of the older boys said we'll go to [City X] and we'll stay there for a week and a half and I'll pay you £2000, so I'm like that's good money, so I went there.'

This young person was missing for a week and half without any adult awareness. His time away from home was organised by older gang members who arranged a flat for him to stay in, instructed him on his route and supplied him with drugs to sell:

'The first day that I got there I'm thinking this is a different area, I don't know nobody, walking around, seeing people, this is where I'm meant to go, this is how it works, cool, I've learnt my route ... Majority of the time I was

by myself, the main guy I worked for, he used to come in the morning, first thing, seven, to come and wake me up. He used to come in at 12 at night, collect the money, give me the fresh stuff, that would be it, I would get my wages, he would go, see me in the morning, wake me up. It was literally the same shit every day.'

The risks this young person faced were considerable, he was both unsafe and involved in serious offending:

'I started seeing bare police riding round. Constantly every five minutes, just riding around in the same circle that I walked. I don't know nowhere else in this area. Just this one estate, this one area, walk around the circle, walk around the circle and see these people. I can see them out the flat window, see the officers walking around, thinking alright, these lot are looking for something, but they don't know who I am, cos I'm not from around here. I'm walking around the corner to where the flat is. Outside that flat, there's two TSG vans, two cars, sniffer dogs, police everywhere, I carried on walking straight down the road, found out where the train station was, went home. From there, never ever went back out there. I don't care how much money, I'm not doing it. I've always dealt with weed. These lots were making me deal A class drugs, I don't like it, but I was a kid, I wanted money, so you have to do what you don't like ... I had a machete the size of my arm. No, I'm serious, that's what he gave to me, he gave me weapon of choice, no one can touch me.'

In order to make sense of this young person's experience and motivations it is essential to understand him as both exploited by older gang members and being pulled towards this risk through promises of large sums of money. In this



case, rather than being seen as an opportunity to intervene and safeguard this 15-year-old boy, there was a high-level police response.

### Types of children and young people most vulnerable

As is indicated in the case study above, children and young people are often recruited for this activity because they are less likely to attract police attention, initially at least. There is evidence of very vulnerable young people being recruited specifically for this activity from care homes, pupil referral units and schools, and being chosen specifically because they don't have a criminal record. One mentor explained:

**'She'd been told that she needed to carry drugs to another area ... the reason why she didn't come up on the radar, 'cos she was a young girl that was involved in care ... because of the pattern of her movement from home to home quite frequently, she didn't come up on the radar straight away.'**

(Mentor)

A police officer had examples of children and young people who they believed had been 'recruited' within a school and very quickly become involved in something they didn't understand and had no control over:

**'They think it's a good idea, it's a good deal, a good opportunity, and they're just a bit naïve, and end up somewhere where they didn't expect to be, attracted by the glamour of all the YouTube videos and lots of bling, and flash cars and all that kind of stuff. That's the sad reality to it. They'll end up in a crack house somewhere in their school uniform, for days upon days, and promised loads of money that they never see.'**

(Police officer)

However, there were also other examples similar to the case study above of children and young people being given the opportunity to earn large sums of money and being exploited in a far more complex way. Similarly to those involved in CSE, exploitation can take place in this sense with little overt coercion. To understand this activity, Simon Harding's concept of street capital can be illuminating. Young people buy into 'the game' and are committed to increasing their street capital through any means available. 'Going country' could be seen as a rite of passage for some trustworthy young people. Practitioners from a gangs team were working with a young person who had been missing 27 times in the past year in connection with this activity. In trying to explain and understand the situation one gangs worker said:

**'There was an element of it, like we have to be real about the situation. There was an element of it that he actually enjoyed because he was making money. He was doing what he was doing for financial gain ... So at the end of day he kind of got stuck within that cycle himself as well.'**

(Gangs worker)

These themes around exploitation and recruitment came up continually throughout the project and will be explored further below. What came through clearly was that there are elements of organisation within this activity and a clear understanding from those benefitting from the profits of this activity that children and young people are an important resource:

**'The gangs have obviously realised that there is a good way, in their eyes, to make money. And there are young people who can be exploited for next to nothing to make money. So it's minimal costs and maximum gain. That's why these young people are being targeted, because their outlay as to costs isn't very high, but what they're actually receiving back in is very high.'**

(Gangs worker)

## 3.3 Relocation and the care system

The research indicates that the care system has a critical role in the link between gang involvement and missing episodes. There are multiple ways in which the care system is involved, whether that is children and young people being recruited from care homes, using their placements to recruit others or running away from their placements back to their fellow gang members.

The care system is used to relocate young people and break their connections to a gang, particularly where they are frequently missing from home. In some cases professionals felt this was effective, but there were also many cases in which this transferred the problem to another area or led to increased missing incidents as the young person repeatedly travelled home. There were examples of children and young people using this as a business opportunity, and using their existing connections to extend their network:

**'We worked with a young man who was heavily involved in gangs and was periodically going missing from his placement, we think to partake in criminal activity ... We had real difficulties with him because we were looking at various different placement options in efforts to break up some of those criminal networks. What was particularly frustrating for us was having tried to disrupt his criminal links, it almost felt like we had set him up to build more in another area. He seemed to be linking the sale of drugs in [City X] back to his previous area.'**

(Social worker)

In some areas this issue affected independent living accommodation. One professional talked about the issues they had experienced:

**'We had a group of three that were recruited by an 18-year-old that was placed in a 16+ unit who was involved in gangs in [City X] that had been moved here for his safety. He was actually using three young people to go out into [City X] and the surrounding areas to deal the drugs. So he'd kind of moved here but had ended up kind of setting up a hub to go back to the areas that he was living at previously.'**

(Missing persons officer)

There is evidence that being placed out of your home borough far from family and friends is often a factor in causing children and young people to go missing.<sup>54</sup> For gang-involved young people who have been placed far away from their home authority, the pull back to the gang can lead to missing episodes. A practitioner from a missing and runaways service had been working with a girl relocated far from home:

**'She'd been missing from home due to gang involvement in [City X] but when she moved up to [City Y] she continued to go missing from home but this was to go back to the gang in [City X].'**

(Missing and runaways project worker)

It was clear from many of the examples considered for this report that care placements were being used as a way to cut off a young person from their gang in situations where the young person was still very much drawn to that involvement. Although some professionals had used this method successfully, providing the young person with time to think and reflect on their involvement, this was a far from universal picture. In the worst cases, young people were so unengaged and un-invested in the process they were simply using it as an opportunity to continue their activity in a new environment.

### 3.4 Debt, fear and repercussions

Gang involvement could act as both a pull factor for some and as a push factor for others. Where the gang acted as a push factor, fear of violent repercussions was often an underlying reason. In reality there are innumerable different reasons for why a young person might go missing to get away from the gang but threats of violence were a common theme in the interviews and survey responses:

**‘When the situation happened when I was getting threatening phone calls and that, I didn’t stay at my mum’s house, I just kept disappearing. I just stayed at one of my friends’ houses ... I felt a bit safer there because no one knew she lived there, no one knew where I was.’**

(Young person)

Survey respondents were asked about the push factors for gang-involved children and young people to go missing from home and nearly 10% of respondents specifically mentioned fear as a factor. In addition gang-related conflict was selected as a push factor by nearly half of all respondents. Debt in particular came up repeatedly as a reason why a young person might suddenly go missing from home or care due to fear and the threat of violent repercussions.

This threat could work in different ways, sometimes leading to missing episodes as those affected were coerced to engage in drug-dealing activity, or simply as they ran away to escape from the problem. In some cases debt was being used as a way to lock children and young people in, and even in some cases to sexually exploit them:

**‘There was one girl we were working with, she’d been asked to carry some cannabis from A to B, not an overall incredible amount. But then she was robbed en route ... it turned out the same guys that gave her the drugs to carry, their friends were the ones that carried out the robbery ... they wanted to get this girl sexually, so by doing this, they had another coercion tactic over her.’**

(Gangs worker)

Drug use by a young person can also lead to drug debts and linked missing episodes as a result. One professional described an escalation in one case as a young person fell into debt as a result of using drugs, and ended up dealing class A substances as a way to pay it off:

**‘He obviously wasn’t paying the money back that they wanted, the pressure was on to deal different substances, and he was trapped then,**

**seemed to be trapped in a bit of a vicious cycle, where he wanted to get out but then he was too deep in, in a really short amount of time.’**

(Youth worker)

In these cases, the fear of repercussions can lead to a young person going missing in order to either pay off the debt or merely stay under the radar. Any work with children and young people in this situation has to take into account the risk of repercussions for these young people, as one missing and runaway worker put it, *‘if you want to help someone, it’s gonna mean some really hard, tough decisions’*. This could mean reprisals for the young person, but there is also often a fear of reprisals and repercussions for the family.

### 3.5 Relationships and CSE

In the survey, grooming and sexual exploitation were selected as relevant pull factors by over half of those who had been in contact with this group. Respondents were also able to provide open-ended comments about the types of pull factors they had observed, and a fifth of respondents gave answers that mentioned sex and relationships.

In general, missing services were far more aware of girls going missing in relation to gangs than boys. As explained

earlier, there is currently no national data collected which would allow us to explore whether there is a differential effect according to gender. Anecdotally, professionals seemed to indicate that both sexes are affected, but as you would expect given that gang involvement is now understood as a gendered phenomenon, the link between gang involvement and going missing also differs by gender. The evidence for this project indicated that whilst missing episodes linked to the drugs market, debt and fear may equally be experienced by both genders, missing episodes linked to relationships and sexual exploitation tend to be specific to females.

Research has pointed to the fact that girls can be affected by gang activity through their relationships with gang members even if they aren’t embedded in gang activity themselves.<sup>55</sup> The evidence from this project indicated that being in a relationship with a gang member could not only involve a girl in gang activity but could also lead to missing episodes as a result.

