RADAR
Full Research Report

Running Away: Drivers, Awareness, and Responses

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Missing Children Europe

Child Helpline International

LIÈGE université

Child Focus 116000

The smile of the child

IAC Instituto de Apoio à Criança

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Disclaimer: The information presented is not exhaustive and does not represent the full scope of data, statements, and best practices of all countries and participants.

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Executive summary

Runaway children, a vulnerable group under the radar

The number of runaway cases in Europe have been increasing annually. In 2018, runaway children made up 58.2% of missing children reported to the hotlines compared to 51% in 2014 (Figures & Trends, MCE)[1]. Once on the streets, runaways face more risks to their safety and long-term well-being. In the UK alone, as many as 5,000 children a year cope by stealing, drug dealing and prostitution (Social Exclusion Unit, 2002)[2], and are increasingly vulnerable to sexual and criminal exploitation. A leading problem in the fight to prevent running away is the misperception of the phenomenon as a behavioural problem and the idea that runaway children are 'voluntarily missing'; this term negates the complexity and nature of the phenomenon. Previous research and the findings from the four studies in this report show that running away is often a symptom of one or more adverse childhood experiences in the child's life.

The RADAR project: Drivers, Awareness and Responses

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

RADAR's methodology consists of conducting Europe wide research to deepen knowledge on the root causes and consequences of running away with a view of disseminating the knowledge obtained through a Massive Open Online Course for professionals across Europe. The project also aims to advance policy work in the area of child protection for runaway children. The project is steered by six European partners, a Board of Professional Experts from different fields of work, and a Young People's Board with 8 young people who have experience of running away.

This report details the results of the project's Europe wide research conducted in the form of:

- Quantitative data on runaways obtained from Missing Children Europe's child hotlines and Child Helpline International's child helplines.
- Focus groups with 28 children and young people with experience of running away in 4 European countries.
- A Delphi study with 28 professional stakeholders in Europe to explore opportunities and best practices for runaway children.

[1] https://missingchildreneurope.eu/Portals/0/Figures%20and%20Trends%202018.pdf

[2] http://www.bris.ac.uk/poverty/downloads/keyofficialdocuments/Young%20Runaways.pdf

Key findings

On what leads to running away

1) Running away is frequently a symptom of one or more Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs) present in a child's life. Children primarily run away due to problems at home, with different forms of violence, conflict, abuse, and neglect featuring at the top of the list of problems experienced. Our findings also show that runaway children experience more violence compared to other categories of missing children.

2) Two main trajectories are identified when researching the motivations behind running away. These trajectories are *running from something* and *running towards something*. Children who form part of the 'running from something' trajectory identify it as a means to distance themselves from a difficult situation and an attempt to draw attention or raise awareness about a problem in the hopes that it will bring change. Meanwhile, children who form part of the 'running towards something' trajectory frequently identify their desire to get closer to a person or to a situation that appears more desirable than their current one. Some express a desire for empowerment and a yearning for a more independent way of life.

3) Mental health is identified as a common reason for running away, often belonging to the trajectory of 'running from something'. Young people who were motivated to run away because of struggles with their mental health, indicated that they experienced mental health challenges long after returning home. This involved mainly episodes of depression and suicidal thoughts.

4) Children of different groups who run away are likely to experience different trajectories and be exposed to different risks. For example, our findings indicate that girls who run away and runaway children who identify as belonging to the LGBTQ+ community are at an increased risk of sexual exploitation compared to other groups of runaway children. Other groups of children who may experience different trajectories are runaway children in migration, runaway children who identify as young carers, and runaway boys. These findings highlight a need for an improved understanding of different trajectories for better responses and protection.

5) Children living in care homes are overrepresented among runaways and are identified as one of the most at-risk groups of young people with increased probability of running away and having trouble accessing help. Common reasons for running away for children living in care include their desire to re-join their families or somebody close to them, and issues around conflict and quality of care homes. Young people who follow this trajectory expressed that running away was a way to signal their distress and discontent, rather than a means to escape forever.

6) Child hotlines and helplines provide essential support for young runaways and their families. The findings of this report show us that runaways make up over half of the missing children cases recorded to the 116 000 hotlines in 2019. A high proportion of runaway calls were recorded as prevention calls, meaning that child hotlines and helplines have a significant role to play in the different timeline trajectories of runaways.

On the dissemination and accessibility of services

7) A series of barriers to accessing help for runaway children are identified in the research. The lack of trust between young people and adults is one of the most common obstacles. The underlying causes for this were the fear of being judged, concerns around professional confidentiality, previous negative experiences with adults or professionals, and the fear of not being believed.

8) Stigmatisation of runaway children is common within communities and among professionals, which may frequently lead to inadequate support and protection. Children who run away more than once are identified as more likely to experience stigmatisation by professionals and have trouble accessing help. Stigmatisation and prejudice are also suspected to be linked to the underreporting of runaways.

9) Children and young people were not always aware of existing services and organizations available and described a sense of hesitation at the idea of reaching out to services they are not familiar with. They also identified the need for more accessible support for all children, mainly through online platforms, with the option of anonymity.

10) The timelines of support services and the lengthy processes of multi-agency protocols are also key barriers in the decision of runaway children to access help. Young people acquire social care for many years before seeing any positive change happen within their families and their lives.

On improving interventions for prevention and support

11) The moment of return home or to care is a delicate stage in the trajectory of runaway children which requires careful attention on behalf of families and professionals. Young people identified the 'moment of return' as a significant step influencing their decision to run away again or not.

12) Parents, caregivers, and families remain the most important context identified for prevention and support work, mainly for the identification and reduction of ACEs. The pillars that form a supportive environment for young people were identified as being open communication, listening and understanding, and a caring and compassionate relationship.

13) The identification of a 'trusted adult' in the lives of children and young people was a common theme in the research findings. The key characteristics identified of a trusted adult include non-judgmental attitudes, stability and openness. Teachers are identified as professionals well placed to identify children at risk of ACEs and to act as trusted adults for young people.

14) The need to establish a sense of belonging and to be part of a social fabric are identified as an important need for runaway children. This is closely linked to the theme of having an 'anchor' in their lives that can prevent running away. This anchor can take any shape and would act as their reason for staying.

1 Introduction

1.1 Research background

When children run away from home, it is often perceived as "problematic behaviour" (Brooks Holliday, Edelen and Tucker, 2017). However, it appears that running away is above all an attempted solution to break free from a problem – a form of response to a situation that has become too difficult to live with (Glowacz, 2017). Current literature on the topic highlights that these young people's needs, and experiences are still poorly understood and need to be explored further for better child protection responses. (Landers, McGrath, Johnson, Armstrong and Dollard, 2017; Bounds, Edinburgh, Fogg and Saeywc, 2019).

In March 2020, Missing Children Europe launched a new Europe wide project on runaways called RADAR (Running Away: Drivers, Awareness, and Responses). RADAR aims to reframe runaway behaviour and move away from its common characterisation as a child's "problem behaviour", (which leads to underreporting) towards it being seen as a clearly detectible indicator of underlying adverse childhood experiences (ACE's). The ultimate impact of the project is to achieve genuine progress in the awareness, understanding, and responses for children running away to provide them with better protection and care across the EU.

1.2 Literature review

Studies on young runaways do not have uniform criteria when it comes to defining the population in question. The criteria that define running away are variable, as previous research indicates (Glowacz, 2017), and the research does not systematically distinguish between young runaways and young homeless people. Studies on this issue therefore intersect with one another regarding themes of young homelessness, child abuse, delinquency, substance abuse and LGBTQ+ groups. Our literature review takes this limitation into account and incorporates studies on these different groups. This review is not intended to be exhaustive but aims to summarise current tendencies and issues regarding teenage runaways that appear new, are receiving greater attention or raise new questions.

1.3 Drivers and risk factors

According to Benoit-Bryan (2011), some groups are more at risk of leaving home and having negative experiences while running away. These include girls, young people with an immigrant or ethnic minority background, LGBTQ+ groups, and youth with a history of being placed in care. Domestic violence and drugs appear to be widely recognised risk factors in the studies. More recent literature reviews (Heerde and Hemphill, 2019; Giano et al., 2020) list the risk factors identified over the last few years for young homeless people and young runaways. These studies highlight the complexity of factors involved in runaway patterns. This complexity calls upon the risk amplification model when dealing with youth at risk of running away or living on the streets (Gwadz

et al., 2018; Glowacz, 2017; Tyler and Melander, 2015). Thus, there is no single factor that leads to running away, but rather a combination of risk factors that increases the likelihood of young people going down this path.

While Brooks Holliday, Edelen and Tucker (2017) identify running away above all as oppositional and delinquent behaviour, other factors can provide us with a better understanding of young people's vulnerabilities and needs. Indeed, Gauvin, Labelle, Daigle, Breton and Houle (2019) highlight the vulnerability of homeless teenagers. These authors also address life as a runaway and the means that these young people sometimes end up resorting to in order to make a living, especially by selling drugs, stealing or prostitution. Gauvin, Labelle, Daigle, Breton and Houle (2019) note substance misuse as a coping strategy for these young people who are at risk of developing symptoms of depression. While delinquency may be a factor before a youth runs away, and may constitute a risk factor, it seems to be above all a response to a situation in which young people seek to ensure their survival.

Other studies have focused on the characteristics of young people who were sexually exploited when they ran away or when they lived on the streets (Landers, McGrath, Johnson, Armstrong and Dollard, 2017; Bounds, Edinburgh, Fogg and Saeywc, 2019; Latzmana, Gibbsa, Feinberg, Kluckmana and Aboul-Hosn, 2019). The authors highlight the multiple problems that these youth face and reveal that their needs are still poorly understood.

The current literature points out specific features of LGBTQ+ youth who appear to be over-represented among young people living on the street. Studies pay particular attention to the specific needs of these youth and the difficulties they face when accessing help, in particular the fear of being discriminated against (Tyler and Schmitz, 2018). This echoes research by Page (2017), which indicates the need to take into account the specific experiences of LGBTQ+ youth belonging to an ethnic or cultural minority, according to the concept of intersectionality. Along the same lines, Coren, Hossain, Pardo Pardo and Bakker (2016) report that gender, ethnicity, religion, disability, citizenship, legal status and age must be taken into account when considering how to respond to these young people's needs. Context also comes into play, such as experiences of sexual abuse, violence, addiction, basic literacy and numeracy, migration (including rural to urban migration), poverty and exclusion mechanisms (including community responses to migrant and refugee status).

1.4 Intervention strategies for runaway children

Current research seems to particularly value prevention strategies involving several people in contact with the young person, especially their peers, during and after running away. Gauvin, Labelle, Daigle, Breton and Houle (2019) suggest providing the guidance and social support that young runaways may request. They propose providing support on the streets from someone who is older and more experienced, in the form of a guide or mentor in order to reduce risks, especially the possibility of suicide. Griffin, Sulkowski, Bámaca-Colbert and Cleveland (2019) investigate the influence of peers and the school environment in supporting teenagers with a connection to the streets. Their recommendations advocate involving peer-led groups and improving socio-emotional skills.

Some studies address support for youth who had difficult experiences when they ran away. Responses for young people who were victims of sexual exploitation during their time away from home advocate for personalised programmes, depending on each young person's specific needs (Landers, McGrath, Johnson, Armstrong and Dollard, 2017; Bounds, Edinburgh, Fogg and Saeywc, 2019). The development of these youth appears to be supported when home care nurses can regularly offer practical parental advice and disseminate information on these young people's specific needs; being involved in discussion groups aimed at empowerment, or even case management services. The study by Landers et al. (2017) also highlights the resources available to young people and the need to help them in their development.

