

Off the Radar

Children and Young People
on the Streets in the UK

Executive Summary

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This executive summary highlights the main findings and recommendations stemming from a qualitative research project funded by Railway Children.

Emilie Smeaton was responsible for the research concept and design, carried out fieldwork, first level of analysis, some second level analysis and wrote the research report.

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Contents

| | Page |
|---|----------|
| Introduction | 1 |
| Methodology | 1 |
| Family and Home | 2 |
| Violence | 2 |
| The Streets | 3 |
| Detached Children and Young People's Experiences of Agencies | 3 |
| Identities, Behaviours and States of Being | 4 |
| Concluding Comments | 5 |
| Recommendations from the Findings of the Research | 6 |

Introduction

- The term 'detached' was coined by Stein and others¹, further developed by Smeaton², and describes children and young people who are away from home or care for lengthy periods of time and who live outside of key societal institutions such as family, education and other statutory services; who do not receive any formal sources of support; and who are self-reliant and/or dependent upon informal support networks³. Detached children and young people may fall into a sub-category of young runaways⁴ but their experiences, diverse in many ways, reveal a specific set of issues and circumstances.
- In the past twenty years there have been a number of key policy developments relating to children, some with a specific focus on protecting more vulnerable children, and others aimed at reaching young runaways. Despite these policy developments, the needs of too many children and young people are not met and the children and young people who participated in this research, and their families, have often not benefited from preventative and/or responsive measures to protect them and meet their needs.
- In 1994 Stein and others identified children and young people who had become completely detached from legitimate support after running away or being forced to leave⁵. *Still Running* (Safe on the Streets Research Team, 1999)⁶ identified small numbers of children and young people who had become detached from family or substitute care for at least six months. Research focusing exclusively on the experiences of these children and young people was carried out in 2005 as there was recognition that these children and young people are particularly vulnerable and marginalised and that their needs are predominantly not met by practical interventions in the UK⁷.
- At present, policy and practice responses generally do not incorporate the needs of these children and young people and there is an identified need to provide an evidence base that highlights their experiences and identifies measures to respond to their needs. To achieve this, Railway Children made a strategic decision to invest in qualitative research that:
 - captures the experiences of children and young people in the UK who become detached from parents and carers, are street involved and/or experience living on the streets for four weeks or more;
 - presents an up-to-date and realistic perspective of what it means to be detached and on the streets or street-involved in the UK;
 - provides a range of policy and practice recommendations to meet the needs of this group of children and young people.
- One hundred and three children and young people participated in the research. Of these, fifty-three were female and fifty were male. All who participated in the

research experienced being detached under the age of sixteen. Some of the children and young people were in these circumstances at the time of participating in the research. Some young people were over the age of sixteen and offered a retrospective perspective of being detached. This was important as it enabled consideration of the longer-term impacts of being detached and on the streets under the age of sixteen.

- The research report has been organised into a number of overarching themes presented as sections addressing:
 - family and home
 - violence
 - the role of the streets
 - experiences of agencies
 - behaviours, identities and states of being.
- This research is a qualitative research study and the sample, collected in a number of locations across the UK, represents an opportunity sample accessed through contact with agencies, snowballing⁸ and spending time in locations frequented by detached children and young people. This sample cannot therefore be assumed to be representative of the numbers of children and young people on the streets across the UK. Because these children and young people are largely not attending school, are avoiding contact with agencies or are not known to agencies and may live nomadic existences, it is not possible, by any known means, to gain a representative sample of the children and young people who participated in this research. What this research provides is insight into the lives of detached children and young people on the streets in the UK and provides an indication of the prevalence of certain characteristics and experiences in this particular sample of children and young people.

Methodology

- To achieve in-depth understanding and rich data relating to detached children and young people's lives, an approach was constructed that was, simply expressed, an ethnographic approach based upon 'hanging out' with children and young people in their spaces and allowing them to tell their stories.
- Semi-structured interviews, carried out in an informal manner, took place with all children and young people who participated in the research, often on more than one occasion. Research participants also showed the researcher around their local area and introduced her to other people they knew. Participant observation was also a component of the methodology as was keeping field notes and general reflections.
- Children and young people were accessed on the streets in a range of locations, through voluntary sector projects and, in one case, through a statutory project. Interviews were also carried out in a young offenders' institution (YOI).

1 Stein M Rees G & Frost N (1994) *Running the Risk: Young People on the Streets of Britain Today* London: The Children's Society.

2 Smeaton E (2005) *Living on the Edge: The Experiences of Detached Young Runaways* London: The Children's Society.

3 Ibid.

4 'Running away' is used in the UK to describe children and young people under the age of sixteen who have either left home or are staying away without parental/carer permission or have been forced to leave and generally used to describe incidents where the child or young person is away for at least one night. Running away amongst the under sixteen population is a diverse experience and there are many differences and needs amongst the many sub-groups of children and young people who experience running away from home or care.