**‘One young woman I worked with was going out with a known gang member and just associating with him, when she was missing ... it was a case that she’d be going to court with him, she’d be spending time with him and his friends.’**

(Missing and runaways project worker)

Another theme was young women associating socially with gang members, partying and frequently being missing from home as a result of their socialising. In these cases children and young people are at serious risk of sexual exploitation, as a missing and runaways project worker describes:

**‘She would go missing for days, up to a week at any time, not going into school, nobody knowing where she was. She was then moved**

**out of the area, but speaking with her after her involvement with it all, it was a case that she was associating with gang members, with all the guys, and very much CSE within that gang ... her and her friend being with older guys who were paying for them to be out at clubs, getting them to maybe hide certain things for them in the house ...’**

(Missing and runaways project worker)

Clearly this is where the link between gang involvement and missing episodes overlaps with the work which has been done recently looking at sexual exploitation in groups and gangs. We know from this work that girls associating with gang members are at risk of sexual exploitation, and this can be increased given the type of association they have. For girls who are socialising with a group of gang members and become known as a ‘link’ they can find themselves in a particularly disempowered position and are therefore very vulnerable to sexual exploitation.<sup>56</sup>

### 3.6 Risks and impact of experiencing gang involvement and going missing

The risks young people face when they go missing and become gang-involved are shown by previous research to be concerning both in the immediate term and through the ongoing impact on a young person’s life. When these factors are brought together it is likely that these risks are compounded and present serious safeguarding concerns.

As is shown in sections 3.1-5, children and young people experiencing gangs and being missing are at risk of sexual exploitation and serious violence. In the worst cases this can be a form of child trafficking as young people find themselves in unsafe environments, completely isolated and with no means of contacting anyone for support. Young

people who are involved in county lines can be in extremely dangerous situations in areas where they are unknown and have no support networks. Research on missing children and young people generally indicates they are very unlikely to go to sources of support outside friends and family.<sup>57</sup> In this situation, however willingly they entered into the arrangement, they are unlikely to be able to back out easily as this would be seen by others involved as compromising the whole operation.

**‘The first thing that these guys do is confiscate their phones, they take their phones off them, and then they give them the drugs. And the reason is ‘cos often the person will be somewhere where they don’t know anyone, they’re in isolation, and they don’t want that young person to give anything away about where they are or what they’re doing.’**

(Gangs worker)

Involvement in the illegal drugs market comes with a threat of violence wherever it is carried out, and this just becomes more immediate in an area where the young person has no support network.

Being repeatedly missing from home can also have a long-term impact for a young person and their family. First, engagement in education is likely to be severely disrupted, both making them increasingly excluded from mainstream support and opportunities as well as damaging their chances of a smooth transition to adulthood. If they end up within the criminal justice system, a criminal record can further damage their chances of reaching their potential. For families, the experience of their child repeatedly being missing from home can lead to a life of constant fear. A mother talked about her experiences after her son had started to go missing

for increasingly long periods linked to county lines:

**‘My son was abusive, no respect, completely changed, I was close to my immediate family so it affected them, I was close to my grandson and nephew. Nobody understood, it was like “Gangs? From the background he comes from?” People don’t realise it’s affecting all walks of life. Things turned where my work was concerned, because they obviously didn’t want someone whose son was involved with gangs, I was battling with my workplace, battling with my son, and all these agencies is coming on board, I had no idea what was going on ... I was at breaking point, I was going through depression, I lost a lot of weight, everything in the space of six months, total life change ... My son has chosen a path that I’ve got to be ready to deal with.’**

(Mother)

For this parent, her life was turned upside down by her son’s gang involvement and increasing missing episodes in the space of six months. The fear and stress affected her emotionally to the point that she was depressed, and there were also implications in terms of her work.

### 3.7 Recruitment and coercion

There are a multitude of reasons an adolescent could go missing in relation to gang activity and the above should be used as a framework to understand some of the key factors involved. Exploitation, recruitment and coercion are overarching themes that have come out of the evidence and link this report to recent work on adolescent sexual exploitation.

In the survey the pull factor ‘Recruited for gang activity’ was selected by over two-thirds of respondents and was the most common factor:

Table 3

	Respondents selected
<b>Grooming and sexual exploitation</b>	54.8%
<b>Running to be nearer friends or family</b>	45.2%
<b>Recruited for gang activity</b>	71.0%
<b>Running to be with gang associates</b>	66.1%

This begs the question of what ‘recruitment’ means, and how it works. Inevitably, and as indicated by the research, it means very different things in different situations and is interpreted differently by professionals in different sectors. In general, the cases the police were involved in were clearer-cut cases of coercion, where very vulnerable children and young people had been specifically monitored and selected by gangs that seemed to be in a grey area between ‘street gangs’ and ‘organised crime groups’. However, speaking to young people and professionals in gang intervention or missing and runaways services the picture seemed to be far more complex.

The research for this report indicates that in the majority of cases coercion is only part of the picture. The challenge in dealing with adolescents is to understand and take into account their growing autonomy and pull towards risk taking. In particular,

research shows that risk taking is increased when adolescents are with peers in a way it isn’t with adults.<sup>58</sup> The majority of these adolescents are taking risks and many of them are invested in these risks.

For some children and young people, in order to understand and prevent exploitation by gangs it is essential to understand why they are pulled towards them. Harding’s casino metaphor in which the world of gangs is a game that young people buy into is the most effective theory for illuminating this. It helps us to understand that for some young people, and particularly those who are embedded, they are playing by specific rules in order to build up their street capital as explored in section 2.1. This mentality is about both individual and collective strategies; grooming and exploitation are an integral part of the picture but they work in a complex way. A young male explained how he had been lured into gang involvement:

**‘The older boys had everything. Everything. I mean the top of the range phone, top of the range clothes, top of the range haircut. Everything would be the best and everybody wants it. They would be walking around the estate with their trainers, and you would think, how did he get that? He’s not older than me. I go to my mum “Can you get me some trainers?” She goes “Alright then son, how much are they?” “£130” she’s like “I can buy you three pairs of shoes and an outfit for less than that.” I thought rare, if I’m not gonna get it from my mum who am I gonna get it from? I have to get it for myself, so from when I was 13, 14, I been my own man.’**

(Young person)

However, the real trigger came only after he had been permanently excluded from school:

**‘You get sent to detention, you sit there, doodle on paper. Now you’ve gone home, I don’t like school. Then you start thinking I’m gonna make some money cos I haven’t got nothing better to do. I have no education, I have the chance to make money ... They see the quick five minutes of the limelight ... you are going to be the flyest boy on the estate, wearing a £2,500 watch, £300 trainers, and you are looking fresh, every boy wants to be you. They see that five minutes.’**

(Young person)

The combination of being excluded from the mainstream and being strongly pulled towards the status and money offered through gangs worked to make this young person extremely vulnerable to recruitment by older gang members. For children and young people who are strongly drawn towards the gang, and are embedded to the extent that they are frequently going missing as a result of it, any simplistic idea of exploitation and coercion will not be effective in developing support. As we can see from above, simply using the child protection system to deal with this issue has mixed results. The ability to engage with a young person, work through their underlying issues and help them understand the consequences of their behaviour may be the only way of supporting them to change it.

### 3.8 A group with specific needs?

The sections above indicate that there are distinguishing factors for gang-involved children and young people who go missing from home as opposed to the general cohort of those who go missing as evidenced by research.<sup>59</sup> However, there were also key areas of overlap in terms of the issues and difficulties affecting these young people’s lives and the consequent push factors for going missing from home or care.

Whilst they may be pulled away from home by distinct issues, the most common push factors in the survey relate to the family, which is a key push factor identified in the general literature. Conflict at home or care was selected by 55 of 63 respondents to the question about push factors for going missing (almost 90%) and in 43 of 58 responses to the open question about push factors the family was mentioned. The Children’s Society report *Still Running 3* indicates that a poorer quality family environment is associated with running away rates around six times greater than in higher quality family environments.

One girl interviewed for the project was involved with gang activity and was going missing as a result of this. However, when she talked about her reasons, her family environment was the key factor:

**‘I used to think, oh there’s no one to help me. I would go parties, I wouldn’t go home for days, sleep at anyone’s house when I had a home to go to. Main reason I didn’t want to go to that home was because that never felt like a home to me. Never felt like family, I just felt like I was going to sleep, going to school, getting back in, we didn’t really associate, we only argued and a child doesn’t want to go home to that. Some children don’t wanna go home.’**

(Young person)

In cases like the one above, although there may be distinct factors pulling her away from home, the causes and motivations behind her being missing are likely to be similar to those of other missing children and young people with no gang involvement. This indicates that although the risks she is facing might be specific, and involve a real risk of violent repercussions if she attempts to move away from gang activity, her underlying support needs may not be so distinct.

Unsurprisingly this group of children and young people is distinct in some ways and not in others to the general population of those who go missing from home or care. Push and pull factors relating to the illegal drug market and the fear of violence in particular are specific issues affecting this group. The overarching themes of recruitment, exploitation and coercion are specific in that they bring together many of the factors affecting this group. However, the overlap between overt coercion and more subtle exploitation is a factor for other groups of children and young people that go missing.



# challenges

## 4. Challenges

The link between gang involvement and going missing from home or care has not been high on the agenda in terms of policy or media interest. There is no government guidance specific to the issue and local authorities have no specific duties with regard to it. There is also no national data collected to shed light on the national picture. Section 5 explores the areas such as Greenwich and Greater Manchester that are leading the way in bringing together gang intervention and missing services. This chapter identifies some of the areas where, similarly to the link between CSE and going missing a few years ago, it is dealt with on an ad hoc basis and there is a need for development.

Given the lack of national prominence and understanding of the link between gang involvement and going missing it is unsurprising that the data collected for this report highlighted some key issues for work with this group. In general professionals agree that those experiencing gang involvement and going missing are widely under-reported, and where reporting does happen, often children and young people receive a criminal rather than a safeguarding response. This is something which professionals are clearly aware of and some agencies were focused on changing. Nevertheless, the evidence shows that many children and young people are regarded as a making a choice to engage in the behaviours which put them in harm's way and therefore are less deserving of support.