Another strand of research raises the question of how young people perceive and access social services when they are roaming on the streets. The study by Gwadz et al. (2018) adds an extra dimension to the discussion around the needs of young people who have run away or are homeless, particularly those in residential care homes or other types of care settings. These academics decided to meet these young people and ask them what their needs were in relation to the responses they received. The youth mentioned the need for safety, support tools, emotional support and stability. They also highlighted their mistrust of social services and the problems they encounter with getting help. Crosbya, Hsu, Jones and Rice (2018) reach similar conclusions: fear of stigmatisation, fear of police response, worries about confidentiality, the need for independence, lack of knowledge regarding services and difficulty in accepting structure. These researchers suggest promoting word of mouth among young people regarding accessing services, encouraging empowerment, a policy of openness by social services, the option of youth being able to opt out of monitoring, and establishing positive relations between youth and professionals. Latzmana et al. (2019) support the need for stability and continuity in placement homes. Coren, Hossain, Pardo Pardo and Bakker (2016) also suggest participative processes to encourage young people to get involved and work through their mistrust of adults.

Page (2017) recommends training professionals in the specific needs of young people, relating to their ethnic and cultural background and sexual orientation, raising awareness on the issue of intersectionality and identifying follow-up programmes for these young people.

Lastly, Coren, Hossain, Pardo Pardo and Bakker (2016) specifically approach the question of reintegration and a way of life without roaming on the streets for street-prone youth. They list different responses, highlighting the complexity of this issue and the fact that the effect of the responses appears to be cumulative and variable.

1.5 Need for the research

Contemporary studies on running away and on young runaways raise a number of different questions and issues that need to be addressed in more detail. Through focus groups and individual interviews with young people, the RADAR project aims to address current gaps in the literature. Heerde and Hemphill (2019) note that little is known about safeguarding measures in relation to runaways and the risks to which young people are exposed while they are on the streets. With regard to assisting these young people, current research supports and promotes

individualised follow-up programmes tailored to the needs of youth who have run away or who are on the streets. Researchers point out that these young people's needs are still poorly understood (Landers, McGrath, Johnson, Armstrong et Dollard, 2017; Bounds, Edinburgh, Fogg and Saeywc, 2019). Many researchers are currently working on the evaluation of programmes and assistance for young people who have run away or are on the streets. This is still a new area of research.

Few studies address the issue of reintegration and factors that promote the return to a regular way of life (Coren, Hossain, Pardo Pardo and Bakker, 2016). Given the risk of running away again after the first attempt, this question seems important to us.

Current research is participating in a trend that values inclusive thinking such as the integration of young people who identify as LGBTQ+ and those from major ethnic and cultural groups (Tyler and Schmitz, 2018; Page, 2017). The concept of intersectionality appears to be promising for research. This theme links with the migratory crisis that is currently gripping Europe, and the question of unaccompanied minors.

Data from current research, as well as the conclusions of previous studies (Glowacz, 2017) prompt us to pay particular attention to the role of peers in prevention and support for young people, as well as the involvement of multiple other parties such as parents, schools and health professionals.

Current research shows that a significant number of young people run away from the institutional settings where they live. This is a field of research that needs to be investigated. Finally, most of the current research comes from the United States or the United Kingdom. It seems to be more difficult to find academic literature pertaining to mainland Europe. Nevertheless, the social, historical and cultural situations in which young people live are likely to influence their experiences and their needs. There is therefore a significant gap in the literature in terms of triggers, risk factors, safety measures and the vulnerability of young people in Europe, in this specific social and cultural context, who are on the streets or at risk of running away.

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2 RADAR (Running Away: Drivers, Awareness, and Responses)

2.1 Background and objectives

RADAR's Consortium and Taskforce is made up of six European partners and a Board of Professional Experts, all of whom contributed to the collection and creation of this research report. The project also has a strong child participatory angle and features a Young People's Board made up of eight young people between the ages of 13-28 years old from Poland, Portugal, Greece, and Belgium. The Board is invited to contribute to all stages of the project development and implementation making them co-creators of every project deliverable.

RADAR aims to achieve the following objectives:

1. Research to deepen the knowledge of key root causes and consequences whilst complementing recent research on runaways in Belgium.
2. Develop a training and toolkit, based on best practices and tools collected from the research.
3. Launch a massive open online course (MOOC) to ensure Europe wide, democratic, cost-free access to the tested training content, toolkits, and best practices.
4. To advocate to EU institutions and national policy makers with recommendations from our research aimed at improving the protection and support offered to young runaways.

2.2 Research work package

Missing Children Europe leads the overall project while the University of Liege led the Research work package. The aim of this work package is to perform necessary EU-level field research to bridge the current knowledge gap and develop recommendations for EU and national policymakers with the scope of improving current child protection systems. We aim to do this through the following specific objectives:

- To deepen the knowledge of key root causes and consequences whilst complement recent research on runaways in Belgium by implementing:
    - Focus groups of 6-8 children in 4 countries to understand the key drivers and Adverse Childhood Experience leading to running away in each of these countries quantitative research as part of Child Helplines International's and Missing Children Europe's 2019 data collection from hotlines and helplines in at least 20 countries across the EU.
- To conduct EU wide mapping of professional stakeholders to recruit experts for the Delphi study and identify professionals for awareness raising and to take part in the trainings and MOOC.
- To perform a targeted EU wide field search with cooperation of selected stakeholders to identify opportunities & best practices to prevent, support and protect children from adverse childhood experience connected to running away, focusing on interagency cooperation.

The research work package took place between March 2020 and March 2021. RADAR is funded by European Commission as part of the Justice Programme & Rights, Equality and Citizenship Programme actions grants. RADAR's research activities are co-funded by Porticus Foundation.

2.3 Focus of this report

This report incorporates the results of the different research stages which were developed in a process of continuity and co-construction between the young people concerned with the issue of running away, the project partners, and the research team. The research presented uncovers the following:

1. Focus-group research report involving children and young people with experience of running away, or being at risk of running away, in our four partner countries.
2. Child hotlines and child helplines report involving quantitative and qualitative data on runaways.
3. Delphi study report, based on the results collected from the research studies above to invite different professionals across Europe to comment on what the young people have said and to share their recommendations.
4. Formulation of recommendations based on an evaluation and synthesis of all the research results collected.

The research questions that guided the studies conducted are based on one hand, on this contemporary research and on the other hand on the study conducted by University Liège's Prof Dr Fabienne Glowacz on behalf of Child Focus (2017), which included an extensive literature review.

The mapping of good practices is under evaluation and will form part of the content for the training and the Massive Open Online Course which will be developed in the next half of RADAR.

3 Missing Children Europe Quantitative Data report Runaways reported to the 116000-hotline network in 2019

3.1 Executive Summary

About the study

RADAR (Running Away: Drivers, Awareness, and Responses) is a European project on running away coordinated by Missing Children Europe, launched in March 2020. The aim is to improve awareness, understanding, and responses for children (at risk of) running away and to provide them with better protection and care across the EU. The scope of this report is to improve our understanding of the underlying causes for running away. This report presents quantitative data on runaways collected from the network of 116000 hotlines as part of Missing Children Europe's annual data collection survey about the year 2019. A total of 23 hotlines across Europe (20 NGOs and 3 governmental agencies) participated in the survey.

Key findings and recommendations

Key finding 1: Runaway children make up the largest category of missing children, with over half of the cases dealt with by the hotlines concerning runaways. A high number of calls are related to prevention. Child hotlines therefore provide essential support to runaways and their families.

Recommendations:

- Against the backdrop of the COVID-19 pandemic, safer and easier avenues to connect children with hotlines (e.g., chat platforms) should be explored, and hotline awareness raising efforts should be improved for children quarantined in challenging situations.
- Considering the potential for a good return on investment in prevention calls, more research is needed on how hotlines can improve this prevention work.

Key finding 2: The issues that lead to running away start early on, with the youngest runaways reported below the age of 10. Slightly more girls than boys are reported as runaways to the hotlines across Europe. Data disaggregated by country point to underreporting of runaways and give a mixed picture on gender, which could indicate that boys are particularly underreported.

Recommendations:

- Prevention should start early on and focus on identification of early Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs) for children and targeted support to reduce the risks associated.
- General awareness raising, as well as training of caregivers and law enforcement is needed to reduce the stigma around running away and to improve reporting rates, response times, as well as vigilance about potential underreporting of boys.

Key finding 3: The high incidence of multiple episodes of running away tells us that children are often returned to the same situation without additional measures of support, leaving the initial underlying problem unresolved. Repeat episodes last longer increasing the risks.

Recommendations:

- Protocols should be developed for timely preparation of the return home and statutory protocols should ensure individual follow-up, return home interviews and targeted support addressing the cause for running away, to mitigate the risk of a repeat episode.
- Investigation is needed into better support for and outreach to long term runaways.

Key finding 4: Young runaways experience high rates of violence and abuse compared to other categories of missing children, and this in the most important contexts of their lives: at home, in school, and in the care homes where they live.

Recommendation:

- Running away should first and foremost be seen as an indicator of one or more Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs). Against this backdrop, family interventions should be tailored to individual needs with the aim of reducing ACEs.
- Mandatory training for professionals working with children (educators, social workers, law enforcement, judicial staff, hot- and helplines) on links between running away and ACEs.
- Implement effective anti-bullying policies and contextual safeguarding in schools.

Key finding 5: Struggles with mental health were ranked as a common reason why children ran away and are often triggered by adverse experiences in different contexts of their lives.

Recommendation:

- Investment in reducing stigma around mental health from an early age, which can partly be achieved by introducing counselling and mental health services in schools and mandatory training on mental health first aid and awareness for school staff.

Key finding 6: Different groups of children follow different trajectories of running away exposing them to diverse challenges and risks. Children in alternative care are overrepresented among runaways, and issues around conflict, quality of care homes, and desire to re-join one's family are indicated as primary concerns. There is evidence that runaways from the LGBTQ+ community are significantly underreported, potential reasons stem from prevailing issues around stigma and fear of judgement. For runaway children in migration lengthy procedures, inadequate reception centres, and family reunification were indicated as leading causes for running away.

Recommendations:

- Care homes for children are a key area for prevention. Focus should be on improving the quality-of-care homes and developing care arrangements for family contact to avoid children being cut off from their families. These care arrangements should be co-developed with children themselves.

- Improved understanding and awareness raising efforts are needed to improve the support offered to runaway LGBTQ+ children and young people.
- Improving the quality of reception centres, speeding up integration into society, and ensuring effective quality guardianship systems are stepping-stones towards providing children in migration alternatives to running away and reducing exposure to abuse.

3.2 Introduction

Missing Children Europe actively supports the improvement and coordination of the European network of hotlines for missing children available through the 116 000 number. Twenty-two of our members manage the national 116000 hotline services for missing children across Europe and provide free and immediate emotional, psychological, social, legal and administrative support 24/7 to children (at risk of) going missing and their families. This report presents quantitative data on runaways from 2019 collected from the network of 116 000 hotlines as part of Missing Children Europe's Annual Data Collection survey. This year, the data was used to inform part of the research activities of the RADAR project.

RADAR (Running Away: Drivers, Awareness, and Responses) is a European project on running away coordinated by Missing Children Europe and launched in March 2020. RADAR aims to reframe runaway behaviour and move away from its common characterisation as a child's "problem behaviour", (which leads to underreporting) towards it being seen as a clearly detectible indicator of underlying adverse childhood experiences (ACE's). The ultimate impact of the project is to achieve genuine progress in the awareness, understanding, and responses for children running away and to provide them with better protection and care across the EU.

The scope of this report is to improve our understanding on the underlying causes for running away through an analysis of the data collected from the 116 000 missing children hotlines.

3.2.1 Research objectives

The objectives of the quantitative data collection are:

- To obtain a recent state of play on the number of runaway cases among the missing children cases reported to the 116 hotlines in 2019.
- To identify themes and patterns in the causes and effects of running away.
- To contribute to the development of concrete and effective recommendations by RADAR's Consortium & Taskforce, together with other research findings, on training and policy in support of runaways.

3.2.2 Methodology

Research methods

Since 2013, Missing Children Europe has collected and analysed data from the 116 000 missing children hotlines through an Annual Data Collection Survey and published its results in its annual Figures & Trends reports.