5 Stein M Rees G & Frost N (1994) *Running the Risk: Young People on the Streets of Britain Today* London: The Children's Society.

6 Safe on the Streets Research Team (1999) *Still Running: Children on the Street in the UK* London: The Children's Society.

7 Smeaton E (2005) *Living on the Edge: The Experiences of Detached Young Runaways* London: The Children's Society.

8 'Snowballing' refers to asking research participants to identify others who fit the sample criteria.

- To support the participation of children and young people whose views are rarely sought and to gain important information about their lives, it was important to work in flexible ways.
- Consideration was given to the role of the researcher who was required to adopt a marginal position and manage being on the margins.
- A grounded theory approach was adopted to generate small-scale theories fully grounded in data that are legitimate and represent what is taking place in the 'real' world. Analysis was undertaken in two stages: the first took place alongside fieldwork and the second stage of analysis was carried out using the software package Atlas.ti to identify themes and issues and make connections and comparisons across the body of data.
- A great deal of consideration was given to the ethical aspects of the research which included gaining informed consent, offering a high threshold of confidentiality to children and young people, providing anonymity, debriefing, offering the opportunity to withdraw from the research and ensuring the researcher's safety and well-being.

Family and Home

- With few exceptions, the majority of the children and young people's experiences of family life were fraught with difficulties that they were often left to manage with no explanation or support.
- Many of the children and young people lived in single parent families for all or part of their childhoods. Many lone mothers raised their children in challenging circumstances. Single mothers were less likely to abuse their children than mothers living with a partner.
- Some children and young people have never met one of their parents and many lost contact with their fathers after parents separated. In a few cases, mothers left the family and broke contact with the child or young person.
- Being lied to about the identity of their biological father often had negative consequences for a child or young person and their relationship with their mother and played a part in becoming detached.
- Children and young people often idealised absent or distant fathers and were not so critical of fathers' behaviours as they were of mothers who were often more involved in raising and caring for them.
- Relationships with step-parents were often poor but there were also cases where children and young people spoke very highly of a step-parent.
- Many children and young people did not have contact with their parent/s at the time of their participation in the research.
- Grandparents played an important role in some children and young people's lives, caring for them when parents were unable to, but testing relationships with grandmothers, due to generational and cultural expectations, also led to children and young people becoming detached.
- Many of the children and young people's parents experienced substance misuse, domestic violence and mental health issues. Often these issues led to

parents being chaotic or emotionally unavailable and impacted upon their ability to care for their children. Parental issues were often a factor where there was abuse of children.

- More than half of the children and young people experienced physical abuse with fathers most frequently the perpetrator, despite the relatively low numbers of fathers involved with their children.
- A small number of children and young people were sexually abused by step-relatives and by family friends. One young person was subject to sexual abuse with the complicity of her mother.
- Neglect and other forms of emotional abuse were commonly experienced.
- The role of young carer was forced upon or adopted by some children and young people with consequences for their schooling and peer relationships.
- The experiences of the children and young people with care-givers raise concerns about implications of them developing disorganised attachment. The children and young people's parents are also likely to have experienced negative parenting that prevented them from responding to their own children's needs in a positive manner.
- A fifth of children and young people grew up in abject poverty. The majority lived in social housing in low-income families.
- Over a quarter of all children and young people have become pregnant or fathered a child at a young age and only a couple of young females' children remained living with them. Most of the young fathers had emulated the patterns of many children and young people's own fathers by not having contact with their children. A couple of young fathers were unable to have contact with their children because of gang-related issues.
- It was common for research participants to have experienced the premature death of a parent, often in disturbing circumstances, with profound impacts.
- Secrets and lies were all too often part of family life with children and young people sometimes not telling a parent that they knew the truth about secrets kept from them and lies they had been told.

Violence

- For many children and young people who participated in the research, violence was part of daily life in the home, in their local neighbourhood, at school and on the streets.
- A few children and young people experienced violence in the care system at the hands of those charged with their care.
- Violence also took the form of children and young people damaging property and experiencing threats and intimidation prior to becoming detached and once detached.
- Young females experienced domestic violence in their relationships with older boyfriends. One young male also described perpetrating domestic violence.