Where professionals are aware of the issues and are putting resources and time into supporting those affected, engagement is still a key barrier to providing effective support. Without an in-depth understanding of the contexts, environments and pull factors for these young people, along with the time and inclination to listen, it is unlikely that professionals will be able to engage with them.

### 4.1 Reporting

Research from the Children's Society shows that missing incidents for children and young people often go unreported, particularly when they are missing from home rather than care.<sup>60</sup> The evidence from this report indicates that this problem is particularly acute for young people involved with gangs and that parents are often reluctant to report their children missing to the police.

Many parents are reluctant simply because of a lack of trust in authorities in general. In many communities affected by gangs there can be an attitude that the best course of action is not to involve authorities. In this case, reporting a child missing to the police would be merely seen to make the situation worse. A gangs worker talked about a mother he had worked with:

**'He'd go missing for about a week, four days to a week. Nine times out of ten it wouldn't be reported ... I think she comes from a generation where the police are not to be called any circumstances.'**

*(Gangs worker)*

In most cases a reluctance to call the police was linked to guilt, fear and shame surrounding gang involvement for many parents. Previous research on families of gang-involved young people has shown the high levels of stigma felt by parents and families, and the connection between this and denial or even collusion.<sup>61</sup> Our research reinforced those findings, showing that many parents are terrified of what they suspect their child is involved with, but are also scared of involving the police and making the situation worse:

**'I think sometimes the fear, that sometimes the parents may not know everything that goes on, but have an idea, and knowing that**

**contacting the police to report somebody missing could actually penalise, they'd probably end up sending their child to jail, and as much as they want them back, they don't want that to happen to them.'**

(Gangs worker)

In many cases there was an intense fear that involving the police in any way could lead to offences being brought to light and end up criminalising their child. For professionals as well as parents there was little faith that reporting a missing incident in a case like this would lead to a safeguarding response.

There were also cases of parents actually having no idea of what their child was involved in. In the case of the young person in the previous chapter, his mother was unaware of what he was involved with, and thought he was away with a friend. A gangs worker talked about his experiences with parents:

**'The reality is, in my experience, I've come across a wide range of the spectrum. Most don't know anything, you know, kids are very good at hiding things. Some parents have even said, "Oh no he's not drugs running, he's not involved in those gangs 'cos I'm texting him and he's texting me back.'**

(Gangs worker)

In many cases young people were still in contact with their parents and when parents were receiving texts they felt that as they were still in contact, their child wasn't really *missing*. This all led to a consensus amongst most professionals that levels of reporting would be low for this group even in comparison to other groups of children and young people who go missing from home or care. These low levels of reporting would hamper any attempt to see the national picture through currently held data. It also means that the majority of young people who are missing and involved with gangs may not currently be supported.

There was also confusion about the new missing and absent categories now being rolled out to prioritise missing incidents, and this seemed likely to impact on reporting. In a few cases there was confusion as professionals thought they weren't supposed to report missing incidents until 48 hours had elapsed. There was also a concern that the absent category would increase the likelihood of incidents such as gang-involved children and young people being classified as absent when they should be seen as high risk:

**'We have seen young people who we believe are heavily involved in drug running being reported as absent and therefore it's not showing up on our systems as them being reported missing. So parents are ringing up and saying this person's missing and being told well yes but they regularly go missing, so we'll just show them as absent unless anything else comes to note.'**

(Police officer)

There is a risk that when children and young people are seen to be 'streetwise' or making their own 'lifestyle choice' professionals can end up seeing repeated absence as an indicator of lower risk. We have seen in the high profile cases of failure in dealing with CSE that this did occur, and there has been a concerted effort to change practice in dealing with this issue. The above example indicates that this is certainly an area of development when dealing with gang-involved children and young people and this should be taken into account when using the absent category.

Some agencies were confident using these categories and felt that they were useful. In these cases they tended to emphasise the importance of the quality of the data and the multi-agency working behind the decision-making:

**'That's one of those things that takes the skill of the front-line worker and the supervisor to really unpick why a young person has gone missing, where they were, what the issues are. I mean our case loads are not particularly high. We have between 12 and 14 young people per worker so they know their young people very well. That helps, I think because they're more likely to be able to make that assessment correctly. I'd be a little more worried if you had a case load of about 20, how that worker was going to be able to decide if they have 10 young people reported missing on a day, how they're going to even be able to in one day figure out which ones are missing, which ones are absent, which ones are unauthorised absent.'** (Social worker)

It is interesting that within social care, in departments with fairly low case loads, the categorisation can become part of a sophisticated decision-making process and can be useful. For agencies with less control over information, and in environments without high-quality partnership working, possibly there is a higher risk involved with deprioritising cases into the 'absent' rather than 'missing' category. This risk is recognised in the ACPO guidance and seen as something to be mitigated through a missing person's coordinator, who can analyse the patterns behind missing incidents and take appropriate action.<sup>62</sup>

## 4.2 Identifying and understanding gang involvement

### Identifying gang involvement

Missing incidents are a key opportunity for early intervention as they can be a sign that a young person is becoming more entrenched in gang activity. The high profile connection between CSE and missing episodes has meant that professionals in most sectors understand this connection and look for

it. The same is not true of the connection to gang involvement, and therefore whilst there were some areas that understood it there were many that did not.

Through the survey, missing and runaways services were asked a number of questions about their understanding of gang involvement and knowledge of services supporting children and young people with these issues. There were only 21 responses from professionals working in missing and runaways services, but given the relative lack of these services nationally and the widespread geographical locations of the respondents this is still a useful sample.

Overall, 17 of the 21 respondents had been in contact with gang-involved children and young people who had been missing from home or care and 18 said they were confident identifying gang involvement. However, only eight knew where to refer a gang-involved young person and only six said they ask questions about gang involvement in return interviews or assessments. Clearly there are some services that understand the issues and are dealing with them, but this does not seem to be the picture across the piece despite the fact that the majority are in contact with this group.

In general, whilst those in big cities had a good understanding of gang involvement and how to identify it, others had more difficulty. In one fairly rural area there was clearly a wariness and a confusion about the term:

**'Maybe there is a lack of understanding of what a gang is. But I think maybe we've caused that for ourselves, perhaps the angle that we look at it is more from an organised crime angle, when maybe we don't sufficiently look at it from the perspective of how young people interact with each other ... It's almost like we're looking for this purely hierarchical gang that has a got a mister big with his lieutenant ...'**

(Police officer)

In cases where children and young people are reported missing, this can be the first contact a parent has with professionals and is therefore a key window for early intervention. Where police missing services are not able to identify gang involvement quickly, these early stages when young people are less entrenched can be missed. In one case a parent talked about the months in which she was repeatedly reporting her son missing but was receiving no support:

**‘First was early Feb, it took until June to get the support ... Obviously when you phone up initially, and the beginning I was doing it three or four times a week, you have an idea, the case number you have to give, whoever takes the call knows he’s going missing repeatedly, after the fourth call or third call they would have to work out, my son was on the map, with a lot of other children in the borough, and if they got the list they would see how many times a parent has called, as soon as they get that number it should go through.’**  
(Mother)

In the time that services were beginning to join the dots and understand what her son was involved in, he was going missing for longer and longer periods, weeks at a time. During this time

he was involved in a drugs line and, as established in Section 3, was therefore at serious risk. Over a seemingly short period of time, this young person’s involvement escalated quickly and led to him being taken into care for his own safety. This cannot help but raise questions about what would have happened had the response been immediate.

In some cases, the high-profile work around CSE had led to a conflation of groups and gangs, particularly amongst those working in missing and runaways services. Professionals that were aware of the work of the OCC on sexual exploitation by groups and gangs in some cases assumed that they were essentially the same phenomena. One missing and runaways worker talked about the definitions from the OCC work:

**‘One of those was a sort of loosely associated group of people who are working together and that’s our definition that we would use as a gang, it’s more often tended to be older men but they’re definitely organised ... The gang that we dealt with, for instance, there were three brothers.’**  
(Missing and runaways worker)

In this case there is clearly a conflation of groups in general, rather than a specific understanding of gang

involvement and the link to missing incidents. This is a very concerning conflation as it doesn’t enhance the understanding and work to support children and young people exploited in any of these situations.

Given the reluctance of many parents to report their children to the police when they are entrenched in gang activity, missing reports from parents are most likely to happen at an early stage of gang involvement. Without an understanding of how to identify gang involvement, it is unlikely this connection will be picked up, missing a key window for effective early intervention.

#### Understanding gang involvement

A key theme that came out of the survey responses around challenges to working with this group was a lack of understanding of gang involvement. Many of the respondents felt that professionals don’t understand the motivations and rationales of the those they work with who are gang-involved. For example, in response to the key challenges, one respondent answered:

**‘Understanding their thinking and reasons behind their gang involvement. Understanding their reasons for staying involved even**

**though there may have been conflict. Not judging them for their involvement but supporting them to make their own choices.’**  
(Youth worker)

Not understanding the issue doesn’t only mean a professional is unlikely to be able to engage successfully with a young person, it could also put that young person at risk. As indicated in Section 3, there can be repercussions for those exiting the gang and particularly for those who are fairly embedded in gang activity. As one missing and runaways project worker put it:

**‘You know, young people know that there’s consequences, it’s not just a case of saying “I don’t want to hang around with you anymore”; if you’re entrenched in something and you just turn round and say “Well, I don’t actually wanna run for you anymore” or whatever, they’re not just gonna go “Okay then, there’s your P45, bye!” “Actually, you’re quite a valuable resource to me and I don’t really want you to not work for me anymore, so that’s not your choice and if it is and you’re gonna try and do it anyway, well, you know, the consequences ...”. It’s about saying “Actually, how can we really properly support this young person?”’**  
(Missing and runaways worker)

Amongst the survey respondents there was a real appetite for training. In response to the survey question on how to overcome the barriers and challenges to working with this group, 24 of the 82 people (29%) who responded to the question referred to training or understanding. In order to intervene at the earliest point, those working with missing children and young people have to have the knowledge to identify gang involvement and understand the support needs of those caught up in it. The evidence gathered for this report indicates that there is a need for general upskilling of those working with missing young people.