In 2019, as part the RADAR project, our survey included additional questions specific to runaway children, asking in more detail than before about the underlying causes and the consequences of running away (see Appendix I) Other missing children categories for which data was collected are: parental abductions, children missing in migration, criminal abductions, lost or injured missing children, and otherwise missing children

3.2.3 Data Collection

The 116 hotlines were invited to participate to the online survey between March 2020 – April 2020. A total of 23 hotlines (20 NGOs and 3 governmental agencies) participated in the data collection. The following Member States are represented in this report: Austria, Belgium, Bulgaria, Croatia, Cyprus, Czech Republic, France, Greece, Hungary, Ireland, Italy, Lithuania, Luxembourg, Malta, Poland, Portugal, Serbia, Slovenia, Sweden, Switzerland, The Netherlands, United Kingdom and Ukraine.

3.2.4 COVID-19 challenges and other limitations to the data collection

The annual data collected from our hotlines is generally able to give us information about the calls answered, however more specific data relating to categories, causes, outcomes and so forth is not always collected by each hotline.

The number of hotlines dealing with different categories of missing children is given in Table 1.

20 out of the 23 surveyed hotlines (about 95%) answered yes to the question whether they dealt with cases of runaway children in 2019. Parental abduction came second, with 18 out of 23 (90%) hotlines answering yes to the question whether they had dealt with cases of this nature; between 60%-69% of hotlines dealt with criminal abductions and lost, injured or otherwise missing cases, and less than half (only 10 out of 23) dealt with missing children in migration.

Table 1 Percentage of hotlines dealing with the different categories of missing children

Category	N	%
	*Number of hotlines**	

Missing children in migration	10	47.6%
Lost or injured missing children	13	61.9%
Criminal abductions	14	66.7%
Parental abductions	18	90%
Runaway children	**20**	**95.2%**

** Data from 21 hotlines*

Runaway cases are the most prominent category of missing children dealt with by almost all hotlines, with two hotlines not able to answer this question due to lack of disaggregated data on calls (or lack of access to their database, see below), and only one hotline, the Dutch Center for International Child Abductions which specializes in parental abductions, indicating they did not deal with runaways.

Indeed, specific information for each category is not always collected and sometimes incoming calls are not recorded under specific categories. Furthermore, fewer hotlines responded to the annual survey in 2019 compared to other years, as the measures to limit the spread of COVID-19 taken during the time of data collection (March 2020) limited the hotlines' access to their databases. Lack of access to their full database due to COVID19 measures, was also a reason for some hotlines to provide partial datasets this year.

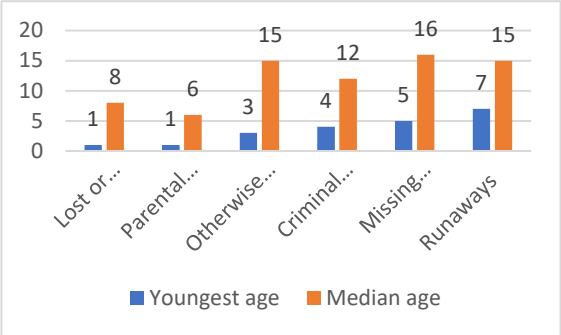
Against this backdrop, this report presents an overview of the data we were able to collect on runaways and should not be read to cover the full extent of the issue of runaway children in Europe, or of other missing children categories.

3.3 Findings

3.3.1 Demographics of runaway children

Figure 1 shows the *youngest age* for each missing children category, and the *median age* for each category. The youngest runaway child reported to the hotlines was 7 years old, while the median age of runaway children was 15 years old.

Figure 1 Youngest and median ages of missing children per category



** Data from 17 hotlines*

The youngest age of children reported missing varied significantly across categories. Reported cases of parental abductions recorded the age of their youngest missing child as 1 year old, while the youngest missing child in migration was reported as being five years old. There was less significant difference in the median ages across categories. The median age for runaways, missing children in migration, and otherwise missing children – all children that are often considered to be "voluntarily" missing - was between 15-16 years old. The median age was much lower for the other categories of missing children (lost or injured and abducted) which ranged from 6-12 years old.

Figure 2 Youngest and median ages of runaways per country

Country	Youngest age	Median age
France	7	16
Belgium	7	15
Ukraine	10	14
Austria	10	15
United Kingdom	11	16
Italy	11	17
Cyprus	11	16
Portugal	11	14
Greece	13	15
Switzerland	13	15

The youngest and median ages of runaways per country are shown in Table 2.

Table 2 shows that, for runaways, the youngest age varies more significantly across countries compared to the median age. The youngest runaway children were reported by France and Belgium, at the mere age of 7, while Luxembourg reported only 1 runaway child aged 17. The data shows us that running away is an issue that affects children from a very young age and spans throughout the adolescent years. This specific piece of data is significant when considering the type of intervention and targeted support that may be most beneficial for runaway children.

Ireland	13	16
Croatia	14	15
Poland	14	17
Czech Republic	14	14
Netherlands	14	15
Serbia	16	16
Luxembourg	17	17

** Data from 17 hotlines*

3.3.2 Gender breakdown

Hotlines in four countries (Austria, Greece, Malta, Switzerland) received significantly more reports on girls running away, whereas hotlines from two other countries (Italy, Ukraine) received significantly more reports on boys running away. Overall, more runaway girls are reported to our hotlines than boys, which is consistent with other research (Glowacz 2017, Benoit-Bryan, 2011), however it is important to consider the possibility that runaway boys are underreported.

Despite evidence from case studies that young people identifying as non-binary or trans+ are at risk of running away, the third gender category offered in the survey to record such cases, was used by only 1 of the 16 hotlines which provided data on gender.

3.3.3 Runaway caseload in 2019

The number of new missing children cases opened per category is shown in Table 3.

Table 3 Number of new missing children cases opened in 2019 per category

Category	N	%
	Cases	
Criminal abductions	18	0%
Lost or injured	56	1%

Missing children in migration	139	3%
Otherwise missing	388	9%
Other types of cases	383	9%
Parental abductions	981	23%
Runaways	2354	55%
Total	**3936**	**100%**

** Data from 21 hotlines*

Runaway cases made up 55% of new cases reported to the 116000 hotlines in 2019, making it the largest category of missing children. Runaways have consistently made up more than half of all cases reported since we started surveying the hotlines. About 23% of new missing children reported to our hotlines in 2019 were cases of parental abductions; the remaining cases consisting of missing children in migration lost or injured children, criminal abductions, otherwise missing children, and other types of cases.

The breakdown of reported cases of runaway children in 2019 per country is shown in Figure 2.

Belgium is responsible for the largest share of reports to hotlines on missing runaway children (35%), followed by France (22%), and Malta (11%). There is a significant difference with reports to hotlines from the remaining countries, often with larger populations than Belgium or Malta, with shares ranging from 0% to 7%.

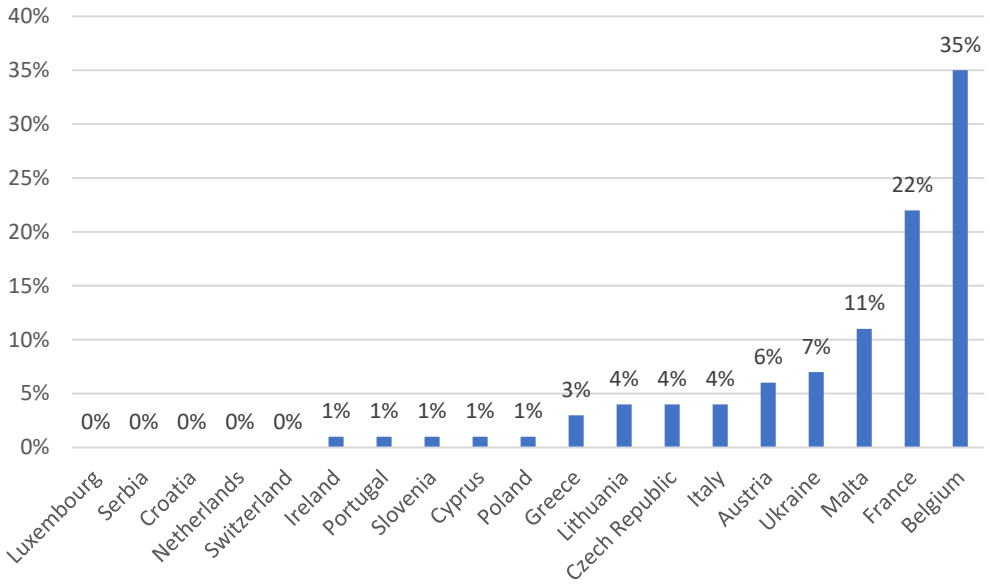
These apparent discrepancies are due to a number of different factors. Public awareness of the hotline in each country makes a difference in the number of children reported missing to the hotlines. In Belgium, the 116000 hotline is widely known in the country, which is likely the main reason for the larger share of reports compared to other hotlines.

The source of the figures also makes a difference: in Malta the 116000 hotline is operated by the police, who do not make a difference in their records between missing children cases reported via the 116000 number or missing cases reported to them in other ways. Hence the Maltese numbers are the complete police statistics on missing children for the country. This stands in contrast with most of the other countries shown, where the hotlines are operated by independent NGO's. In general, the hotlines receive lower amounts of reports than the police (but can provide more targeted 24/7 psychological and emotional support to children and left behind families).

All of that said, divergent reporting rates of missing children in general, and of runaways in particular are commonly observed. These widely diverging reporting rates (e.g. 1/million in Italy vs 5/million in France in the 2013 study by the European Commission and ECORYS) are assumed to

suggest a significant level of underreporting in some countries, potentially due to social stigma associated with this category of missing children. But even in the UK, which has comparably high reporting rates according to that same 2013 study, the Children's Society says two thirds of runaways are not reported.

Figure 2 Percentage of new runaway cases opened in 2019 per country



** Data from 19 hotlines*

3.3.4 How missing children were found

Table 4 shows how children are found.

The prevailing methods by which children were reported to be found was either by law enforcement (35%) or they returned of their own accord (30%). In general, it can be assumed that children who have returned of their own accord are the same children who "voluntarily" went missing, in this case mainly runaways, and some otherwise missing, since the fate of the majority of children who go missing in migration unfortunately remains unknown. Children who are abducted, lost or injured would be less able to return on their own. The data indicates that the general public may play a significant role in finding missing children, with 21% reported to be found after the use of publicity appeals and 7% found after the activation of a child alert. However, it is not clear if in all of these cases, the publicity appeal or child alert played a direct role in locating the child, all we know is that the child was found after such an appeal or alert was issued. Evidently, once the child is located, law enforcement and/or social services would still be involved in returning the child home. 7% of children were found in other ways, which includes being located by a parent, by another young person, or by welfare services.

Table 4 Services involved in finding children

How were missing children found	%

Search and rescue team	0%
Other	7%
Child alert	7%
Publicity appeal	21%
Returned of own accord	30%
By law enforcement	35%
Total	**100%**

** Data from 17 hotlines*

For runaways, whether returned of their own accord, by welfare services or by law enforcement, the simple return of the child often does not solve the underlying problems which led the child to leave their home, or the place where they lived. It would seem important to establish mechanisms for each potential pathway of returning home, to ensure proper follow up of the case to prevent repeated running away, an issue which is becoming more and more frequent (see paragraph 4.9)

3.3.5 Runaway prevention cases

The number of calls that dealt with the prevention of missing children, more specifically before a child went missing, is shown in Table 5.

Roughly 62% of all prevention calls received by our hotlines concerned cases where a child was at risk of running away. This includes children (sometimes with previous episodes of running away) calling because they were thinking of running away again, as well as an adult or concerned peer calling in an attempt to prevent a child from running away. With 1231 prevention calls regarding runaways compared to 2354 cases of runaways reported, there is significant opportunity for prevention, and for return on investment in the quality and effectiveness of those prevention calls.

Parental abduction cases made up about 23% of prevention calls and otherwise missing cases made up 15%. As lost or injured cases are challenging, and criminal abduction cases almost impossible to predict, the number of prevention calls on these cases are minimal, as would be expected.

Young newcomers who go missing from a reception centre or temporary care facility after being registered to national authorities, usually do so within hours or days after arrival, leaving no time for prevention, as is shown in the figures. Here we need investment in performative and high-quality

guardianship systems, thorough risk assessments upon arrival, and appropriate reception conditions.