- Sexual violence was experienced by both young males and young females, including being gang-raped and being passed round by men for sex. Some sexual violence took place when children and young people were living on the streets.
- Violence, in general, was a common experience on the streets with children and young people being victims of violence, responding with violence in self-defence and perpetrating violence.
- Carrying a knife was common amongst young males and a small number of young males carried and used guns.
- Whilst the majority of the children and young people described hanging out with groups of others on the streets, approximately half of all young males self-defined as belonging to a gang. However, there was some diversity in children and young people's descriptions of a gang. Whilst many emulated elements of gang behaviour, few young males belonged to organised gangs with an identifiable order that were highly structured and involved in, for example, organised violence and the sale of guns and drugs. Territorial issues, to differing degrees, were apparent in gang activity. With one exception, those young males who self-identified as belonging to a gang were white. The few young females who self-defined as belonging to a gang were limited to groups of children, young people and adults who came together on the streets for general survival. All of the young males who experienced being part of more organised gangs had exited, or were seeking to exit, violence and gang association. Descriptions of gang life and reasons for joining gangs reveal the similarities between the process of becoming detached and being part of a gang, the nature of gangs and the important role gangs play in providing protection and an alternative to family.
- From the description of the lives of the few young people who have left the streets and have a more settled life, it is apparent that violence continues to be a part of their lives.
- For many of the children and young people who participated in the research, violence has often become normalised. Descriptions of their lives reveal how children and young people who are victims of violence become perpetrators after learning to respond with violence. Violence can become a currency whereby a child or young person protects themselves by being able to defend themselves and by ensuring their reputation for violence will act as a deterrent to others seeking to harm them. Violence may also serve as an outlet for bottled-up emotions relating to, for example, being abused, anger and frustration.

The Streets

- The majority of children and young people spent time on the streets prior to becoming detached, drawn to the streets because there was nothing for them at home and also because the streets offer freedom and fun.
- Sometimes conflict arose between parents or carers and children and young people relating to what

children and young people were doing on the streets. This conflict could act as the trigger for children and young people becoming detached and permanently on the streets.

- As well as running away and being thrown out of home, children and young people also drifted to the streets.
- Children and young people in care sometimes took to the streets because they were unhappy in their care placement or wanted to be with particular people.
- Prior to becoming detached, integration with homeless communities could hasten the speed at which a child or young person took to the streets and became detached.
- The homeless community could be a source of support and protection as well as a risk to children and young people. Some children and young people sought out others on the streets but others actively avoided the homeless community, viewing homeless adults as different and as a potential danger.
- With a couple of exceptions, those children and young people who did not sleep on the streets were street-involved.
- Children and young people employed a number of survival strategies on the streets including shoplifting, burglary, stealing cars, involvement in selling drugs, selling sex and begging and blagging. Sometimes spending time with others on the streets was an invaluable source of support. Survival strategies also entailed identifying safe places to be and practising attitudes and behaviour to minimise danger.
- Some children and young people viewed their time on the streets as wholly negative whilst others described it as being largely positive.
- For some, being on the streets was normal because it was experienced by many of their peers. It appears to be difficult to withdraw from street life, even when a young person has permanent accommodation.

Detached Children and Young People's Experiences of Agencies

- Only a quarter of the children and young people who participated in the research received interventions to address problematic issues in their lives.
- Most children and young people did not seek formal support because so many of their experiences, for example, violence and being on the streets, became normalised, being reinforced by others around them as well as through their life processes and experiences.
- Some children and young people identified barriers to seeking support such as not knowing where to go for help or having to be self-reliant to survive.
- The majority of children and young people did not enjoy school and left before the age of sixteen with no qualifications, sometimes because it was difficult for them to attend school and often because they preferred the culture and the company on the streets. Nearly half the children and young people were excluded from school and some attended alternative educational provision with mixed results.

- Whilst most of the children and young people were at risk and experiencing harm, many were not known to social services. Children and young people expressed mixed perceptions of their social workers and there were also mixed experiences of being in care.
- There was significant experience of being known to the criminal justice system and some young people had served more than one sentence in a YOI.
- A few children and young people received therapeutic services and interventions from the voluntary sector.
- Once children and young people reached sixteen, the range of options for support widened but many expressed reservations about accessing generic services for the adult homeless population, viewing these places as undesirable and some homeless adults as dangerous. There was experience of being referred to supported housing projects where some participants took advantage of available support to make changes in their lives. More young people take advantage of the less formally structured support offered by drop-in centres as this model of support is familiar, frequented by 'people like them' and fits with what they feel comfortable.
- The children and young people's recommendations to support detached children and young people on the streets mostly related to respecting children and young people, giving them space to talk and listening to them, incorporating their views in decision-making that affects their lives, having professionals who are non-judgemental, providing less structured support for under-sixteens including drop-in centres and hostel accommodation and providing mentors.
- Many of the children and young people have experienced depression, and other mental health issues, and have never received any support to address the trauma behind their depression. Some children and young people found self-harming a helpful release for their inner pain and turmoil; a few have attempted suicide.
- Sexual activity started at a young age for many of the children and young people and there is often swapping of sexual partners between groups of children and young people. Sometimes relationships are held together by being on the streets.
- Children and young people are sexually exploited in diverse ways, ranging from casual sex with adults, older boyfriends, being shared for sex by groups of men and selling sex. Exploitative relationships could play a part in a child or young person becoming detached, and becoming detached could also make a child or young person vulnerable to sexual exploitation. There were also examples of young people viewing selling sex as a means of survival. There were different patterns of grooming and some children and young people identified that feeling unloved and desperately wanting to be loved led them to be vulnerable to sexual exploitation. It is also recognised that detached children may not always be on the streets but are also very vulnerable behind closed doors and in need of safeguarding.
- Children and young people discussed their own identities, and those of others: how they are formed and were set free by the streets; how issues relating to sexuality led them to be on the streets and shaped their time whilst detached; how being different influenced the course of their life; and how groups of people become established based upon physical style of presentation and sharing an identity. For a few, their identity has shifted making it difficult for them to return to a place of origin.