## 4.3 Referral and safeguarding

The findings of recent inquiries into CSE established that in some cases girls who were victims of exploitation were being treated as adults who had made their own lifestyle choices.<sup>63</sup> Repeated missing episodes were not taken as a sign of heightened risk and were instead taken as evidence that children and young people were somehow less deserving of support. This resonated with findings from this research and an overarching theme was the distinction made between those who were genuinely vulnerable and those who somehow weren’t.

This led to a distinction in some cases between those who were choosing to engage in criminal behaviours and those who were simply being coerced. One social worker explained:

**‘Whenever he was reported missing to the police that assessment would be passed on. He’s not particularly high on our risk radar, this young man because we were very clear he was making a choice as to what he was doing. There were no signs that he was being exploited in that regard. Whenever he was reported missing to the police that assessment would be passed on. I would say that nine times out of ten the concern was much more about what risk he’s putting other people at than what risk he was at, unfortunately.’**  
(Social worker)

The focus on his ‘choices’ in this passage indicates that this young person is being treated as capable of making informed decisions in the way an adult would be. This attitude both underlies the criminal rather than safeguarding response many adolescents involved in gang activity receive and undermines attempts to work effectively with adolescents who are often strongly pulled towards the exploitative situations they find themselves in.

This distinction between those young people who are 'genuinely' coerced and those who are making a choice affected reporting and referral, and tended to have a differential effect according to gender and age. Professionals felt that girls were far more likely to be reported missing and were also more likely to be referred to missing and runaways services. In general it was felt throughout that boys were far more likely to be seen as more 'streetwise', able to take care of themselves and making choices to engage in criminal behaviour, whereas girls were often seen as more vulnerable and coerced. Despite being under 18, older teenagers were also seen to be less likely to be reported missing and possibly less likely to be referred to missing and runaways services.

Professionals working in missing and runaways services felt they were unlikely to be referred boys who were going missing in connection to gang involvement. In some cases this was because these services didn't feel they had the specialism to engage with this cohort. But there was also a general sense that these young people would be involved with the criminal justice system, and this is how they would come to light. The missing episodes they were experiencing would then be more likely to elicit a criminal rather than a safeguarding response:

**'These are not groups of people that we as a society have sympathy for, so we're not all going to comb the neighbourhood looking for a 15-year-old lad who's selling crack cocaine ... These are young people who are terrorising neighbourhoods. So that they go missing is, you know, neither here nor there.'**  
(Mental health practitioner)

In this sense there was also a concern that many girls involved may not come to light at all, and wouldn't receive any support if they were going missing but not involved in the criminal justice system:

**'Police officers are often very blinkered in recognising CSE, particularly among gang members, they stop a group of gang members in the street, their priority is around risk and risk to themselves and focusing on the male gang members and the loud ones, and not so much the females, you take their names and the girls just get ignored and so you don't see what's going on, and the fact that they are being used to hold drugs and exploited.'**  
(Police officer)

The evidence from this report shows that children and young people going missing in relation to gang activity can end up in

highly risky and dangerous situations. There should be no complacency about the risks that those affected face because they are perceived to be willingly engaging in gang activity. As explored in Section 3, all of the young people involved in this activity are children, and are exploited and coerced in complex and subtle ways. This links to the wider issue of support for adolescents who are pulled towards risky situations, and the need for solutions which embrace a safeguarding approach.

#### 4.4 Relationships and engagement: 'Breaking the wall'

One of the strongest themes in terms of the challenges that professionals face when working with this group was the difficulty of engagement and the barriers to making strong relationships. In the survey, nearly half of those who responded to the question about the main challenges and barriers to their work with this group referred to factors related to engagement (36 of 85 people) as a key issue. When asked what helps them to work effectively with children and young people nearly two-thirds mentioned factors related to positive relationships (57 of 89).

An initial barrier to engagement was the difficulty of 'pinning

young people down' at all. Some were going missing so frequently it was physically difficult for any professional to see them for long enough and for a consistent enough period to work with them. In one case a young person was missing so frequently most of the work was actually being done with their family:

**'There was a lot more work around the parents as opposed to the young person. Because he was missing, there was so many episodes of him missing, it was very difficult to actually engage him. So in this case it was a lot of work around supporting mum, supporting dad and supporting the family.'**  
(Gangs worker)

Professionals talked about the importance of persistence in tracking children and young people down and engaging them; otherwise there was a risk of reinforcing existing views those affected may have had that they have been given up on:

**'They often have a lack of trust from a very early point, so building this can be a long and frustrating task. Young people involved in gangs and going missing are very difficult to pin down and so professionals must be willing to keep trying and not give up as this just reinforces their belief that we are just "doing a job" – a common conception they hold in my experience.'**  
(Missing and runaways worker)

In some cases, police and social services are highly aware of the link between gang involvement and missing episodes, and are committed to supporting children and young people caught up in it. However, without the ability to engage those involved and create strong relationships to drive behaviour change, there are limits to how much can be achieved. One police missing persons co-ordinator responded to a question about the main challenges

to working with this group:

**'They're all very worried of grassing each other up ... they're all very close in community so they're all kids that have met each other out on the street and one person might go missing, we might go with a social worker looking for them and knocking on doors, no one wants to talk. If you get people alone and you get to have a bit of a relationship I think you can get them to open up more but it's having the time to be able to do the work with them. You can't go and see someone and the first time go, "Oh where have you been? What have you been doing? Who have you been hanging around with?" They won't tell you. You need to be able to go back and back and back because it does take a few months at times to even get them to start telling you who they're going out with at weekends.'**  
(Missing persons co-ordinator)

As illustrated by this extract, a key challenge that has been touched on before is around the need for secrecy and young people's reluctance to disclose what they are involved in and why they are going missing. This is a key barrier to engagement with this group in general, as in some cases there could be a justified fear of repercussions for disclosing. The severity of repercussions could also increase depending on a young person's level of embeddedness; professionals talked about the importance of intervening earlier, as the barriers to engagement only become greater the more embedded they are.

In some cases, children and young people can be so invested in their activity and so wary of trusting adults that only very persistent and assertive outreach can hope to lead to engagement. One young person talked about their attitude to professionals who had been in their life as a teenager:





**'I had a probation worker, I had two probation workers, I never listened to them, I didn't care, I never went, fuck off. I don't care, what you gonna do to me? I was in the youth offending service, I had an officer, hated her. Hated her guts. Then I got another guy, hated him, I almost punched him in the face. He gave me a big booklet of work, fuck your work. I never did what anybody told me. I was that young kid, I know it all, you ain't been there, you ain't done what I done. I earn more money than you do and you're a big adult, fuck off. That's how I used to be. I used to earn so much money I used to be, I don't care. I don't care anything you've got to say to me. I'm bigger, I've got a brain of my own and I know where I'm going. I'm gonna be the biggest, richest drug dealer in the world, and no one's gonna fuck with me. I'm gonna be the next scarface.'**

(Young person)

This young person had been permanently excluded from school and never reintegrated into mainstream education. In reflecting on his experience of support, after he had realised he wasn't going back into mainstream school, he didn't engage with a service again throughout his teenage years. In a case like this, engagement is a huge challenge and it seems unlikely that anyone but a highly experienced worker with a profound sense of what was motivating this young person would have a chance of engaging with him. In particular, professionals talked about the difficulties of statutory services in engaging with young people who may have little trust in authorities.

A factor that has come up as a barrier in many recent reports is that of professionals not listening to children and young people and not understanding the significance of what they may disclose. One young person felt she had rarely been listened to and that social services had not really understood or engaged with her:

**'Social services they don't really understand you, when I told them about problems that was going on around me, they never really understood until something actually happened, and those type of situations is not the safe type of situations, so that's the only time they listened to me when I said I actually need to leave the area. A year ago a situation happened where I was threatened with a knife. I turned around and said to social services, I need to leave the area because I'm having threatening phone calls to my house and all of this. Until I got threats, that's when they decided to move me out. Because they thought it was a joke, and I had to explain to them, it wasn't a joke, and it was something that was always said, so that's the only time when they took it seriously that I had to keep repeating myself.'**

(Young person)

This young person had been entrenched in gang activity, going missing from home repeatedly and it was only when she received mentoring from a VCSE organisation that she was able to make positive changes. She describes the difference between her mentor and other support she had received in the past:

**'The difference with my mentor is that she hears you out ... They are the type of people that will talk to you, first they will hear you out and talk to you, guide you. They will do whatever is in their power to keep you out of trouble ... the difference between her and [other services] it's like she understands you.'**

(Young person)

As this example indicates, children and young people who gang-involved and going missing are difficult to engage, and without strong relationships, engagement and a real understanding of the environment they are in and the risks they face they

are unlikely to be fully supported. There is a clear role for VCSE organisations here in supporting these young people and using their expertise to create strong relationships. These findings also indicate a need for better training of both VCSE and statutory agencies in working with children and young people experiencing these issues.

## 4.5 Partnership working

Similarly to the link between CSE and missing episodes, the link to gang involvement may only be identified through bringing together information from a number of different organisations and also partnerships. In areas such as Greenwich (which is explored in Section 5), co-location is used to bring together services working with those who are gang-involved or going missing. In Margate, a police missing persons coordinator is in place to explore the patterns in missing incidents and coordinate the multi-agency response. In areas without a specific focus on the issue, mapping the data and co-ordinating responses can be a significant challenge.

Professionals described the challenge as bringing together the pieces of a jigsaw; without a specific multi-agency focus on the issue, young people could easily fall through the cracks:

**‘It’s like the CSE, until you actually start exploring it, and start getting in community groups, and actually getting children to talk to you, you don’t know if things are going on. If they don’t tell you about it, or you can’t actually substantiate it, you don’t know.’**

(Police officer)

Given that the issue of gang involvement and going missing has not been in the national spotlight, it was unsurprising that under half of respondents to the survey question on multi-agency forums said

they had a forum bringing together information about going missing and gang involvement. As noted above, the survey was to some extent self-selecting in that professionals engaged with the issue were more likely to respond; this indicates that this is a generous estimate of joint working in affected areas.