Table 5 Number of calls about the prevention of missing children per category

Category	N	%
	Calls?	
Missing children in migration	0	0%
Criminal abductions	1	0.05%
Lost or injured	2	0.05%
Otherwise missing	296	14.9%
Parental abductions	461	23.2%
Runaways	1231	61.8%
Total	**1991**	**100%**

** Data from 14 hotlines*

3.3.6 New and ongoing support for runaway cases

Hotlines were asked to collect data on the number of cases requiring ongoing support from the previous year as well as the number of new cases opened in 2019 which required support.

Runaways take up a smaller share of ongoing cases than they do of new cases, which means in general, they return (or are returned) faster compared to other cases, and compared to missing children in migration in particular, where often cases remain open because there is no cross-border feedback.

That said, ongoing cases of runaways take up almost a third of all cases requiring support and knowing that runaway children are more at risk of violence and other adverse experiences the longer they stay away, it is important to invest in efficient support of these cases.

Table 6 Number of cases supported per category

Missing Children Categories	N	%	N	%
	Ongoing cases		New cases	
Criminal abductions	11	0.5%	15	0.4%
Lost or injured	5	0.2%	56	1.4%
Missing children in migration	342	16.3%	132	3.4%
Otherwise missing	193	9.2%	179	4.6%
Parental abductions	462	22%	1234	31.6%
Runaways	1091	51.8%	2291	58.6%
Total	**2104**	**100%**	**3907**	**100%**

** Data from 18 hotlines for the Ongoing Cases*

** Data from 19 hotlines for the New Cases*

3.3.7 Locations children ran away from

Hotlines were asked to report on the most common locations that children ran away from. Table 7 shows that the majority of children, roughly 68%, ran away from home. The second most common location children ran away from at roughly 23%, was the care home or children's home where they were living. Just under 3% of children ran away from their foster home, and just under 1% ran away from other locations which may include schools, youth, or sports clubs.

Around 5% were reported to have run away from an unknown location. An explanation for this may be that the caller did not disclose where they/the child they reported ran away from or that this particular piece of information was not sought at the time of the call.

Table 7 Locations children ran away from

Location	N	%

	Children	
Other locations	10	0.7%
Foster home	40	2.8%
Unknown location	76	5.1%
Care homes	338	22.8%
Home	1014	68.6%
Total	**1478**	**100%**

** Data from 16 hotlines*

From the information we do have about locations children ran away from it is clear that alternative care locations (children's homes or foster homes), together make up more than 25% or one fourth of reported cases. Children in alternative care are thus overrepresented amongst runaways and at higher risk than the general population, an indicator with regard to where prevention may need to be targeted.

3.3.8 Length of runaway cases

The length of time that children were missing for after running away is shown in Table 8.

More than 62% of children reported as having run away were found within the week, 99,5% of them alive, whereas 19% of runaways reported missing (were) returned within the month, with the percentage of children amongst them found deceased immediately doubling to 1%. At 6 months, another 6,4% of children were found, again with 1% of them having been found deceased. While death rates thus remain relatively low amongst runaways, the fate of a significant number of young runaways, more than 12%, remains unknown after one year. The data shows us that the chances of being found alive are the best in the first week, the risks increasing as the child stays away from home longer, and that the length of time a child is missing for plays a significant role in the chances of them being found at all.

Table 8 The length of time in which children were found alive or deceased

Length of time	**N**	**%**	**N**	**%**	**N**	**%**
	Alive		*Deceased*		*Total*	

‹ 1 week	1033	61, 7%	5	0,3% (0,5% of total found in week	1038	62.1%
‹ 1 month	316	18,9%	3	0,2% (1% of total found in month)	319	19.1%
‹ 6 months	107	6,4%	1	0,1% (1% of total found in 6 months)	108	6.4%
‹ 1 year	4	0.2%	0	0	4	0.2%
Not Found					204	12.2%
Total	**1457**	**88,2%**	**9**	**0,5%**	**1673**	**100%**

** Data from 18 hotlines*

3.3.9 Frequency of runaway cases

The frequency of runaway episodes is show in Table 9.

Twelve hotlines were able to provide data on children reported to have run away more than once during 2019. If repeat episodes are not recorded, runaway numbers may seem inflated, but more importantly, cases where the child returns to a problematic situation that has not improved, urging them to run away again, may be overlooked. To the 12 hotlines, in total 328 children were reported to have run away repeatedly, accounting for more than 700 cases. We can see that there is a significant difference between the number of children who ran away 2-5 times (91%) with the number of children who ran away 6-10 times (7%) and more than 10 times (2%). These numbers demonstrate that children often return to a situation that has not improved, leading to further episodes of running away. This calls into question the ability of current interventions to address the root causes of running away and alleviate the needs of runaway children.

Table 9 The number of times children ran away (n=12)

Frequency	N	%
	Children	
2-5 times	300	91%

6-10 times	22	7%
>10 times	6	2%
Total	**328**	

** Data from 11 hotlines*

3.3.10 Causes for running away

Table 10 shows a ranking of the causes identified for running away.

Asked which the main reasons were reported for a child running away, 83% of hotlines answering indicated problems at home. Problems at school and problems in the care home where children lived were indicated to play a role by more than half (61% and 56% respectively). Mental health issues were also ranked high with 50% naming it as a reason for why children ran away. This was followed by running away to be with a partner/lover, reasons related to drugs and/or alcohol, adventure, and peer pressure. Only one hotline indicated issues around coming out as LGBTQ+ as a reason for running away, which stands in stark contrast with statistics from the US which indicate that up to 40% of homeless children identify as LGBTQ+. There are a number of possible reasons for this. The person reporting the missing child may not be aware that this could be a reason, or if they do, may be reluctant to report it, while hotlines do not ask. The low number indicates that social stigma is likely still strong in many countries. It may also be the result of this information (reasons for running away) not being sought, as four hotlines indicated "unknown" as one of their top answers.

Table 10 Ranking of the causes identified for running away

Reasons for running away	**N**
	Hotline responses
Problems at home	15
Problems at school	11
Problems at care homes	10
Mental health issues	9
To be with a partner	8

Drugs/Alcohol	6
Adventure	5
Peer pressure	4
Unknown	4
LGBTQ+	1

** Data from 18 hotlines*

3.3.11 Problems at home

Table 11 shows the ranking of the most common problems experienced at home.

Asked about the nature of problems at home most commonly experienced by children who ran away, the presence of physical or emotional violence within the home was placed at the top by hotlines who recorded this information. This was followed by the presence of conflict and tension, neglect, and abuse. Other problems identified at home as reasons why children ran away are changes in the family dynamics which may refer to the death of a loved one, a separation, family changes, or the birth of a new sibling. Authoritarian parenting style and parental drugs/alcohol abuse closed the ranks.

Table 11 Ranking of the most common problems at home

Most common problems	**N**
	Hotline responses
Presence of physical or emotional violence	7
Conflict and tension	4
Neglect	3
Abuse	3
Change in family dynamics	2

Authoritarian parenting style	2
Parental drugs/alcohol abuse	2

** Data from 15 hotlines*

3.3.12 Problems at school

Table 12 shows the ranking of the most common problems at school experienced by runaway children.

Few hotlines provided data to this question. A reason for this may be that problems at school were not asked about, or that they may be unknown to those reporting the runaway child. Children may not have disclosed to their parents or carers which specific problems they experienced at school. The most common problem children experienced at school was bullying, followed closely by learning difficulties, with truancy and peer pressure closing the ranks.

Table 12 Ranking of the most common problems at school

Ranking	**Problems identified**	**N**
		Hotline responses
First	Bullying	7
Second	Learning difficulties	6
Third	Truancy	4
Fourth	Peer pressure	4

** Data from 8 hotlines*

3.3.13 Problems at care homes (children's homes)

Table 13 shows the ranking of the most common problems at care homes leading to children running away according to hotlines.

The table shows us that there is less significant difference amongst problems experienced at care homes compared to the problems experienced at home, where violence was ranked significantly

higher than any other problems. The most common problems reported at care homes were the desire to re-join family members, the presence of conflict and tension, and abuse. The presence of physical or emotional violence, neglect and authoritarian climate were all other problems indicated to be experienced by children running away from care homes.

Combining the data in tables 11 to 13, we can observe that different forms of violence and abuse rank high in all the primary contexts of a child's life: home (whether with their family or in a care home), and at school.

Table 13 Ranking of the most common problems at care homes

Most common problems	**N**
	Hotline responses
To rejoin family	3
Conflict and tension at the care home	3
Abuse	3
Presence of physical or emotional violence	2
Neglect	2
Authoritarian climate at the care home	2

** Data from 11 hotlines*

3.3.14 Violence

Fifteen hotlines were able to give data on violence experienced by children reported to them as missing, fewer were able to tell us the type of missing child case concerned where violence was experienced but from the data we have, it is clear that the overwhelming majority of cases where violence was reported, were runaways.

This confirms our conclusion from tables 11 to 13: that the issue of violence against children is closely related to the issue of runaways, and that preventing and reporting violence against children is an important step towards preventing children from running away and potentially running an even greater risk of violence and or abuse while on the street.

Table 14 Types of missing child cases experiencing violence.

Type of missing child cases	N
Runaways	334
Parental abductions	15
Missing children in migration	2
Criminal abductions	6
Otherwise missing	3
Other	**130**

** Data from 15 hotlines*

3.3.15 Cross-border runaway cases

Table 14 shows the percentage of cases with a cross-border element per category.

The data shows us that roughly 9% of cross border cases identified in 2019 concerned runaways, meaning that the runaway child at some point crossed a national border. This percentage is much lower that the percentage of runaway cases overall meaning that runaway children usually remain within their country. However, even if the number of cross border runaway cases remains relatively low, in comparison, they should always be treated with concern. Runaway cases with a cross-border element may refer to children and young people who have run away as a result of exploitation – which can include sexual, but also criminal exploitation, which may require them to run drug lines from one border to another. Runaway cross-border cases may also refer to runaway children in migration (see section 4.16 Runaway children in migration) in which case smugglers and traffickers may be involved.

Table 14 Percentage of cross-border cases per category

Missing children **Categories in cross border cases**	**N**	**%**
	Children	

Criminal abductions	1	0.13%
Lost or injured	2	0.26%
Other category	11	1.44%
Otherwise missing	25	3.28%
Runaways	71	9.32%
Missing children in migration	116	15.22%
Parental abductions	536	70.34%
Total	**762**	**100%**

** Data from 18 hotlines*

3.3.16 Runaway children in migration

The data collected from Belgium and the UK showed that a total of 137 children in migration were reported missing to the hotlines there after running away. Table 15 shows a ranking of the reasons why children in migration may run away from the temporary children's home or reception centres where they have been placed.

The table shows us that the most common reason children in migration run away is to be reunited with their family. This piece of data is consistent with the data in Table 13, where children reported running away from the care homes they were living in, to be with their family. This data may also be consistent with that from Table 14, whereby children in migration may cross borders in order to be with their family. Other reasons ranked high for runaway children in migration is the fear of being sent back to their country of origin, the poor conditions in reception centres, and the length of determination processes deemed too long for children.

Table 15 Ranking of reasons for running away for children in migration.

Ranking	Problems identified
First	To be reunited with family
Second	Afraid of being sent back to country of origin/first country of arrival in Europe

Third	The conditions in the reception center were not appropriate for children
Fourth	They felt the status determination process was taking too long
Fifth	They were pressured to leave for reasons linked to trafficking
Sixth	They did not have appropriate shelter
Seventh	They had no opportunities for education or employment
Eight	They experienced a form of violence
Ninth	**They experience mental health issues**

** Data from 6 hotlines*

3.4 Key findings and recommendations

On the basis of the following key findings from the 116 000 hotlines, several recommendations can be made in order to improve prevention and responses to runaway children.