Identities, Behaviours and States of Being

- Identities, behaviours and states of being were all too often a consequence of damaging experiences from early childhood that were reinforced as a child grew older. However, it is also important to recognise that children and young people showed remarkable resilience and initiative to manage the range of circumstances in which they found themselves.
- Substance use was rife amongst detached children and young people, often starting at a young age, and was linked to fun, escapism and coping with emotional feelings that children and young people found difficult to manage. Children and young people were introduced to drugs by siblings, parents, both older and same-age friends and boyfriends. Substance use often escalated when a child or young person became detached. Polydrug use was common and some children and young people became heavy users of drugs such as heroin and cocaine. There was a close relationship between substance use and crime; violent street crime was linked to a child or young person's substance use. Whilst ceasing to use drugs was recognised as difficult, some children and young people managed to stop using drugs, and resist drug use, whilst still living on the streets. Becoming a parent often acted as an incentive to stop using drugs. Some of those children and young people whose lives have become more settled have changed their substance use, now using alcohol and or cannabis at weekends for relaxation purposes.
- Children and young people's experiences of bullying sometimes had a range of consequences including leaving school prematurely, spending time on the streets and becoming a bully.
- Anger issues are highlighted as consequences of some children and young people's experiences and of the lack of support with a range of difficult and traumatic events and issues. Anger issues often had a significant impact upon children and young people's lives.
- Some children took responsibility for their actions, expressed remorse and were able to forgive those who had inflicted cruelty and damage.
- Resilience was key to some children and young people's management of risk and partly explains why some children and young people were able to survive highly damaging experiences.
- Children and young people's wishes for the future reflect those desired by most people: a home, a family, to be loved and love, to have children and give their children a good home and life, a career and enough money. A few are at the outset of progress toward some of these aims. Others do not see a future where the streets do not play a significant part in their life even if they cease to live on the streets. Others want to reduce or abstain from certain behaviours, such as

using substances or engaging in criminal behaviour, but without somewhere to live view this as impossible. Children and young people also recognise the importance of breaking with areas and people that are associated with what they now view as problematic behaviours. Without the chance and support to move into accommodation in a new area and rebuild a life, the opportunity for change is bleak.