As a police officer explained, it is a picture you don’t see unless you look for it:

**‘Certainly when you start looking at other boroughs and areas now, they’ve realised that it is actually a bit of an issue, but unless you start looking at missing persons data and debriefs ... We started flagging all of our gang-associated children on the matrix, and because we were flagging them on the matrix and marking them on the matrix, the gangs matrix, then you start getting information back from where they’re getting picked up, and getting found out in the counties or the boroughs and whatever. If that information comes back through, then you can think, okay – if they’d stopped out there, we probably wouldn’t have heard about that otherwise. So what are they doing out there, who are they stopped with? – ah, they’re gang members, are they? That’s interesting. So you can just piece it together and you get far more of a picture from that.’**

(Police officer)

### Sharing data

As the police officer mentions above, data is a key issue here. As has been mentioned previously, this is not an area where data is currently collected on a national level. One issue for the police was around the flagging of data on their databases. Police officers were concerned that there was no system for flagging up that a young person was at risk.

**‘If they do get picked up, there is no trigger for anybody who picks them up – predominantly the police force – to look at why they are there. Is it county lines, are there drugs? There seems to be no system that allows people to do that.’**

(Police officer)

This question around data on those who are at risk, as opposed to those who are known to the police as gang members, was a frequent issue and a complex one. Whilst many people argued for centralised data, and for data on risk levels logged onto the Police National Computer (PNC), there are clearly legal and ethical issues involved with collecting information on the PNC, which is only intended for safeguarding rather than criminal justice purposes.

Another challenge for organisations bringing these sources of information together was in the data sharing involved at the point of a missing report being taken. In areas such as London, there is a specific gangs marker on the PNC so as soon as a check is done this would be picked up. In areas that don’t have a specific gang marker, even where the police force was aware of gang involvement, this information would be mixed in with other intelligence and not flagged for attention. In these areas a police missing coordinator role becomes vital – having someone with the time to explore and understand the trends and issues emerging in missing data can be the only way to pick up on the connection between gang involvement and going missing. In Margate, the police missing persons officer was able to map all of those affected by gang-involvement and going missing and coordinate the multi-agency response.

Information sharing with social services was also flagged by a police officer as an issue:

**‘The biggest thing for me is getting information back from social services, at times when we need it, at two in the morning, being able to pick up a phone. Also debriefs and information about individuals, if a social worker goes to speak to a young person who has been missing we do not routinely get information back, if we want information back we have to go and ask for it and find that information, that’s no good to us if that young person goes missing at ten at night because we can’t get access to that information, having some kind of system for the information on debriefs alone to come back, even if there isn’t a particular problem, at least that enables us to make a decision if they go missing again, but we don’t get anything back unless we go hunting for it.’**

(Police officer)

The above extract indicates that there is work to be done in ensuring effective return interviews are carried out and then data is shared quickly and efficiently to support work with a young person. Clearly development is needed in the information-sharing arrangements currently surrounding return interviews.

### Multi-agency arrangements

In many areas it is clear that multi-agency working has improved greatly in the past few years. The focus on gangs in some areas and the focus on CSE in many areas has definitely had knock-on effects in terms of bringing the relevant sources of information together around gangs. However, a concern for some professionals was the common separation between multi-agency safeguarding hubs (MASHs), where teams focusing on missing and runaways tend to be based, and community safety, where gangs work is often based. The evidence indicated that there were areas with well-

known gang issues where missing and runaways services were not engaged with gangs services at all. In one urban area with an established history of gangs the missing operational group meeting had some key omissions in engaged agencies:

**‘The operational group, which is at the moment failing miserably, is police led and it’s not working but even if it was, interestingly the youth offending service aren’t heavily involved neither is probation, and social care rarely come to the group believe it or not. It’s police led so the police are there, health is here, the voluntary sector; you know the usual stalwarts are there, community safety isn’t involved.’**

(Missing and runaways worker)

In Greater Manchester (explored further in section 5) there are regular meetings between the Children’s Society, the Integrated Gang Management Unit and VCSE gang intervention services. This allows informed decisions to be made about who is the most appropriate lead professional for each child or young person affected by gang-involvement and going missing from home. However, in areas with information sharing and multi-agency forums that only bring together statutory services, the voluntary and community sector could be locked out of these structures. In some cases, voluntary sector organisations appeared to rely on good luck and good networking to be included. A manager in a youth project explained how this could work in practice:

**‘Unless we actually get onto these meetings, or if you meet the right person, like I met a police officer the other week, and through her then we got invited to [a multi-agency] meeting because I was telling her about the work we did. So sometimes there’s not that link.’** (Gangs worker)

In cases where the multi-agency framework includes a strong lead professional who has a strong relationship with the young person, this is an effective way to ensure gang-involved children and young people receive the most effective support. However, where multi-agency working does not prioritise a lead professional this can result in a damaging lack of consistency:

**‘With social services, they’re not consistent. There are different people doing different jobs all the time, and agency staff, and with [young person] alone, I think he’s had, within a three-month period he had like five different staff members.’**

(Gangs worker)

Complex structures can cut out voluntary sector agencies, and without a strong lead professional, this can mean children and young people having to manage multiple different relationships without consistent support. Even as multi-agency arrangements become more sophisticated, this is not a guarantee that work with young people automatically becomes more effective.

#### Cross-boundary working and social care

The key issue around social care was linked to cross-boundary working and children who were in care placements outside of their home borough. This is an issue that has been flagged in research before and came through this piece strongly.<sup>64</sup> Relocating gang-involved children and young people can be an effective intervention, providing time to reflect away from negative influences. A professional described how she had supported a young person placed away from home:

**‘It was about continuing doing some one to ones in terms of just making her feel that she wasn’t alone ... because obviously it’s**

**isolation, being away from family and friends and being in an area that you don’t know. It was just touching base with the people that were caring for her at the time, making sure that she got back into education so she applied for a college place.’**

In this case, thorough placement planning had been conducted before the young person was placed away from home and continuous support provided throughout the placement.

However, a wide range of professionals were concerned about children and young people placed in their borough without regular debriefs when they go missing and without regular contact with a social worker:

**‘If your young person, your looked-after child, is from one town, and they’re living in another, the debrief should be done by their home town ... But because of capacity, demand and all that sort of stuff, they won’t make the journey, so we’re potentially losing that intelligence there, in terms of that young person, where they’ve been and what they’ve been up to. I would imagine that would happen quite a lot.’**

(Police officer)

**‘Out of 8000 missing children, 6000 would be looked after and 36% of those would be from outside our area, children who will hardly ever get a social worker to come and do and visit, so multi-agency working when it’s our own, we’re quite good, but when it’s a child coming here who is gang involved?’**

(Missing persons Officer)

As explored above, relocating children and young people who are involved with gangs can have

mixed results, and relocating them without regular support seems unlikely to have the desired effect. A social worker reflected on the challenges in supporting those affected by these issues:

**‘Constant upheaval, professionals are always dealing with crisis and not addressing issues. I am left with the feeling I transfer a young person and their behaviours from one place to another, no intervention ever takes place.’**

(Social worker)

There was also a concern that before placing an individual in a placement out of area, not enough research and care planning was being done exploring whether this would be a suitable placement for them. Given the issues explored in relation to drug lines, it is clear that placing gang-involved children and young people in areas affected by gang-related crime may draw them back into the same activity they are leaving behind.

**‘They can still make associations, they can still end up in the same situation as where they would be in their home authority, so you can’t always just say “let’s pick them up and drop them somewhere else” it doesn’t always necessarily work. Another thing as well is, if you’re moving a young person out of area because of gang association, move them to an area where there aren’t more gangs. We’ve had young people from Liverpool, Birmingham, London, that have been moved to Manchester and you think “Where is the logic in that?” if they’ve been moved because of gangs, you’re moving them to one of the big cities where there are gangs. I know gangs are popping up more and more, but let’s not take them to the epicentre!’**

(Missing and runaways worker)

In one area with a high number of children's homes, and issues with gangs and drug markets, they took a pro-active approach when a young person was placed in their borough with little research beforehand:

**'We went to a London borough and we had a face-to-face meeting with this local authority, and we were saying, "you are sending a child to this place you haven't even researched they've got all these issues, sexualised behaviour, drugs etc and you are putting them right in the middle of [our town] and it's a problem"; within an hour they had phoned and taken them back. And that is the difference between being able to do it face to face, we didn't argue about it, there was no nastiness, they said actually yeah, we can see the sense.'**

(Police officer)

There was also a concern from the police that information is not always passed on in advance of placing a young person out of area. For the police, if a young gang-involved person is placed in another area and they don't have that information, it becomes that much harder to join the dots together if they do go missing from care. A lack of communication from a young person's home authority to the placing authority was a key issue, and one that affects this cohort in particular.

## 4.6 The key challenges

Gang-involved children and young people who go missing from home can be hidden from support services. Few are reported missing, and for those who are gang involvement may not even be identified as an issue. In the cases of those who do come to professional attention, their absences may be classed as 'lifestyle choices' and their exploitation ignored.

Missing episodes, when understood and responded to quickly, can prove to be a key warning sign and an opportunity for effective intervention. As children and young people become more entrenched in gang activity, intervention becomes exponentially harder as they are more difficult to engage and the repercussions for gang exit increase in severity. Clearly these early warning signs have to be a priority for intervention, and the evidence from this report shows the need for development in recognising gang involvement as a factor and then passing the information on as needed.

The evidence from this section points to a wider issue with support, as professionals struggle to deal with adolescents who are pulled towards risky situations. Without the understanding of why gang-involved children and young people can become caught up in this world, and of the complex nature of exploitation in this context, it is unlikely that support will be effective. The care system is often used as a solution for these young people when they reach a crisis point. However, as we have seen, the results are mixed and young people are often placed in different areas with little care planning or support. The evidence here points to the need for professionals who have the time, expertise, understanding and credibility to engage successfully and create relationships with children and young people to drive change.