1) Child hotlines and helplines provide essential support for young runaways and their families. The findings of this report show us that runaways make up over half of the missing children cases recorded to the 116 000 hotlines in 2019. A high proportion of runaway calls were recorded as prevention calls, meaning that child hotlines and helplines can play a significant role in the different timeline trajectories of runaways.

There is significant potential for return on investment in prevention through missing children hotlines. More research is needed on how they can provide more effective prevention and reach children better.

Against the backdrop of the COVID-19 pandemic and the risks posed to children by the quarantine restrictions, different and safer pathways connecting children to hotlines need to be explored and awareness raising efforts of the hotlines should be increased. Channels connecting children to hotlines should focus on chat platforms that remain safe and anonymous within restricted spaces such as households, while awareness raising efforts should be conducted by actors who have regular and ongoing contact with children and their families. This includes schools, leisure activities for young people, and primary care workers (doctors, nurses, dentists, etc.

2) While the median age of runaways is 15, the issues children deal with that lead them to running away likely start much earlier, and the youngest runaways are below the age of 10.

Prevention should start early, with a focus on children in primary school years and the early years of secondary school. Early prevention should support better identification of early Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs) that children may experience at home, as well as targeted family support interventions to reduce the risks identified. Schools are important spaces for awareness raising and risk identification, but it is recommended that all adults working with children should be better enabled to identify adverse experiences and respond to them (see further recommendations 6 and 7).

3) There is evidence that runaway cases are underreported in many countries. The lower number of boys reported in some countries may be an indication of underreporting.

General awareness raising is needed on the link between ACEs and running away to reduce the stigma around running away, improve reporting rates and provide a more accurate picture of the number of runaway cases across Europe. Awareness raising is further needed to improve knowledge on the risks and adverse experiences that runaways face at all stages of a running away episode - before, during and after – to improve understanding that the risks increase the longer a child is missing and to counter the underestimation of risks to boys due to the misperception that they cannot be victims of exploitation and abuse. Every parent should know to immediately report a runaway child and how. Workshops with caregivers and other adults working with children should be carried out to improve their knowledge on when and how to report a runaway child and law enforcement should be trained to take every runaway episode seriously and respond immediately.

4) The high incidence of multiple episodes of running away tells us that children are often returned to the same situation without additional measures of support, leaving the initial underlying problem unresolved. Repeat episodes often last longer, increasing the risks.

Specific protocols should be developed to ensure that a return home is well prepared with parents and educators, in a timely manner (i.e., during the disappearance) to ensure it is positive. To reduce the rate of repeat episodes of running away, statutory protocols should be developed to ensure that the right support is offered to children and families after an incident of running away. Such protocols should involve assessments of the risks and needs to provide targeted intervention, Return Home Interviews by an independent person, and follow up procedures for all cases, regardless of the pathway to return.

Investigation is needed on how to better support long term cases, and to better reach out to and support runaways while they are away from home, with information about resources, trusted people and places they can turn to.

5) An important key finding from the report is that high rates violence and abuse experienced by young runaways, compared to other categories of missing children, as well as the fact that problems at home, particularly various forms of violence, conflict, neglect and abuse, were ranked as top reasons for children to run away.

Several recommendations can be made for these findings. Running away should, first and foremost, be seen as an indicator of one or more adverse childhood experiences, and the data points to the home as a prime location. Against this backdrop, investment should above all be placed on family interventions targeted at reducing ACEs and mitigating harm.

Interventions, both prevention interventions and interventions offered after an incident of running away, should be based on individual needs assessments. Needs assessments will support the development of more targeted and individualized family support work.

In situations not assessed as high risk, mediation should be readily offered to children and families after an incident of running away.

Training should be mandatorily provided to relevant professional actors on the link between running away and ACEs, and on effective prevention and response to running away within a context of ACEs. Relevant professional actors should include education, law enforcement and judicial staff, children's social services, and child hotlines and helplines.

6) The report identified problems at school, including bullying, peer pressure and other mental health issues, as another top reason that can lead children to running away.

Adopting effective anti-bullying policies as well as a contextual safeguarding approach in schools are key recommendations to tackle this finding.

Contextual Safeguarding helps parents and professionals recognize, understand, and respond to the idea that as young people grow older, they are exposed to and influenced by a range of risks that go beyond the family environment. This means that interventions (whether prevention or not) should be carried out together with and within all areas of a child's life (schools, communities, peers). Adopting a contextual safeguarding approach requires all professionals working in the different sectors of a child's life to become a critical part of safeguarding practices, and not only those involved in family support work.

7) Children in alternative care are overrepresented amongst runaways. Issues around conflict and quality of care homes were amongst the top reasons for running away. Another important key finding is the motivation to re-join one's family as a common reason for running away from a care home.

These findings make alternative care homes another important area for prevention efforts. Increased importance should be given to providing adequate family support to reduce institutionalisation, as well as investing resources in alternative family care for children, and in improving the quality of alternative care for children to make it child centred.

This includes developing alternative care arrangements that avoid cutting children off from their families when alternative care is absolutely necessary. These care arrangements should include agreements for family contact and visitations and should be co-developed directly with the child in question.

8) Mental health was ranked as a common reason why children ran away. Issues around mental health are often linked to other problems present in a child's life, such as abuse, emotional neglect, or trauma. Bullying is also frequently associated with the development of mental health issues in children and young people.

Improved investment and efforts should go towards reducing stigma around mental health from as early as primary school. A step towards achieving this is to make mental health support and counsellors readily available in schools, and for training on mental health awareness to be mandatorily integrated in training to school staff and refreshed on a regular basis.

9) Only one runaway child was recorded as being trans+, and only one hotline mentioned issues around coming out as LGBTQ+ as a reason children run away. This contrasts with case reports received from hotlines of LGBTQ+ youngsters who did run away, and with evidence from the UK and the US that being LGBTQ+ is a risk factor for running away.

Awareness raising efforts and training to relevant actors is needed to reduce stigma and raise sensitivity on LGBTQ+ issues. That said, more research is needed to improve our understanding of the trajectory of LGBTQ+ runaways and to be able to provide more targeted and effective support. Relevant professional actors, as well as child hotlines and helplines, should be enabled to provide a map of national and local resources specifically for this group of runaways reaching for support.

10) The report shows that children in migration run away for numerous reasons: lengthy and difficult procedures, family reunification, and inadequate reception conditions.

Prevention is challenging for runaway children in migration but should be targeted at investments for adequate reception conditions, thorough risk assessments at arrival and performant high quality effective guardianship systems.

Other current research shows that children in migration are at high risk of being groomed for exploitation and trafficking. Grooming is sometimes a stepping-stone that leads children to run away. By improving the timing of procedures upon arrival as well as speeding up integration into society, we can decrease the risk of children's exposure to groomers and offer children (at risk of running away) in migration alternative solutions.

4 Child Helpline International's Child Helpline Quantitative Data Report: Contacts Reported by European Child Helplines in 2019 which relate to runaways and runaway behaviour

4.1 Introduction

Child helplines offer a unique insight into the direct experiences of the children and young people who contact them. In order to understand the issues faced by the children and young people who contact the child helplines, we survey our child helpline members every year to gather information about the contacts they received and the actions they have taken to follow-up on these contacts.

Alongside our annual data collection, we have developed a supplementary thematic data collection for our European child helpline members focused on **runaways** and **runaway behaviour** to contribute to the research for The RADAR Project, of which Child Helpline International is a partner (*Running Away: Drivers, Awareness and Responses*). From our data collections, we share the expertise and experiences that child helplines in Europe and around the world have with regards to runaways and runaway behaviours.

With the present report, we aim to provide insights into the root causes of why children and young people present runaway behaviour based on information collected by child helplines in Europe. With the hope that this report will contribute the current knowledge of the drivers behind *running away,* and will guide the development of advocacy, through training and policy recommendations.

4.1.1 Methodology

To understand the issues faced by the children and young people who get in touch with child helplines, we surveyed our members around the world to gather information about the contacts they received in 2019. This report presents a selection of those data to contextualise the data from our RADAR Project Data Collection.

Child Helpline International conducted a RADAR Project specific survey where we invited all the child helpline members in Europe, both full and associate, to submit data on the contacts received related to runaways and runaway behaviour between the 1st of January 2019 until the 31st of December 2019. The survey was open for submission from 31st of August 2020 until 26th of October 2020.

4.1.2 Participating Child Helplines

In comparison to the 38 European child helplines that contributed to our 2019 Annual Survey, 19 child helplines reacted to our RADAR survey request. There was a total of 11 child helplines that reported data to our project survey, seven additional child helplines that reported no contacts

related to runaways in 2019, and two child helplines that were unable to share data as a direct result of Covid-19 including limited time and inability to access the office.

This report primarily analyses the data from these 11 child helplines spanning 11 countries. The countries included in this project are Austria, Azerbaijan, Czech Republic, Greece, Italy, Netherlands, Poland, Portugal, Switzerland, Ukraine, and United Kingdom. For a complete list of the child helplines that contributed to this report, refer to Appendix 2.

4.1.3 Child Helpline International's Definition of Runaways

Building on Child Helpline International's Glossary on the New Data Framework that was developed in consultation with child helplines, this project focused on pre-existing terms and categories while also creating project specific terms relevant for runaways and runaway behaviour. Child Helpline International uses a data framework's classification to collect data on contacts every year. That framework divides the reasons for contacts into four themes and 11 large issues or reasons, each of them divided into more specific sub-categories.

The first theme is Endangerment, and it includes the category **Missing Children** which interests us here.

Missing Children is defined as situations in which a child or young person is missing, has disappeared and/or cannot be found.

The **Missing Children** category includes a total of four sub-categories:

1. Child abduction
2. Lost, injured or otherwise missing child
3. **Runaway child**
4. Other/Unspecified

The third sub-category, *Runaway child*, is most relevant for the present report. It is used when comparing the RADAR specific data collection to Child Helpline International's annual data collection.

However, for the RADAR Project and its data collection, the scope of the project extended beyond runaway children to also include runaway behaviour. The following definitions for a *runaway* and *runaway behaviour* was developed and shared with the reporting child helplines. In this project, we use the terms runaway and runaway behaviour interchangeably.

A **Runaway** is a child or young person who voluntarily runs away from or is pushed out of home or from the institution where they have been placed.

Runaway Behaviour is the action of running away, that is to voluntarily runaway from or being pushed out from home or institution. Runaway Behaviour can also include a child or young person who expresses interest in running away, concern about running away, or concern about other children or young people who have run away.

4.1.4 Data Limitations

Depending on the requirements of their counselling and research activities, our child helpline members record various information for each contact they receive. Child Helpline International worked closely with the child helplines to create a common categorisation of those contacts to create a shared understanding of each child helpline's data and to strengthen the comparability of data at a regional and global level. Annually, the child helplines provide the number of contacts received for each of these different reasons and sub-reasons, as well as supportive contextual information.

As a result of creating a common categorisation for our data framework, there are some limitations to the data and analyses.

- It should be noted that the content and level of detail of the information recorded for each contact is the prerogative of the child helplines themselves and is not dictated by Child Helpline International (although we offer a framework and guidelines). Therefore, these categories might differ from categories used by some child helplines when the data was originally collected. In addition, if a child helpline does not report any contacts for certain categories, it is noted that they did not report contacts instead of no contacts. Child Helpline International does not verify the accuracy or validate if a child helpline does or does not have reported contacts for these categories.
- It should also be noted that child helplines have differing practices relating to the information recorded. Whereas some indicate the reason voiced by the child or young person for calling, others indicate the reason identified by the counsellor, which might in some cases not be the same.
- It should also be noted that there is potential for variation in the numbers between our 2019 annual survey and the RADAR Data Collection. This variation is a result of the larger scope of the RADAR Study that also includes runaway behaviour, and not only runaway contacts. As a result, some child helplines reported more contacts than they previously did for our 2019 Annual Survey, as they record additional types of runaways and runaway behaviour outside of our data framework.

4.1.5 Pre-Existing data on Runaways

Annually, we collect quantitative data on the number of contacts our child helpline members received regarding runaway children. Our pre-existing data on runaways, as outlined below, was limited and consequently we were not able to identify the demographics of runaway contacts and the root causes of runaways and runaway behaviour. The data outlined in this section present an overview of our pre-existing data on runaways before the RADAR data collection was completed.