Concluding Comments

- Throughout the research process, the concept of being detached has been stretched in interesting ways. None of the children and young people, of course, referred to themselves in this way or used any other word that refers to the state of being detached from parent or carers and social structures of support. For so many of them, it was normal to be away from home or care either permanently or for long periods of time under the age of sixteen. No word was used by children and young people to describe this particular phenomena.
- As the research process with children and young people took place, it became very apparent that this research is not only about detached children and young people on the streets in the UK but about how life is experienced by many children and young people.
- The opposite of detached, being attached, is relevant, especially relating to children and young people's experiences of being parented and the likelihood of disorganised attachment. In addition, the extent of children and young people's attachment to other people and behaviours played an important part in their experiences. After consideration of the impact of parental and carers' issues, their lack of connection to their children, and implications for attachment and disorganised attachment, it appears that many detached children and young people have parents who are emotionally or physically detached from them. Thus parental detachment plays a part in children and young people becoming detached from parents and carers and key societal institutions. The extent of parental issues highlights how important it is to support parents with their issues and with parenting. These patterns also raise questions about who helps detached children and young people to parent, both those who are already parents and those who become parents in the future, and what will happen to their children if no support is set in place.
- Detached children and young people are not homogenous and there is diversity in children and young people's experiences of becoming detached. For some there is no specific moment that they can identify as the time they stopped living at home; they drifted away. There is also diversity in how males and female dealt with their experiences and their outlook and attitudes.
- It is also important to recognise the diversity of gangs to ensure more accurate and responsible use of the term 'gang' and to recognise that this term does not define the 'catch all' term used by some children and young people, professionals, the media and policymakers. Whilst there are undoubtedly negative elements of gang association for individual children and young people and local communities, it also important to acknowledge the diverse reasons children and young people become part of a gang. There are also positive elements to children and young people's involvement in gangs that provided a sense of family and protection where blood ties and formal social structures have not.
- Children and young people who participated in the research are often at risk through others' actions, their own actions and because they do not receive appropriate support to address their issues. For example, the extent of depression experienced by children and young people has potential for the longer-term impacts and also affects children and young people's enjoyment of childhood and youth and their ability to make decisions.
- Many of the children and young people were subjected to, and witnessed, appalling violence and some are violent to others. To understand why children and young people commit violent acts and exhibit damaging behaviour is to understand what has happened in their past and to recognise that they developed in the only way they knew to adapt and manage their circumstances.
- Previous research⁹ has outlined how children and young people are not always aware of potential risks when engaging in certain activities or making decisions about what form of action to take. Children and young people's perceptions of risk influence their decisions. In addition, lack of alternatives may also compel a child or young person to contemplate a course of action that is inherently risky.
- There are mixed messages relating to risk for the children and young people who participated in the research. Many have not been protected from risk by adults that are supposed to protect them, by their parents and by support agencies; and others have been subjected to harm by the very people who should have their welfare at heart. Many children and young people have witnessed prevention of risk, as far possible, by the very people often presented as a potential source of risk. It is also possible that the same person may be both protector/provider and exploiter and the child or young person may decide that the protective element takes priority.
- The extent of substance use amongst the children and young people is alarming and only time will reveal the long-term damage that the children and young people experience after prolonged use of substances that started at a young age. Once again the normalisation of substance use partly accounts for why children and young people use drugs. In addition, children and young people use substances for pleasure, to manage stressful circumstances; for escapism to take them away to a different place where there is a release from pain and hardship.
- There are often risks related to sexual behaviours and attitudes towards sex. Sometimes females are at risk from how males use sex to express emotions that have little to do with sexuality. There are a number of factors that are likely to decrease the likelihood of practising safe sex. Children and young people are therefore at risk of becoming infected, and infecting others, with HIV/AIDS and sexually transmitted diseases (STDs).

- The experiences of the children and young people who participated in the research revealed how many of them have shown remarkable levels of resilience and initiative and developed coping strategies to manage a range of difficult and disturbing events and circumstances. Despite the odds, a few of the children and young people had arrived at a place in their lives where, at the point of their participation, they have changed a number of their behaviours and attitudes, choosing to forego crime, substance use and social networks where drugs and crime are common, and are ready to become a part of the more formal world of education, training and work and all that entails. Sometimes children and young people want their lives to change but are at a loss to know where to begin; some support services established to facilitate the rehabilitation of children and young people unwittingly recreate the circumstances that hinder their rehabilitation.
- Sometimes an act or experience generally portrayed as problematic for children and young people can also act as a positive force. For example, teenage parenthood is often portrayed, for understandable reasons, as problematic and undesirable, and this research has described how many of the young parents have limited or no access to their children. However, for some, becoming a parent motivated them to change their lifestyle; to stop using substances or selling sex; to withdraw from violent behaviour and to generally address their issues so they are able to have a relationship with their child and provide for them in some way.
- The term 'normalisation' has been used to offer some explanation of how children and young people accept being harmed and inflict harm upon others; their involvement in crime and substance use; and their acceptance that part of their life is lived on the streets. Normalisation also offers some explanation of why many of the children and young people who participated in the research did not seek support. To further understand processes of normalisation, it may be useful to consider other options available to detached children and young people. One such option could be to disassociate from what happened to them and took place around them. Whilst some of the children and young people may have taken this option, events often spiralled to the point where it was no longer possible for a child or young person to disassociate because something happened externally or internally to the child or young person and they were forced to respond. A second option could be to deny that which is taking place. This can be seen in children and young people's presentations of, for example, their sexual relationships with older adults. However, it is argued that normalisation can contribute to both disassociation and denial and that all three are interlinked to differing degrees at different stages in a child or young person's life and form part of a process. Normalisation, disassociation and denial are also seen in the research participants' parents' and carers' behaviours and responses¹⁰.
- Perhaps normalisation, disassociation and denial are also strategies employed by individual and group responses to some groups of children and young people. Normalisation processes are exemplified in statements such as 'that's what children and young people are like today; it's all these violent games they play'. Disassociation is expressed through utterances that place the emphasis upon the other: 'that wouldn't happen to my child; that's a problem found with Black and other ethnic minority youth'. Denial is represented, for example, in accounts negating the existence of children and young people on the streets: 'there aren't children and young people on the streets in the UK. We don't have problems like that here; that's an issue for poor countries'.
- Detached children and young people's experiences do not always fit with public perceptions and other portrayals of childhood. There are many experiences of childhood and some tension between dominant presentations of childhood and failing to meet the needs of children and young people who are forced to adopt adult behaviours, to manage their circumstances, and simultaneously expected to fit into preconceived moulds of childhood. Demonising children and young people fails to account for, and shifts focus away from, the reasons children and young people sometimes engage in violent and disturbing behaviour thereby preventing debate and formation of consensus that is based upon reality.
- Despite a range of legislative measures, guidance and policy commitments, there are too many children and young people in the UK who do not receive the support and care they are entitled to, though rhetoric claims to provide for all children and young people under the age of sixteen.
- Elements of the above comments point to the need to provide alternatives. If detached children and young people are expected to change their behaviours, there needs to be some alternative opportunities, alternative support mechanisms and alternative ways of engaging and including the hard-to-reach.
- Attempts to access 'hard-to-reach' families have not been successful; the testimonies of the children and young people who participated in this research of evidence bear witness to this as does, for example, the government commissioned evaluation of Sure Start. The government's Runaway Action Plan, an example of government activity to meet the needs of vulnerable children and young people, whilst welcome, will not meet the needs of detached children and young people as it is based upon research, learning and practice that relates to a largely separate group of children and young people.
- It is time to accept that something more needs to be done to reach and safeguard detached children and young people and provide them with alternatives.