# promising practice

## 5. Promising Practice

The challenges outlined above indicate that the link between gang involvement and children and young people going missing from home or care is not yet understood on a national scale. However, our research also showed that there were areas of the country that did understand the issue and were working in an innovative way to tackle it. These tended to be areas with very strong multi-agency partnerships and good relationships, particularly between statutory and voluntary services.

This chapter will outline some of the key themes that emerged through the research in promising practice, and some case studies of where that work

is currently happening.

### 5.1 Relationships

The last chapter made it clear that one of the key barriers for work in this area is basic engagement with the children and young people involved. Secrecy, lack of trust and even having someone in one place and time for long enough to work with them meant that this was a serious issue for professionals. The case study below explores some of the themes in supporting those affected and creating strong relationships to drive change.

#### **XLP**

**XLP are a voluntary and community sector organisation working across seven boroughs in London to support disadvantaged young people and those affected by gangs. They use volunteer mentors who spend a minimum of two hours a week with their young people. A project manager from XLP talked about a young person who had been gang-involved who they supported for two years and helped to exit gang activity:**

“What we’ve got to remember is that if they are born into this, so that’s their environment, that’s their world, then that’s hard for them to come out of it unless something happens and unless they realise this is not the life I want to live. I think a lot of it came from the fact that she was very fearful, very afraid for her well-being.

It was during conversations with her around that that she then recognised and then decided that she didn’t want to continue down that road and it had to be a place where she then sat and reflected and thought through did she want to change. That’s when we could do the real work with her. It took a long time. It wasn’t easy. We were fighting against someone who just didn’t believe that people really cared. I think she’d pushed all her

boundaries because she was so used to people saying when she was at her worst, when she was really angry and aggressive, the norm would be, “I don’t want to have anything to do with you,” and just pull all the resources away. For us, that’s the time when we just continued to support her even when it felt like we were a losing battle but we still persisted. The outcome is that we’ve got a young lady now who’s doing really well.

We take kids away, we do a weekend trip. We may take around about 50 kids, say, for instance, with their mentors. It was a weekend trip and she didn’t get on with any of the other girls. She was very negative. It was just ... she was fighting every step of the way. What we did was we literally just sat with her one day and we just affirmed her. I think at first she felt very uncomfortable but we then said, “Look, we’re here for you. We want to help. We want to see you do really well,” we really appreciated her. I think it was at that point where she knew that we weren’t just saying it, we really meant it and we really cared and that we weren’t just going to turn our backs on her and say, “We can’t work with her”. I think it was at that point where she reflected on the fact that there are people that do care and that we’re here for her 100 per cent.’

Some of the key themes in the case study are explored in more detail below:

### Time, persistence and not giving up

When asked about how to overcome these barriers and engage effectively with this group, phrases like ‘assertive outreach’ were a theme. There was an emphasis on understanding that many children and young people affected by these issues will have been let down in the past and therefore will take time to trust new people. Throughout the data, respondents emphasised the importance of time to build relationships and the difficulties of doing this kind of intervention within a strict, time-limited framework.

The case study above illustrates the challenges and rewards of creating real and trusting relationships with children and young people. It shows how problematic it is to create a dichotomy between those who are ‘exploited’ and those who are ‘making a choice’. In reality the young person above was a product of her environment, having grown up in a chaotic and difficult family environment, and ended up involved with gangs through family connections. The only way to work effectively with this young person was through creating such a strong bond with her that she believed they weren’t just ‘doing a job’. It was at this point that real work could be done around helping her to understand she had choices and supporting her to change her life.

### Listening and confidentiality

A strong theme that emerged from the survey and interviews with professionals was the importance of really listening to a young person, taking them seriously and making them feel safe:

**‘The difference with my worker and counselling is my worker hears you out, they are the type of people that will talk to you, first they will hear you out, and talk you and guide you, they will do whatever it**

**is in their power to keep you out of trouble ... it’s like she understands you. Social services don’t really understand you.’**

(Young person)

Part of this is about working through root causes, understanding what is causing the behaviour of a young person and why they are pulled towards gang activity. An overt focus on surface behaviour at the expense of understanding root causes, and without really listening to the young person, is likely to make any support less effective.

**‘You’ve really got to understand what’s happening, the causal factors ... if there are any lessons, I think it’s the causal factors, we really need to understand why. Too often we’re fire fighting.’**

(Youth worker)

Listening, providing a safe space to talk and understanding the real drivers behind a young person’s behaviour all came through as essential components to this work.

### Risks, realities and empowerment

Once a trusting relationship has been created, professionals talked about the importance of working with a young person to help them fully understand the risks they are facing, and the realities of gang activity. As one worker in a gangs project described:

**‘I think it’s just highlighting the factors around it really. Because it’s the glamour and the pull, and it’s negative things that lead to either a criminal sentence, danger of being involved in any gang-related situations that could even potentially lead to death as well. Some of it is actually going through the reality of things, and to get them to understand and reflect and look at that. Even using examples of ... depending on the young people in the area that they’re from, sometimes, it’s**

**probably examples of other young people that have been down that pathway, and to look at where they are now, to where they were. To talk to them about real-life cases, and situations that they’re aware about as well.’**

(Gangs worker)

Underlying this is an understanding that adolescents are in a transition and learning to exercise their own autonomy. Strategies that sit within the child protection paradigm can be problematic when they work against this growing autonomy and go against the grain of the transition to adulthood. The emphasis within the data was creating strong relationships in order to both deal with causal issues and support children and young people to understand the consequences and risks of their behaviour. As has been shown above, there is no useful distinction to be made in this area between those who are ‘exploited’ and those who are making an active choice. Rather, the majority of adolescents involved with gangs and going missing from home or care will only be effectively supported through working *with* them to change their behaviour; simply moving them in the hopes that this will do the trick is unlikely to work. As a gangs worker explained:

**‘Once they go home, they’re always still left to their own willpower, as such, as to whether they do it or don’t do it. Yeah, so I think it’s just being able to really help them build that willpower. Yeah, and to give them their own mind to not make those decisions. Sometimes, there are a few cases of young people, probably the ones I’ve spoken about as well that, the parents would lock the doors, take the keys out and do certain things. And, it wouldn’t be an issue for them to jump out of their top bedroom window and, kind of, just sneak out in the early hours of the morning, or then not come back. So, yeah, I think sometimes if they wanna go, they will go.’**

(Gangs worker)

Rather than seeing this in a negative light, the growing autonomy of a teenager can be treated as an opportunity. However, interventions have to go with the grain of development, building up resilience and supporting children and young people to make the right decisions when it matters.

## 5.2 Specialist services

Much of the evidence above indicates that in order to have the best chance of creating the relationships that are so vital to this work, practitioners need to have a profound understanding of the motivations and pull factors drawing young people towards gang involvement. In some cases it was clear that although professionals were aware that there was some kind of link between going missing and gang-involvement, simply ‘opening up the case’ to social care services wasn’t necessarily going to change the behaviour of the young people.

There is a discussion to be had here about the extent to which generic missing and runaways services are appropriate for children and young people involved with gangs. There was a consensus from professionals that return interviews should be carried out by VCSE organisations, which is consistent with national guidance.<sup>65</sup> Police in particular felt that children and young people were far more likely to open up to a VCSE organisation than to someone associated with the police. Clearly there is a need for professionals in both fields to be upskilled in understanding issues around identification and referral. However, there was mixed opinion about whether gang-involved children and young people would be better off speaking to someone from a specialist organisation. This was particularly in relation to the issue of secrecy and the fact that this specific group are very reluctant to open up about the issues they are facing.

Some professionals felt that in situations where a young person was already working with someone and had a strong relationship, return interviews should be carried out by that person with the relationship rather than someone they didn't know.

There were areas where multi-agency working in this area was established, and they were making complex decisions about these young people and who they should work with.

### **THE CHILDREN'S SOCIETY IN GREATER MANCHESTER AND THE INTEGRATED GANG MANAGEMENT UNIT**

**Work around young people and gang involvement is fairly well established in Manchester and the Integrated Gang Management Unit brings together through regular meetings statutory and voluntary sector agencies including family intervention support and the Children's Society Missing from Home Project. This means that in making decisions about gang-involved young people who go missing the flexibility and resources exist to make sure young people will be supported by someone who can engage with them. A project worker from the Children's Society Missing from Home Project explains what happens when a gang-involved young person is referred to their service:**

'There are some young people that obviously get reported to our service that are already known from the Gangs Unit. People that might already be involved with services for young people, that are associated with gangs, you then look at the support package in place for these young people and then you say "Well, actually, is our service appropriate?" If you've got a young person who's got a gang mentor and got a

youth offending team worker, if you then come in and say "Why you running away from home?" and they're saying "I'm not running away from home, I'm just out with my friends at this time"; "What are you doing when you're out?" and you know what they're doing, it would be your mentor and your youth offending worker that would be addressing what that reason is, as to why they're missing.

If they fit the remit of running away, which a lot of them do, and there's no challenge for us to be working with them ... I refer young people into other organisations that specifically work with young people in gangs and they've been able to pick that work up, or we've looked at things together. I would say specifically for Manchester, that there's good ... the organisation and multi-agency work is something that works well.'

**The multi-agency forum in Manchester allows complex decisions to be made about the best professional to work with young people affected by gang-involvement and going missing.**

## **5.3 Multi-agency working**

As shown above, multi-agency working is a patchy picture, very strong in some areas and much less strong in areas without structures bringing together services dealing with missing and gangs issues. Services that have a strong multi-agency structure tend to be

those that have a proactive individual pushing the relationship forward. Without specific government guidance in this area it takes a specific focus to bring agencies together. Without data sharing and police missing teams with the time and resources to explore the patterns and trends in their data, these children and young people will not necessarily come to light.