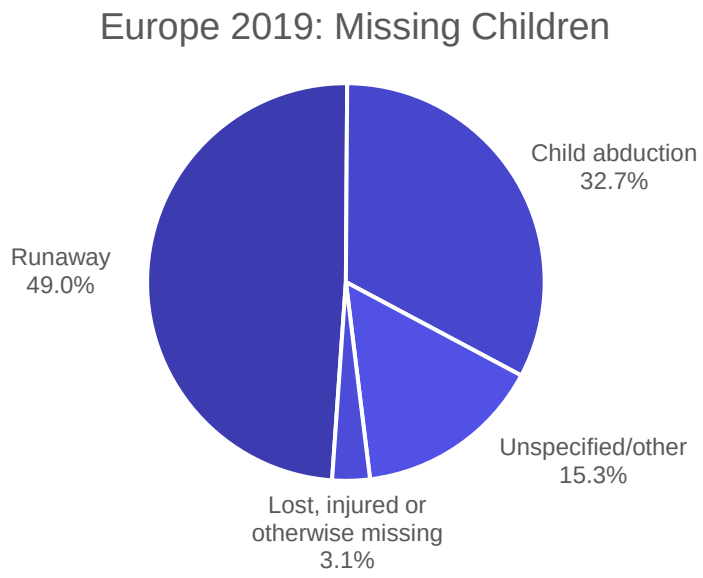
4.1.6 European Context of Runaways

In 2019, our child helpline members around the world received a total of 42 921 contacts related to runaway children and young people.

	2019 Runaway Contacts
Europe	3 335 (7.8%)
Global	42 921

Specifically, our European child helpline members[3] received **3 335 contacts** related to runaways in 2019. This represents 7.8% of all global runaway contacts and is the number of times a child helpline was able to provide support, advice, or another form of counselling to a child or young person.

Furthermore, runaways are the largest sub-category of missing children in Europe. In 2019, there were **6 807 contacts** related to missing children reported. **Of these missing children contacts, runaways accounted for 49% of contacts whereas the second largest sub-category child abduction accounted for 32.7%.**



The top three countries reporting the largest number of runaways and runaway behaviour were **United Kingdom** with 58.6%, **Netherlands** with 20%, and **Poland** with 7.4% of all the European runaway contacts. For a country-level analysis on the number or runaways and runaway behaviour, refer to 3.

[3] Of the 38 European child helplines that contributed to our 2019 Annual Survey, 22 reported missing children contacts in 2019.

4.1.7 Covid-19 and Runaways

It is still too early to quantitatively assess the impact of Covid-19 on children and young people who are running away or runaway behaviour. We have conducted quarterly Covid-19 data collections with our child helpline members, but the results are not definite enough to indicate an impact on the broader category of Missing Children. However, there are indications supported by qualitative analysis provided by child helplines outside of Europe that suggest that current lockdown measures and stay-at-home orders are impacting children and young people who are thinking about running away.

4.2 Runaways and Runaway Behaviour

4.2.1 Background Information

We obtained data on background information about the children and young people who contacted our European child helpline members in 2019 with concerns of running away and runaway behaviour. From these data, a complementary picture emerges about the context surrounding these contacts to understand these children and young people who have reached out to child helplines. Of these contacts, 95.5% of the children and young people are the caller, that is, the person in direct contact with the child helplines, themselves.

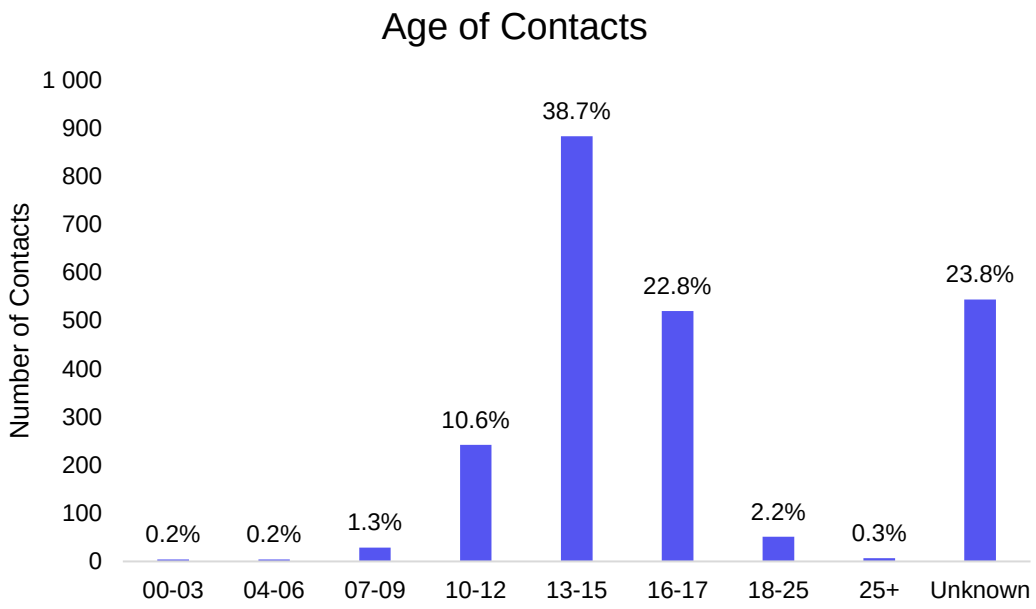
Gender

The majority of contacts related to runaways and runaway behaviour came from girls. Girls account for over half of all contacts (61.5%), whereas boys for nearly a third (29.9%). The remaining contacts were from children of unknown gender (7.6%), followed by children who identify as non-binary (1%).

Age

The youngest contact to the child helplines came from a four-year-old girl in the United Kingdom and the youngest age for a contact from boys was seven years old, contacting from Italy, Poland, and the United Kingdom. However, these younger cases are outliers in the larger picture of age distribution.

Therefore, the median age is a more accurate representation of the contacts related to runaways or runaway behaviour received by child helplines. The median age of contacts from girls was 14 years old, whereas the median contact age for boys was 15 years old. This is also reflected in the age distribution of contacts, where nearly two-thirds of the contacts (61.4%) were received from children and young people between the ages of 13 -17. Which indicates that running away is primarily an issue that impacts children and young people throughout their teenage years. For a country-level overview of youngest and median reported ages, please refer to Appendix 4.



Living Situation

A significant majority of children and young people who contacted the child helplines were living **with parent(s) or guardian(s)** (77.8%). A smaller portion of contacts came from children and young people living in a **group facility** (8.4%) or in **foster care** (6.1%). This shows that an overwhelming majority of children and young people are living at home **with family members** when they contacted a child helpline.

This trend is consistent with the results from our 2019 Annual Survey, where a large majority of children and young people who contacted the child helplines in 2019 are living **with parent(s) or guardian(s).** With the percentage of children and young people living with parent(s) or guardian(s) is observed at 88.4% globally and 91% regionally.

Living Situation	%
Foster care	6.1%
Group facility	8.4%
On their own	1.0%
With parent(s) or guardians	77.8%
With relatives	3.5%
Unknown	0.1%
Other	3.0%

Repeat Runaways and Recurring Cases

Most of the responding child helplines do not record repeat runaways or the frequency of recurring cases. In most cases, child helplines record every contact as a first contact and measure each contact individually, regardless of whether the caller has contacted before. In few cases, child helplines do register if the behaviour is repeated based on the caller's data.

Child helplines expressed that in some cases children and young people talk about their past concerns and contacts related to repeat runaway behaviour. In the case that the child or young person indicates the recurring behaviour, child helplines take note of this, but this would require child helplines to conduct an in-depth qualitative analysis for each contact which was beyond the scope of the present study.

For these reasons, the analysis presented here is limited and only represents a small portion (4.5%) of the total contacts related to runaways and runaway behaviour. The majority (**78.3%**) of children and young people that were repeat runaways have run away twice. Of these children and young people, boys were slightly more likely than girls to be repeated runaways, as they accounted for 59%. However, children and young people who have ran away between 3-5 times were much more likely to be girls (72.7%) than boys (27.3%).

	Girl	Boy
Ran away twice *(78.3% of repeat runaways)*	41.0%	59.0%
Ran away between 3-5 times *(20.8% of repeat runaways)*	72.7%	27.3%
Ran away between 6-10 times *(0.9% of repeat runaways)*	0.0%	100.0%

4.2.2 Reasons for Running Away and Runaway Behaviour

To identify the root causes and drivers of runaway behaviour, we posed three questions with both quantitative and qualitative aspects to our child helpline members. Each of the following sub-sections (Common Reasons, Related Elements of Concerns, and Related Reasons for Contacts) are linked to questions developed for our RADAR Survey. These questions were developed to measure the multiple facets of the reasons for running away and runaway behaviour. The first two sub-sections were adapted from Missing Children Europe's questionnaire to facilitate comparability between the two datasets. While the last sub-section, aligns with our data framework and parallels our annual data collection.

These sub-sections and their corresponding questions are outlined below. For the complete questionnaire, including the corresponding questions, refer to Appendix 4.

Common Reasons: Child helplines had ten options of common reasons of why children and young people run away from which they could choose from and/or share additional reasons.

Related Elements of Concerns: Child helplines were asked to enter the number of contacts with the related elements of concerns focusing on Violence, Neglect, or Abuse. These elements all fall under our data's category of Violence, but potentially allows for additional contacts.

Related Reasons for Contacts: Child helplines were asked to map the number of contacts related to runaways and runaway behaviours to the 11 categories of our data framework.

This approach allowed child helplines to share their data and knowledge on the root causes and drivers from multiple perspectives. Furthermore, having questions that overlap and vary slightly accommodated child helplines who collect data on a more granular level to highlight these nuances. From those data, we have triangulated the findings of the data and to best understand the reasons children and young people run away or consider running away.

Common Reasons

The most common reasons for children and young people to run away or consider running away are related to **problems experienced at home** and **experiences of abuse or exploitation (physically, verbally, or sexually).**

While these top two reasons cannot be quantitatively linked based on the data collected, we can infer that the top two reasons for runaway behaviour overlap and deduce that a portion of the abuse or exploitation are experienced at home as a majority of children and young people live at home with parent(s) or guardian(s). Furthermore, this claim can be supported by the qualitative data provided by child helplines where child helplines indicated that **Abuse and Neglect** are the top two problems that children face at home.

Child helplines further emphasized family problems, including conflicts and relationship difficulties with parents, as a common reason for runaway behaviour through qualitative responses. It should be noted that the scope of these common reasons is not limited to children and young people living at home but also include children and young people living in foster care or group facilities.

Other common reasons reported by children and young people with runaway behaviour are **mental health issues**, experienced by the child and young person and/or a parent or caretaker, and **problems at school**, usually relationship issues with teachers and peers, where the common problems at school are bullying, followed by peer pressure.