Recommendations from the Findings of the Research

1. When developing services to meet the needs of detached children and young people, it is important to start with the premise that children and young people who become detached have chaotic and messy lives and that this will impact upon any attempts to intervene and with the process of supporting them and meeting needs.

2. It is also crucial to accept that detached children and young people may not share the cultural values of services and professionals:

“many of these young people have been forced to take responsibility for their own survival, both at home and whilst away from home, and the norms and values that govern their lives differ to those of mainstream society.”

(Smeaton, 2005; 23.)¹¹

3. It is necessary to accept that years of trauma require years of recovery: a history of trauma requires long-term interventions. It is also likely to take time to acquire detached children and young people's confidence and build a full picture of their experiences and needs.
4. Because of the impact upon children and young people of parents' and carers' own experiences of being parents and the impact of their issues and the complex situations they may find themselves in, it is imperative that support is also provided for parents and carers that is delivered in an appropriate and effective manner, perhaps building upon some of the principles recommended for working with detached children and young people. For example, recognising that long-term interventions are required to build trust and address intergenerational patterns and issues.
5. Without doubt, placing interventions with detached children and young people and their families will often be challenging. The families of children and young people who become detached are often very hard to reach and some may not initially welcome offers of support, perhaps due to negative perceptions or experiences of agencies. However, detached children and young people also have a lot to offer and the consequences of enabling them to develop a positive life would have far-reaching consequences for individuals, local communities and wider society.
6. As well as supporting children and young people and their carers, it is important to support the professionals who work with them and all the challenges they present. As previously noted, detached children and young people and their families may sometimes be difficult to access and work with. Where professionals fear a violent response or visit alone, there is potential for professional concerns to be left unaddressed¹². Frontline workers need support and back up from managers and other colleagues so that they are able to share fears and stresses. The Children, Schools and Family Committee recommends that social workers should have more time to work with families before need becomes acute and also recognises the importance of enabling social workers to focus upon their relationships with the children and families that form their caseload:

“Stable, reliable bonds with key individuals are fundamental to children's security and development. In all circumstances, the care system should be

supportive of rather than obstructive of good relationships. Children too rarely have the sort of relationship with their social worker that they want. High staff turnover, heavy workloads and an administrative burden all militate against relationships flourishing. Vacancy rates remain high and new recruits lack support. Social workers feel disempowered and then more experienced may seek moves away from frontline work. The same factors impinge on social workers' capacity to forge constructive relationships with families before problems escalate to the point where a care order might be sought.”

(Children, Schools and Family Committee, 2009; 8.)¹³

Lord Laming¹⁴ makes a number of recommendations relating to supporting frontline social workers, including improving their training and increasing the numbers of frontline social workers with an appropriate skills base. There is also a need to move away from the culture of distrust that leads many care professionals to operate within a climate of fear. A lack of public and professional support plays a part in professionals being hindered from being as effective as possible and ill-equipped to manage their work.

7. Learning from research confirms that when working with detached children and young people:

“there is a need for a careful balance between ensuring a person's immediate safety and retaining a relationship to the long-term benefit of the young person. By the very nature of the experiences of young people who are detached, interventions should focus upon long-term engagement and trust-building. This can offer the opportunity for crisis intervention when a young person experiences a breakdown in their survival strategies.”

(Smeaton, 2005; 23.)¹⁵

It is therefore necessary to work with high thresholds of confidentiality.