### **GREENWICH**

**In Greenwich, a change in management in the missing persons team prompted a review of all under-18-year-old missing people. This review allowed the team to observe patterns of children associated with gangs going missing repeatedly and for fairly long periods of time. This review provided the data for them to work specifically around tackling this issue and share information appropriately.**

**As a response, co-location was used as a way to bring together teams and allow them to work together on a day-to-day basis, as Detective Chief Inspector Mike Balcombe describes:**

'I realigned my gangs team alongside my missing persons team, so they could share information, and that helped us to get a better picture of where the children were going missing from, what they were doing, where they were ending up, some were being found out in the counties, for example, and when the gangs team were searching or visiting drugs addresses they would come across the same missing children night after night, often in school uniform, 14/15-year-olds in the drugs addresses, in squalid conditions. Whilst obviously

it's good taking them home, the next night they're back there again.'

**They also have a MASH which sits alongside the police work, under the same line management as the gangs and missing persons teams. This means issues related to safeguarding and gangs come under the same chain of command, ensuring a safeguarding approach to young people.**

'I'm the lead for safeguarding children and adults, as well as gangs and CSE. So I've got a broad umbrella and understanding of what's going on across all of those areas, and then I link in with all of the key partners through the safeguarding boards and children's trust boards. We are lucky that we've got a really, really good joined-up partnership that really understands and wants to explore the risks and deal with them. It's probably the most progressive joined-up partnership that I've ever worked with.' (DCI Mike Balcombe)

**This partnership is a good example of how co-location can be used to bring together services dealing with the issues that adolescents commonly face, ensuring better information-sharing about risks and needs.**

Despite the low reporting levels, missing teams within the police are still a key resource in terms of spotting children and young people who are going missing and may be involved with gangs. As mentioned previously, a parent ringing the police to report their child missing may be the first contact made with professionals and therefore it can be a

key opportunity for early intervention, requiring a strong response. The areas where innovative work was being done tended to be those with missing teams with the resources to stand back and spot a pattern in their data. Where a missing person's co-ordinator role was in place, this could help the police to make the connection to gang involvement.

### **PAN CHESHIRE MISSING AND CHILD SEXUAL EXPLOITATION SERVICE**

**This service works with young people under 18 years old across Cheshire East, Cheshire West and Chester, Halton and Warrington who are missing from home or care or who are experiencing or at risk of CSE.**

**After each missing episode, a face-to-face interview with the young person is conducted after 48 hours, during which a needs assessment is conducted. The service runs a dedicated helpline and provides support to children and young people who have run away or need advice as well as family and friends who are concerned about runaways or them running away. Comprehensive screening and assessment of young people is also conducted to identify CSE risk and incidence, followed by programmes of intervention which enable young people to reflect on and recognise signs and symptoms of CSE. The service offers training to groups of young people (preventative and targeted) as well as professional training to members of the children and young people's workforce.**

The unique set up of the service across four local authorities, but under one police authority, allows the service to overcome some of the challenges in multi-agency working across local authority boundaries. In particular, this approach tackles the challenge in supporting children and young people who are placed away from their home borough and go missing from care. This cross local-authority structure allows for:

1. increased identification of risk where children and young people are placed in the care of other local authorities
2. better safeguarding of these children and young people
3. better joined-up work with the police over the whole of Cheshire in the risk management of these children and young people.

**In the first six months of its operation from April to September 2012 the Pan-Cheshire Missing from Home Service has reduced missing episodes by 40% in Halton and 20% in Cheshire.**

Where local authorities commission VCSE organisations to provide return home interviews on a cross local-authority basis, this can allow better use of resources as well as better safeguarding of children and young people.

There is a need for further guidance and a policy focus on the needs of this group in order to support local areas to bring teams together in a way that works for them. Clearly the structures of work with gang-involved children and young people and those working with those going missing will vary drastically according to area. However, there are some areas moving forward and using innovative solutions and structures, and it is essential that areas can learn from each other.

## **5.4 Care placements**

Professionals were asked about examples of when an intervention had worked well for a child or young person they were in contact with, and in a number of cases relocation was cited as an effective way to make a real change. A missing and runaways worker talked about their experiences of relocation and how to make it work:

**'I do believe that actually if you wanna offer an intervention to a young person and they're, as I said, going back to the same environment day in, day out, then it's hard for them to have that space where they're able to imagine not being in a situation. So if you are able to remove them ... it's not a case of just removing them and going "Well, you know you're gonna live 50 miles away", it's about saying "We're gonna put you somewhere else, this is why we're gonna do it, but whilst you're**

**there, this is going to be the support that's going to be offered to you" so you're actually working with them, helping them to look and think about things in a different way, so that if they were to return, they would come back with a different frame of mind.'**

Clearly the difficulties and challenges presented by relocating children and young people should not be used as a reason to prevent this happening in any circumstances. Rather there is an urgent need for professionals to understand the implications of moving a gang-involved young person and how to mitigate the risks involved. With effective care planning, strong communication between the home and placing borough both before the move and throughout the life of the placement and wrap-around support, this type of placement could be effective.

For children and young people affected by CSE there has been real innovation to tackle some of the difficulties in supporting those affected through the care system that were highlighted in recent reports and serious case reviews. For example, specialist foster placements have been developed to improve outcomes for this cohort through a more local and specialist therapeutic approach. This report indicates that these issues also apply to children and young people involved in gangs, and possibly similar approaches could be appropriate.



### **Catch22 AND SOUTH YORKSHIRE COUNCILS SPECIALIST FOSTER CARE PLACEMENTS**

*(Department for Education Innovation Fund project)*

Catch22 is working with South Yorkshire councils to deliver a new cross-local authority model of social care for those experiencing or at risk of CSE. This involves the provision of specialist foster placements for children and young people in care and support for families on the edge of care. This model involves intensive wrap-around support and therapeutic services delivered in partnership with the Integrate Movement.

The Integrate model was developed in London from the ground up, working with and led by children and young people involved in or at high risk of gangs and serious violence. This model turns traditional mental health services delivery on its head, meeting both clinical and non-clinical mental health needs and increasing each individual's

sense of resilience. Therapeutic support is provided direct to those affected and consultation is provided for staff and foster carers who support the project. This model also seeks to effect wider systems change through upskilling youth workers and other professionals.

Although this model is primarily targeted at children and young people experiencing or at risk of CSE, it will address a number of the concerns raised in relation to gang-involved children and young people in the care system. Where those affected have been placed in external residential care placements at a distance from home, often making them feel more isolated and increasing other risk-taking behaviours, this model realigns funding towards local, high-quality foster-care placements and work with families on the edge of care. The approach means that learning and best practice can be shared and applied across South Yorkshire authorities.

This kind of innovative thinking applied to work with those experiencing and at risk of CSE can clearly be applied to those involved with gangs. Many of the issues identified in this report in relation to care placements are similar for both cohorts and speak to a general need to rethink social care for adolescents. One of the motivations behind the Department for Education Innovation Fund is to drive a greater diversity of provision for this group and this means provision is needed in tackling other adolescent-specific risks such as gang involvement.

## **5.5 Improving practice**

Throughout the data, respondents emphasise the importance of relationship-building and working with children and young people to build up their resilience and work through underlying issues. Analysing the essential components of this work, the key factors seem to be the time to build trust, the need to listen, a safe space to talk and the expertise to understand the needs and risks faced through gang involvement.

As has been shown above, the majority of children and young people involved with gangs and going missing from home or care are both overtly coerced into risky situations and exploited through promises of money, status and belonging. Rather than responses coming largely through the criminal justice system or through care placements in different areas, there needs to be a focus on engaging with young people and going with the grain of their developing independence. This message chimes with the findings of recent research on work with adolescents and points to a wider need for change in our approach to supporting adolescents as a whole.

Missing episodes can be a key warning sign and an opportunity for early intervention. In order to capitalise on this opportunity, those working with missing children and young people, particularly those taking missing reports and carrying out return interviews, need to be trained to identify gang involvement. In addition, return interviews need to be surrounded by effective information-sharing arrangements. In general, multi-agency working is a varied picture; without specific government guidance it takes a specific focus to bring agencies together. There is a clear need for guidance on how to bring agencies together and for areas currently working well to share their practice on how they use specialist agencies and how they make referral decisions.

Innovative work around social care which focuses on young people involved with gangs is sorely lacking, and research is urgently needed to understand the specific issues and risks for this group. Whilst there is clear development and innovation targeted at those experiencing or at risk of CSE, this learning could be applied to others in this age group experiencing adolescent-specific risks.



# conclusions

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## 6. Conclusions

Children's safeguarding policy and practice is currently in a state of flux, and this report confirms the challenges and failures of the support for the specific needs of adolescents. Gang involvement and going missing are both adolescent-specific risks that rarely affect younger children. These issues go to the heart of the exploitation and coercion young people can experience as they transition to adulthood.

### 6.1 Are there links between gang involvement and going missing, and what form do they take?

The data collected for this report identifies a number of specific links between gang involvement and going missing from home or care. The key issues relate to relationships and CSE, fear and intimidation, relocation and the care system, and the illegal drug market. The gendered nature of these missing incidents was clear, as whilst missing episodes linked to the drugs market, debt and fear may equally be experienced by both genders, missing episodes linked to relationships and sexual exploitation tended to be specific to females.

Children and young people who experience both going missing and gang involvement are affected by overt coercion at the same time as far more subtle exploitation through the pull factors of money, affection and status. The temptation for professionals to distinguish between those who are making a 'choice' to engage in criminal behaviour and those who are genuinely coerced is therefore to fundamentally misunderstand adolescent support

needs. In order to understand the experience of this group of children and young people, and provide effective support, it is essential to understand the complexity of the concept of exploitation and engage with the underlying causes of behaviour.

### 6.2 What are the consequences if those affected do not come to the attention of services?

Involvement in the illegal drugs market comes with a threat of violence wherever it is carried out. The risks children and young people face when they go missing and when they become gang-involved are shown by previous research to be concerning both in the immediate term and through the ongoing impact on an individual's life. When these factors are brought together it is likely that these risks are compounded and present serious safeguarding concerns.