Related Elements of Concerns (Violence, Neglect, or Abuse)

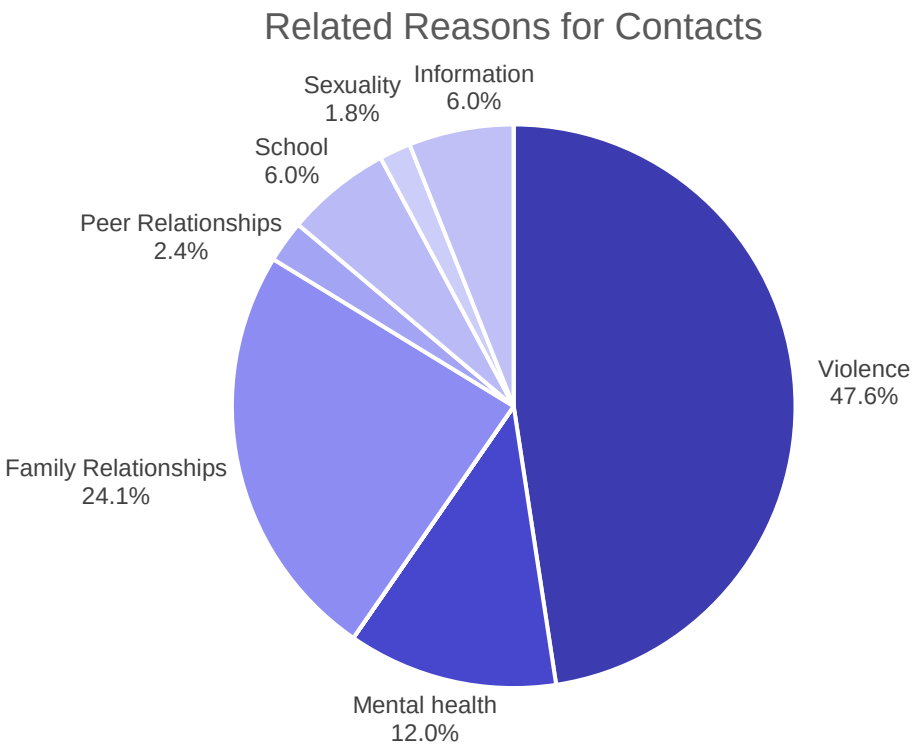
In line with Child Helpline International's data framework, these related elements of concerns to runaway behaviour include the sub-categories: *Mental / Emotional Violence*, *Neglect (or negligent*

treatment, *Online sexual abuse*, *Physical violence*, and *Sexual violence*. Collectively, child helplines reported that at least 26.6% of the contacts with runaways and runaway behaviour have related elements of concerns to violence, neglect, and/or online sexual abuse. This figure is lower than anticipated, but this could be a result of how child helplines record contacts, as some child helplines do not record these data points for every contact.

Related Reasons for Contact

This sub-section analyses the related reasons for contact from children and young people to run away or consider running away in line with Child Helpline International's data framework. The top three related reasons for contacts were **Violence** (47.6%), **Family Relationships** (24.1%), and **Mental Health** (12%). These findings are in line with our most common reasons and further support the concern that runaways and runaway behaviour have related elements to violence, neglect, or abuse.

Reasons for Contacts	Totals
Violence	47.6%
Mental health	12.0%
Physical health: own	0.0%
Physical health: parents/grandparents	0.0%
Accessibility	0.0%
Discrimination and exclusion	0.0%
Family Relationships	24.1%
Peer Relationships	2.4%
School	6.0%
Sexuality	1.8%
Information	6.0%
Other	0.0%



Violence, family relationships, and **mental health** are the key recurring themes that all the child helplines have highlighted through quantitative and/or qualitative responses. In line with the findings from the common reasons sub-section, child helplines further emphasized that these contacts related to violence are usually related to cruel behaviour from the parents of children and young people. However, in some cases violence also extend outside of their homes and are present in schools, where bullying by peers is involved.

The remaining reported reason for contact by children and young people with runaway behaviour is **information**. Child helplines shared specific examples of the questions that children and young people call about including finding local shelters where they can stay, legal questions regarding running away, and if they should contact social welfare services.

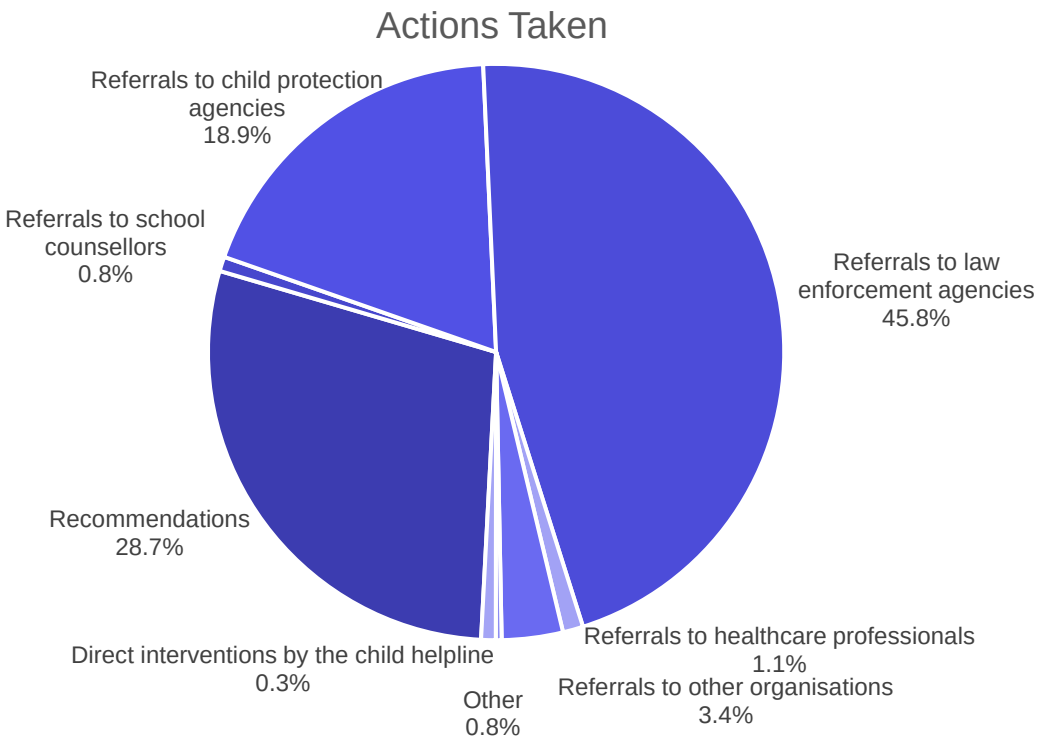
4.2.3 Child Helpline Services and Actions Taken

Child helplines do much more than taking calls and listening to children and young people. Child helplines respond to children and young people who are seeking help and looking to receive support related to issues they are experiencing. Child helplines engage in many different actions to help the children and young people who reach out to them. The actions taken by child helplines are those steps taken following the initial contact, to provide continuing support (case management) to the child or young person.

In 2019, **613** actions were taken by our responding European child helpline members to contacts related to runaways and runaway behaviour. As noted above, European child helplines received a total of 3 335 contacts related to runaways and runaway behaviour. That means one out of every four times that a child or young person contacted a child helpline because they had run

away or were thinking about it, a child helpline has provided support to a child or young person beyond simply listening and talking about the issue that they were concerned by.

Referrals to law enforcement agencies (45.8%) by the child helpline were by far the most frequent action taken for contacts related to runaways and runaway behaviour. The second most frequent type of action taken was making **recommendations** (28.7%). Together these two types of actions account for almost three-fourths of all actions taken, followed by **referrals to child protection agencies** (18.9%).



As reported in our *Voices of Children & Young People Around the World* report, contacts concerning missing children and more specifically runaways are often one of the lowest reasons for contacts in most regions. Taking this into consideration some European child helplines indicate that "counselling contacts ending in a referral is proportionally one of the highest for runaways. This is due to the immediacy of the danger". In addition, in some countries, when a contact concerns a runaway child or young person, the child helpline "must refer the case to the appropriate government agencies".

Most child helplines expressed that they provide counselling and psychological support during a conversation with runaways, alongside asking for relevant information such as the safety and health condition of the child or young person and explaining how the child helpline can help the child or young person and their family. In some instances, child helplines have standardised measures in place for when runaways contact the child helpline, such as notifying local governmental institutions and referral to external agencies and networks.

The distribution of actions taken, and explanation of support offered illustrates the gravity of a child or young person being in danger in relation to runaways and runaway behaviour. This shows that child helplines are 42.6% more likely to take actions on contacts related to runaways and runaway behaviour than contacts related to other concerns. To compare, the European average percentage of referrals to law enforcement agencies for all reasons of contacts was only 7%. This means that contacts concerning runaways and runaway behaviour are nearly seven times more likely to be referred to law enforcement agencies than other types of contacts.

4.2.4 Cases of Runaways

Child Helpline International encourages child helplines to submit case summaries as they are essential to support the stories told by the numbers. We use evidence-based methods to make decisions on advocacy, training, and capacity building, and these narratives to strengthen those decisions and to convince people those decisions are the right ones. With these stories of children and young people contacting child helplines we hope to amplify their voices effectively.

Many cases related to runaway children involve violence by parents, such as physical violence or neglect, or a mental health issue. For all runaway cases, children and young people mentioned concerns with their living situation, such as problems with peers at foster care institutions or difficulties in relationships with parents at their home. These presented cases are examples of contacts that child helpline counsellors experienced with children and young people.

A 14-year-old girl contacts the child helpline saying that she has been physically abused by her parents. She has been away from home for two days and is currently at a friend's house. She says: "I have been beaten up by my parents who never scold me, they always agree and together they beat me". The girl explains that she has two older brothers, but she does not want to stay with them because "I'm afraid to be with any of my family members, I'm afraid they could hurt me too." The minor is very worried about returning home, in fact, she says "it's not promising, they could be preparing my grave." The child helpline suggests involving the police, so that they can assess the elements of risk and take all the protective measures necessary for her wellbeing. The child helpline contacts the police to report the case and assesses the involvement of the competent local services for long-term support. After a few days, the child helpline was informed that the girl has been temporarily moved to live with an aunt and that her father had filed a report the same day his daughter disappeared.

A 11-year-old boy who first contacted the child helpline the morning he was placed into care home. He told to the child helpline: "I'm having a bad time, finding things hard to cope with and want to run away from everything." He had been put into care because his parents were hurting him. He told the counsellor he was feeling angry and unwanted. That evening the child helpline heard from the boy again. He said he had run away. He was alone in the park, about half an hour's bus journey from the care home. He explained "I got put into care and I don't feel safe and want to go home. The other kids there were being horrible and pinned me up against the wall." The boy was scared about returning to the care home and being in trouble for running away. The counsellor talked with him about how he needs to be safe and eventually the boy suggested he call his social worker to pick him up. The counsellor stayed with the boy during this process until they knew he was safely back at the home and reassured him that child helpline is always there should he need to talk.

A 15-year-old girl phoned the child helpline crying a lot because she was "very scared" and she "does not know what to do and how to proceed." The consultant calmed the girl down and asked her to share what had happened to her. Due to poor performance at school, the girl's parents "began to shout and call her very loudly." Her mother "hit her in the face very painfully until she left." The girl could not stand it and ran away from home, and was "at the station, where it was dark with many homeless people." The consultant supported the girl and asked her to enter the station and ask the police officer on duty to keep the girl safe. The girl was officially redirected to the district police department and the local children's service to improve the relationships in the family. At the end of the consultation, the girl was safe, felt calm and protected.

A 15-year-old girl lives in foster care calls the child helpline because she ran away from her foster care facility and has suicidal thoughts. She explained that during the weekend she is allowed to see her mother for some hours. But after the visits of her mother, the girl is overwhelmed by negative emotions because of frustrating contact with her mother. Her negative emotions lead to suicide thoughts. After talking with the child helpline counsellor, she finally agrees to an intervention with medical rescue services.

A girl contacts the child helpline saying that she will be removed from home against her will. She ran away from home after this news and does not know what to do. The girl says that she does not want to go to youth care and does not want to be in an institution as she has had bad experiences. The girl does not have a clear goal for the conversation, but just wants to chat. She currently lives with her uncle as her parents have died but will be removed as her uncle is going to prison. During the conversation it emerged that the school reported her case because they had evidence of sexual abuse and physical mutilation. The child finally admits that it is not nice to live with her uncle but that he is the only one she has. Unfortunately, after this revelation the child ends the conversation before the counsellor could help with support or finding help.

A 16-year-old boy phoned to the child helpline and admitted that his parents have alcohol addiction. Quite often, "in this state, they first fight with each other and then start hurting me." "My parents get drunk almost every day." In the evening, the father got drunk and "began to strangle" the boy. "My mother, at that moment, was sitting at the table, drinking and did not react to the situation." As a result, the boy "pushed his father away and ran out of the house." At the time of the call, he was on the street near the house, but was very afraid to return home and did not want to. The consultant supported the child and thanked the boy for providing this information, as no one has the right to abuse a child. The consultant asked the boy, if he had any relatives, friends, neighbours with whom he could stay for some time to stay safe until the police arrives. At the same time, referrals were made to the local police and children's service department were contacted. The boy went to his classmate and kept in touch with the consultant until the patrol police arrived.