8. Services for the adult homeless population are not appropriate for detached children and young people. Many are too vulnerable to cope with frightening and chaotic environments. Others become introduced to new drugs and behaviours and further submerged in street-life.
9. Responding to the needs of detached children and young people will require resources and cost will be cited as a barrier to implementing interventions. However, it is important to consider the costs, financial and otherwise, if there is no investment in detached children and young people¹⁶. If both preventative and responsive interventions are not set in place, society will continue to pay for many of these children and young people as they move into adulthood and become more entrenched in the criminal justice system, require medical interventions in relation to, for example, mental health issues or substance misuse issues. It is also not acceptable to compromise

11 Smeaton E (2005) *Living on the Edge: The Experiences of Detached Children and Young People* London: The Children's Society.

12 Littlechild B & Bourke C (2006) 'Men's use of violence and intimidation against family members and child protection workers' in Humphreys X & Stanley N ed. *Domestic Violence and Child Protection: Directions for Good Practice* London: Jessica Kingsley Publishers.

13 Children, Schools and Family Committee (2009) *Looked After Children* London: The Stationery Office.

14 Lord Laming (2009) *The Protection of Children in England: A Progress Report* London: The Stationery Office.

15 Smeaton E (2005) *Living on the Edge: The Experiences of Detached Young Runaways* London: The Children's Society.

16 Railway Children has produced a paper to compliment this report highlighting some of the costs of children and young people becoming detached which confirms that failing to respond to detached children and young people incurs significantly high costs. This paper is available at <http://www.railwaychildren.org.uk>

children and young people's safety by 'value for money' decisions.

10. The first contact with a detached child or young person is crucial, often requiring a light touch that is presented in an informal manner. Get this right and there is potential to work with the child or young person for longer-term benefit. If the first contact with a detached child or young person is unsuccessful, there is potential that the child or young person will not return and opportunity to provide support will be lost.

11. Abuse and other risks experienced by children in the home at very young ages confirms the importance of professionals implementing home-based interventions. The majority of detached children and young people's parents do not, for a number of reasons, access children centres and health clinics and professionals must be encouraged to carry out significant parts of their practice in the family home where they will gain insight into family dynamics. As noted by Lord Laming, health visitors should be given resources to effectively assess and support children and play a key role in their protection:

"The role of health visitors as a universal service seeing all children in their home environment with the potential to develop strong relationships with families is crucially important."
(Lord Laming, 2009; 15.)¹⁷

12. In general, early intervention should be promoted to prevent children and young people from being harmed and to work with parents and carers so that it becomes possible, both from a child protection perspective and parents and children and young people's perspectives, for the child to remain in the home. This importance of early intervention is confirmed by Lord Laming:

"Leaders of local services must recognise the importance of early interventions and ensure that their departments support children as soon as they are recognised as being 'in need', averting escalation to the point at which families are in crisis."
(Ibid, 4.)¹⁸

13. Not all children and young people will come to the attention of support services whilst still living at home. However, an opportunity arises to access a child or young person when they start to spend time on the streets, before they have ceased to live at home and become detached. Street-based youth work should be carried out on the streets and other areas that children and young people frequent at times when children and young people are on the streets, particularly evenings, weekends and school holidays. This work should be carried out in an informal manner by professionals with appropriate expertise using a range of creative means to engage with children and young people. If a child or young person's needs are identified, it will be possible, in some cases, to work with the child or young person and their family to address the issues and if this is not possible, a safe alternative can be found for the child or young person.

14. At this point, it is appropriate to highlight the important role that schools play. When a child or young person attends school, teachers and other personnel are able to identify when a child or young person's behaviour changes and provide support after a child or young person discloses problems. Despite the clash between many detached children and young people and school culture, and subsequent feelings of alienation, school is often the only agency that children and young people are known to and once they stop attending school, they become lost to social support agencies. As identified previously in other research¹⁹, when a child or young person disengages with school, this should trigger the need to alert appropriate agencies so that interventions can be made before the child or young person becomes untraceable or too entrenched in street life. If schools are to implement this role effectively, it is important that they are provided with the resources to do so.

15. If it is not possible to prevent children and young people from becoming detached and on the streets, their needs should be responded to when they are on the streets. This will be particularly challenging as, by this point, many will have particular identities, attitudes and behaviours that influence their perceptions and way of life leading some to be exceptionally difficult to engage. This may be different for children and young people who are identified as soon as they come to the streets and who may be more amenable to receiving support. Detached children and young people's experiences and self-reliance highlight the importance of building trust and of developing services for children and young people that are based on models for the adult homeless population, whose lives they share, but which are specifically for children and young people. Responsive measures should take three forms:

- Outreach work should take place to identify detached children and young people on the streets.
- There should be drop-in centres for children and young people that operate in an informal manner, open during evenings and weekends, and provide the basics of shelter, warmth and food but also able to provide further support, either directly or through appropriate referral mechanisms, when indicated by children and young people that this is desirable.
- There should be accommodation provision for children and young people that also operates in this informal way, closely monitored and inspected but not as a children's home, based upon the principles of hostels for homeless adults providing a bed for the night, some food and washing facilities, but with the capacity to respond to children and young people's requests for more support.