This report indicates that children and young people experiencing both these issues are at risk of CSE and serious violence. Those who 'go country' and

end up missing from home or care in an unknown area can be in extremely dangerous situations in areas where they have no support networks. This can be a form of child trafficking as young people find themselves in unsafe environments, completely isolated and with no means of contacting anyone for support.

Being repeatedly missing from home can also have a long-term impact for those affected and their families. Dropping out of education and becoming involved in the criminal justice system can affect an individual's life chances as well as disrupting the transition to adulthood. Families' lives can be turned upside down by the fear and stress.

### 6.3 What are the challenges of working with children and young people experiencing both gang involvement and going missing?

Children and young people who experience both gang involvement and going missing from home are a hidden group, for the most part unidentified, not reported missing and not understood. Given the consensus from research participants that reporting levels are extremely low, there is a key question of just how many cases are going under the radar.

Even where services are aware of the link between these issues and committed to working with this group, there are significant barriers. Engagement is a key issue for services and professionals talked about a wall of silence, with those affected unwilling to disclose any details of their activities due to fear of repercussions. Without time, credibility and expertise, it is very difficult for professionals to build relationships with young people experiencing these issues. In the worst cases, rather than intervention children and young people are merely

relocated to different areas, not getting the support they need and simply picking up their activity in a new location.

Where responses diverge between criminalisation on the one hand and heavy-handed child protection approaches on the other, it is clear that support for these children and young people is less than adequate. The drawback to both of these approaches is that they work against the growing autonomy of adolescents and can separate those affected from potential support networks rather than building resilience.

### 6.4 What would make it easier to work with gang-involved children and young people going missing from home or care?

Missing episodes, when understood and responded to quickly, can prove to be a key warning sign and an opportunity for effective intervention. As children and young people become more entrenched in gang activity, intervention becomes exponentially harder as they are more difficult to engage and the repercussions for gang exit increase in severity. This means that upskilling those working with missing children and young people and training those taking missing reports to identify gang involvement at the earliest opportunity. Return interviews with strong information-sharing agreements surrounding them must be a priority if those affected are to be picked up.

The emphasis within the data collected for this report was on working *with* children and young people to create strong relationships. As noted, there is no useful distinction to be made in this area between those who are 'exploited' and those who are making an active choice. Rather, the majority of children and young people involved with gangs and

going missing from home or care are dealing with intense pull factors. Effective support will only be provided through working with them to deal with underlying issues, change their behaviour and build up their resilience. Given the difficulty of engaging this group, it is likely there is a key role for specialist organisations and credible workers able to engage gang-involved individuals.

Currently there is no policy guidance on dealing with this issue and multi-agency working is a varied picture. Without specific government guidance in this area, it takes a specific focus for local safeguarding children boards to bring agencies together. Services that have a strong multi-agency structure tend to be those that have a proactive individual pushing the relationship forward. Within the police, those areas with missing persons coordinators had the time and ability to step back and understand the pattern in their data, and these were the areas able to pick up the issue. They were also areas with a focus on return interviews and structures to share this data, and make the right referral decisions on the basis of this information.

The focus on the link between CSE and going missing from home or care has had a significant impact on policy and practice. Although there is still far to go, professionals can now see this connection in their work with children and young people, and look to prevent it and safeguard children when it does occur. There is also emerging innovation in the social care arena to tackle some of the issues that have been raised in the use of the care system for this group. The link between gang involvement and young people going missing has not had the same policy attention and this is clear in the varied nature of the approaches taken. Too often children and young people are still being criminalised rather than safeguarded, and the same issues crop up with both groups in terms of care placements, which are used in crisis situations and don't provide the intensive support and stability needed.

This report indicates that adolescent-specific risks such as children and young people going missing from home or care, gang involvement and CSE need new approaches in terms of safeguarding, interventions and social care. Currently many of these risks are not picked up or the risk-taking behaviour that is an inherent part of adolescent development is interpreted as a 'choice', with those affected 'putting themselves in harm's way'. The professional and public concern that has been raised for the safeguarding of those affected by CSE is now driving innovation in policy and practice. This learning should be applied to children and young people more generally, and the momentum should be capitalised on to drive wider systemic changes in support for children and young people in the UK.



# recommendations

## 7. Recommendations

There is a clear need for development in the policy and practice surrounding children and young people who are gang-involved and going missing from home. There is little data available to help understand this link and the lack of national and local policy means those affected are unlikely to be consistently safeguarded. Many children and young people who are entrenched and seriously at risk receive responses through the criminal justice system or through care placements which aim to disrupt destructive relationships. This report suggests that work is needed to find responses in which those affected are safeguarded and receive interventions which engage them, work through underlying issues and use relationships to drive change.

### 7.1 Understanding and using data

This report highlights the absence of available information at a local or national level on the number of children and young people affected by gang involvement and going missing from home or care. It is essential that this situation is remedied in order to begin to understand the issue and ensure that those affected are safeguarded.

- Police forces should collect and monitor data on children and young people going missing and involved with gangs so geographical and demographic (primarily gender) trends can be mapped. They should work across county boundaries to share information and join up plans where appropriate.
- LSCBs should undertake local mapping in partnership with LCJBs to understand the link

between gang involvement, going missing and CSE as part of their statutory duty to monitor and scrutinise data on children and young people missing from home and care.

- Police and crime commissioners should drive forward a joined-up approach to collecting and sharing this data in partnership with LSCBs and LCJBs, and ensuring that joint actions are agreed.

### 7.2 Early identification and intervention after missing incidents

Missing episodes are an important early warning for children and young people who are at risk of harm. Gang-involved young people must be picked up quickly after going missing to intervene and prevent

them being at risk of further harm and becoming entrenched in gang activity.

- The Home Office should work with partners in the Department for Education and Youth Justice Board to create risk assessment tools that support early identification of gang involvement that can be used by a diverse range of services.
- LSCBs should work with specialist VCSE organisations to ensure that all professionals working with missing people and runaways have safeguarding training on the risks and needs of gang-involved children and young people as well as CSE.
- Police forces should build on good practice and ensure there is a missing person coordinator to review missing data and particularly review all missing and absent cases.
- Forces should provide training to ensure that police missing teams and those taking missing reports understand the links between gang involvement, CSE and going missing. The College of Policing should ensure this is reflected in authorised police practice on missing person investigations.
- All return interview providers and commissioners should ensure that strong information-sharing arrangements are in place to share return interview data with all relevant partners as soon as this data is recorded.

### 7.3 Safeguarding

This report indicates that gang-involved children and young people who go missing do not always receive a safeguarding response. Services must work in partnership using co-location where appropriate to ensure that safeguarding is prioritised alongside a criminal justice response. Young people should receive appropriate support from a professional with expertise and understanding of the needs and risks

surrounding gang involvement. Multi-agency working in this area is currently led in relation to missing and CSE issues with any consideration to gang-related risk factors being secondary or not considered at all. Whilst there is good practice, work needs to be done to ensure this good practice is shared.

- LSCBs should develop local safeguarding policy in partnership with LCJBs, outlining the responsibilities of local agencies in safeguarding children and young people affected by gang involvement and going missing.
- The Department for Education should lead on providing guidance on partnership working, bringing together services dealing with gang involvement and missing services. This should include guidance on joint working between the MASH and community safety teams.
- Where there is a local connection between gang involvement and going missing, forces should co-locate missing person teams and those dealing with gang crime and this should be closely aligned with the MASH. These should link into integrated offender management as well as multi-agency risk assessment conferences in the area.
- Local authorities should ensure that an independent VCSE organisation is available for children and young people to speak to in return interviews and ensure that where a child or young person is gang-involved, they speak to someone who has expertise and understanding in this area.

### 7.4 Building relationships to drive change

Engagement was flagged up as a significant problem, and even where services were aware of the link between gang involvement and going missing this didn't mean they were able to effectively engage and work with those affected. This report indicates

that building relationships with children and young people and using this relationship to work through underlying issues is likely to be more successful than criminalising them or using heavy-handed child protection measures.

- All interventions and support for gang-involved children and young people should prioritise strong relationships through ensuring consistency, persistence and time to build trust.
- Services should provide gender-specific support for girls as they are likely to experience different risks associated with gang-involvement.
- Local authorities should ensure that where children and young people are gang-involved and going missing from home, they have access to specialist VCSE services and interventions.
- Professionals from all sectors working with young people affected by gang-involvement and going missing from home or care should be trained to understand and support this group effectively.
- Where children and young people are missing repeatedly, local authorities should work with the VCSE sector and troubled families teams to ensure that families have ongoing support.
- Local authorities should ensure that missing children and young people and their families are signposted to appropriate 24/7 services such as the 24-hour confidential 116 000 Missing People phone line.

### 7.5 Relocation and the care system

Relocation is often used as a way to disrupt children and young people's gang involvement, but where young people are unengaged in the process and not provided with sufficient support this can have mixed results. In the worst cases, children and young people can simply use this as an opportunity to

extend their network and establish new drug lines. As awareness and understanding of CSE has increased, innovative new ways of working with adolescents affected by it have been developed. Ideas such as specialist foster placements and children's homes, which are now being developed to deal with CSE, are equally applicable to gang-involved young people. It is essential for us to understand better when a care placement is and is not the right option for a gang-involved young person, and when it is, how we can develop placements that are effective.

- The Home Office and the Department for Education should fund a joint, national research project into care placements and relocation of gang-involved children and young people. This should assess the rate of breakdown in placements for gang-involved young people located out of area and explore whether, and in what circumstances, this is an effective way to support those affected.
- The Department for Education should work with the VCSE sector to develop a pilot project launching specialist foster placements for gang-involved children and young people on the same basis as those piloted for those involved in CSE.
- Ofsted inspections increasingly focus on whether return interviews are being offered to all children and young people. However, there should be a focus on whether looked-after children placed out of area are receiving return interviews.
- Local authorities should ensure that looked-after children are not placed out of area without extensive care planning beforehand. Where gang involvement is an issue, children and young people should not be placed into areas where gangs are a local problem.
- Where children and young people are relocated with their family to a different area but do not reach the threshold for care, their home local authority should have an obligation to share information with their host local authority.

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