16. For previously identified reasons, many children and young people find withdrawing from street life difficult. Having safe and permanent accommodation is clearly crucial for young people as a first step to changing their lives but it should not be assumed that providing accommodation will provide the solution to all of their issues. For some who are used to being with a group

¹⁷ Lord Laming (2009) *The Protection of Children in England: A Progress Report* London: The Stationery Office.

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ Smeaton E (2005) *Living on the Edge: The Experiences of Detached Young Runways* London: The Children's Society.

of people on the streets, living on their own is isolating and lonely. Others will still require a lot of support to address a range of issues including, substance use and mental health issues, so that they are able to remain in their accommodation and move on with their lives.

17. A number of the recommendations offered so far have explicitly or implicitly touched upon the skills required by professionals who work with detached children and young people. As well as receiving training specific to issues relating to children and young people, it is also important that professionals with direct contact have understanding of detached children and young people and are able to present in an informal manner whilst setting boundaries and maintaining a professional focus and making professional judgements. There is some argument that the voluntary sector is best placed to provide certain forms of services for vulnerable children and young people, and indeed some detached and young people may be dissuaded from seeking support if it was perceived as being offered by social services. However, the key is to ensure the service meets the needs of detached children and young people and the professionals delivering services have appropriate skills and expertise, be they from a statutory or voluntary agency.
18. The research findings and recommendations raise issues relating to safeguarding children and young people and child protection procedures. The experiences of detached children and young people means that some will not be sympathetic to child protection measures being set in place to address their needs and will refuse to engage with or will reject outright such an approach, perhaps finding it difficult to be told they are a child and treated as such when they have been providing for themselves and living in an adult world. There is a difficult balance to be achieved between recognising the child or young person as a 'child', as defined by law, protecting the child and probably losing the opportunity to protect the child *and* providing a protective response that is acceptable to the child and results in improved circumstances for the child or young person. To safeguard children and young people effectively, there should be some flexibility in how child protection responses are implemented to ensure the best outcome possible is achieved. In some circumstances, it may be appropriate to look at implementing other responses. For example, where a child or young person is involved in a sexually exploitative relationship, dependent upon the child or young person's age, ability and other factors, it may be more appropriate to implement a domestic violence response. In addition, the difficulty of safeguarding children and young people when they are not known to support agencies is recognised. This adds weight to arguments to implement a range of preventative and responsive measures to detached children and young people.
19. As part of any intervention with detached children and young people, there should be a focus upon building resilience both by supporting the child or young person's resilience and also by providing a social context that promotes resilience. However, whilst building resilience is vital, it is important to recognise, firstly, that the social context can only foster or inhibit qualities of resilience that a child or young person may or may not display²⁰ and, secondly, to ensure avoidance of exclusive reliance upon a resilience-led perspective, particularly in extreme adversity²¹.
20. It also important to treat detached children and young people on the streets with respect and view each as an individual, without making assumptions and ill-informed judgements. They all have something to offer and are important for the future.
21. Due to the large amount of data generated by the research, it has not been possible to share all of the research findings in the research important and it is important that opportunities are made available to disseminate other research findings to further understanding of the lives of detached children and young people and identify learning for policy and practice. For example, there are some significant differences between males and females that are worth further exploration.
22. As parental and carer issues and experiences played such an important role in children and young people's lives, it is important to gain understanding of their perspectives of how circumstances developed so that it was no longer possible for children to remain in the home and parents or carers and children become detached from one another. This learning would enable interventions to be developed that respond to parents' needs and are able to effectively focus addressing the issues and dynamics that trigger a child or young person becoming detached and also upon building more positive relationships between parents and carers and their children.
23. As many of the children and young people who participated in the research in a number of locations came from local estates, to achieve full insight into their worlds, it is recommended that action research be carried out in localised areas that includes the participation of local stakeholders including key professionals, community representatives, parents and carers and of course, children and young people.
24. This report ends with the recommendation that a community approach be adopted to care for all children and young people. It is our collective responsibility to address the needs of detached children and young people, to understand them and their worlds and to represent them accurately. Their experiences may be difficult to comprehend and may contradict previous notions of what it means to be a child in the UK but it will only be possible to design and deliver effective responses to their needs when there is understanding of the realities of being detached and on the streets in the UK. Every child matters and these children and young people matter too.