4.3 Key Findings

Based on the analysis, the following key findings can be drawn to highlight four recurring issues that our child helplines experienced.

Key finding 1: Our RADAR data collection confirms that child helplines, alongside missing children hotlines, play a pivotal role for those children and young people who contact them at critical moments such as running away. While we identify a portion of our European child helplines did not receive any contacts related to runaways or runaway behaviour, this does not imply that there are no children and young people from these countries who runaway or consider running away. In some cases, child helplines explain the limited contacts due to separate missing children hotline existing in their countries. This illustrates how child helplines and hotlines work collaboratively.

Key finding 2: The majority of children and young people who contacted a child helpline are currently living with or have run away from their parent or primary caregiver. Our data shows that three out of four children and young people want to run away from something in their homes. In the context of the current Covid-19 pandemic, where children and young people are experiencing lockdown measures and stay-at-home orders, this finding highlights a concern that children and young people who have runaway or are considering running away are potentially more at risk now more than ever before.

Key finding 3: Violence is the recurring top underlying issue of children and young people who contacted child helplines because they have runaway or are considering running away. This means that **one out of two times a child or young person contacts a child helpline about running away, the root cause is related to violence.** Violence can take many forms, such as physical violence and neglect, which may relate to violence by parents.

Key finding 4: Child helplines took further actions to ensure the safety and well-being of children and young people who have run away, beyond providing psychological support to children and young people. One out of four times that a child or young person contacted a child helpline about running away, a child helpline took further action on the case beyond listening and talking about the issue that they were concerned by. This shows that child helplines are **42.6% more likely to take actions on contacts related to runaways and runaway behaviour** than contacts related to other concerns. For this reason, child helplines are not only a direct contact for children and young people but often they act as a liaison between the child or young person and other organisations.

4.4 Recommendations

Based on our key findings, the following recommendations can be drawn to improve the protection responses for runaway children.

Recommendations specifically for child helplines and missing children hotlines:

- Since some of our child helplines identified missing children hotlines in their country as the main point of contact for runaways, we recommend that child helplines and missing children hotlines, if not already, **should work collaboratively in each step of their cases.** This should especially include the referral mechanisms (including Standard Operating Procedures) and case management, to provide and ensure better support to children running away or considering running away. It is important to establish and strengthen this collaboration to facilitate the collection of more accurate data and share existing knowledge about runaway children or runaway behaviour.
- As our research showed that some European child helplines do not consistently receive contacts related to runaway behaviour, we recommend that it would be useful if child helplines and missing children hotlines, **collaboratively work to create awareness, influence, and advocate** policymakers, governments, and other organisations working on these issues. From this, spaces should be created for capacity building, regarding runaway children and missing children, for counsellors at these organisations to create awareness and to share best practices of how to manage these types of cases.
- Our evidence shows that violence is a main underlying cause for runaway behaviour. We recommend that child helplines and missing children hotlines, with the support of their partnerships with social services (when possible respecting confidentiality), should establish a process to follow-up with contacts from children and young people that indicate concerns of violence, neglect, and any other type of abuse; **to provide guidance and support on the consequences of running away before the child decides to run away.**
- As our data show that child helplines took more actions in response to runaway behaviour compared to other concerns reported by children and young people. We recommend that child helplines and missing children hotlines should have guidelines in place on how to respond to runaways and runaway behaviour. They should identify which organisations are relevant and necessary to contact when making referrals for cases of runaways. It is useful if these guidelines are created in collaboration with relevant external organisations, to identify and implement the best approaches for dealing with complex issues of runaway behaviour. In addition to this, these collaborative discussions strengthen existing relations and allow the inclusion of **new relations, such as organisations focused on violence against children, in the discussion.**

Recommendations involving governments, policymakers, and external organisations:

- Because most children and young people contacting child helplines live at home with parent(s) or guardian(s), we recommend that governments, partner organisations, child helplines, and missing children hotlines should **create awareness campaigns on the potential number of children suffering due to the Covid-19 reality**. These campaigns and programmes should not only about focus on running away but also to support and highlight children and young people that are facing violence and abuse. It could be useful to use evidence-based methods and narratives, such as excerpts from runaway cases, to support these campaigns. Multiple target audiences should be considered at an individual, organisational, and governmental and policy level.

- As we found that violence was the main underlying concern related to contacts for runaway behaviour, we recommend that policymakers and organisations working with children and young people should **address the root causes and underlying issues leading to runaways and runaway behaviour**. Runaway behaviour should be addressed as a consequence of a larger issue, such as Violence, rather than the main issue itself. Therefore, existing programmes, projects, and policies working on this problem must be strengthened using existing data to reinforce better measures to protect children and young people from violent contexts, which then works to prevent them from running away. With the data from child helplines and child hotlines, these root causes and underlying issues can be identified for local and regional contexts.

5 Focus Groups Research Report

"I think that everything plays a role in a child's psychology, and this is why everyone, each in their own way, can help a child to not leave their house, and to stay there, through conversation, in sharing experiences, in spending time together, in doing different things with the child that makes them happy... parents, tutors, they can provide extra security to children, show them understanding and love, care, and all of those good feelings. And there are always specialists, who provide more specialized advice and who can help you face many things, and, finally, those people close to you, and all of this can be done at the same time (...)" I'm going to give you my opinion, I think that each person in a child's environment must make an effort to see that the child does not run away. Because if the child runs away, this shows that the child did not feel safe, so in the first place, an adult, their friends, and others must see to it that the child has the security they need so that they stay, and then there are other, secondary issues, like not treating them poorly or with contempt, or things like that. However, there are other ways. Yeah. "– girl participant in RADAR focus group in Greece.

5.1 Executive summary

5.1.1 About the study

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

Focus groups were conducted by RADAR's four project partner countries in Belgium, Greece, Poland, and Portugal. The aim was to understand the key drivers and Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs) that lead to running away in each country and to identify the specificities that relate to gender differences. We wanted to further explore the ACEs that young runaways are exposed to while away from home and to understand how child protection systems can support resilience after a first episode of running away.

This research is a qualitative study using a semi-structured questionnaire developed by the University of Liege and reviewed by Missing Children Europe, project partners, and the Young People's Board.

Five focus groups and five individual interviews were conducted with a total of 28 young people between the ages of 14-32 (20 girls and 8 boys). All participants had past experiences of running away or of being at risk of running away.

Interviews were conducted between August 2020 and October 2020. Interviews were conducted in the participants' native language and audio recorded with consent from participants and their carers where necessary. The interviews were then translated and transcribed into French by Translators Without Borders and subjected to thematic analyses. By identifying themes and sub-

themes and highlighting contradictions, convergent and divergent points of views within the same theme or sub-theme we arrived at a complex representation of the phenomenon of running away.

The research was approved by the University of Liège Ethics Committee Board.

5.1.2 Key findings

On understanding why children runaway

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

On the trajectory of running from something:

- Running away is a means to distance themselves from a challenging situation, it is a call for help, an attempt to draw attention and raise awareness about a problem in the hopes that it will bring change.
- For young people living in care homes, it is an attempt to obtain love and attention from the staff in their home, and an attempt to find out if someone will worry and look for them.
- For young carers, specifically runaway girls, it is an attempt to get away from their caring responsibilities that have become too heavy to bear. Young runaways who follow this trajectory often express feeling guilt and worry towards the siblings that they left behind.
- Young people who the trajectory of 'running from something' frequently describe a sense of relief from being away from a situation that was causing them suffering.
- The home or the place where the young person resides appears to be the space where young people are most likely to experience problematic situations and one of the primary locations that young people running away from.

On the trajectory of running from something:

- Running away becomes an attempt to fulfil their desire to get closer to a person or a situation that appears more desirable than their current situation, as well as a desire for empowerment and a yearning for an independent way of life.
- Young people who follow the trajectory of running from something describe feeling a sense of freedom and empowerment after leaving home.
- For young people living in care homes, running away becomes an attempt to re-join their family or somebody close to them. This trajectory bears more weight against the backdrop of the pandemic where contact and visitation with family will have been limited or restricted all together for children in care.

On other ACEs that lead to running away:

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

While away from home

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

Returning home or to care

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

On barriers for accessing services

- Issues of trust between young people and adults form a significant barrier in accessing help. Causes for the lack of trust include the fear of being judged, concerns around professional confidentiality, previous negative experiences with adults and professionals, and the fear of not being believed.

- The fear of being judged is closely related to the feelings of shame described by young people. Feelings of shame are brought about by the stigma of being a victim of abuse or of facing increased challenges.
- Young people identified not being familiar with the support services available within their communities and the role or responsibilities that different agencies uphold.
- Young people described a sense of hesitation at the idea of reaching out to services they are not familiar with as well as experiencing a sense of intimidation towards certain authoritative institutions such as police and social services.
- The timeliness of support services and the lengthy processes of multi-agency protocols are also key barriers in the decision of runaway children to access help. Young people described being involved with Social Care for many years before seeing any positive change happen within their families and their lives.
- The fear of returning home or being sent back home also constitutes as a barrier, and young people described actively putting strategies in place to avoid drawing attention to themselves and hide from adults who were looking for them.

On interventions for prevention and support

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

- Outreach services that help provide runaway children with shelter and basic needs are considered among the most important responses. For some young people, outreach services can be expanded to include emotional and psychological support which can help reintegration into family and social life.
- Dialogue and communication remain factors with significant influence on a young person's decision to run away.

5.1.3 Key recommendations

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

For interventions on prevention and support

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

For children living in care homes

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

For children of the LGBTQ+ community

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

5.2 Introduction

5.2.1 Research **background**

Focus groups were conducted by RADAR's four project partner countries in Belgium, Greece, Poland, and Portugal. The aim was to understand the key drivers and Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs) that lead to running away in each country and to identify the specificities that relate to gender differences. We wanted to further explore the ACEs that young runaways are exposed to while away from home and to understand how child protection systems can support resilience after a first episode of running away.

The richness of focus groups lies in the interaction between participants; through their exchanges meaning is co-constructed and negotiated (Raby, 2010; Warr, 2005). More than a collection of individual experiences, it is the emergence of a shared meaning and the engagement of the collective intelligence of the group that emerges.

5.2.2 Methodology

Research Objectives

We wanted to encourage young people to reflect on their experiences instead of simply re-telling them. Against this backdrop and the introduction laid out at the start, our research objectives were to explore and build upon the experiences of participants in the following areas:

- Their needs before, during and after running away.
- Suggested prevention strategies and assistance based on needs.

- The involvement of multiple parties in prevention: peers, parents and carers, schools, and professionals.
- Accessibility of support services.
- Reintegration into regular life, or at least a return to a satisfactory quality of life following a period on the streets.

Research methods

This was a qualitative study using a semi-structured questionnaire developed by the University of Liege and reviewed by Missing Children Europe, project partners, and the Young People's Board.

Five focus groups and five individual interviews were conducted with a total of 28 young people between the ages of 14-32 (20 girls and 8 boys). All participants had past experiences of running away or of being at risk of running away. The initial aim was to conduct three focus groups per country (an all-boy group, an all-girl group, and a mixed gender group). For our partners in Belgium, we recommended two mixed gender groups due to the bilingual characteristics of the country, one for each language.

Recruitment of the participants was done separately by each partner. Some of the strategies used included contacting children with whom they had previously worked, posting announcements on social media, and making use of their professional networks, including the 116 000 hotlines. Partners were encouraged to make efforts to include a diversity of children with different backgrounds and different pathways of running away. This included young people from the LGBTQ+ community, migrant children, children with a disability, and more. Our aim was to collect diverse realities of these young people and to allow issues specific to one or the other gender to be expressed in the non-mixed groups.

A breakdown of the interviews by country is presented below.

In Belgium, an individual interview was conducted online with a 20-year-old girl. Two individual interviews were conducted in person with young men aged 20 and 22 years old. One of these young men identified as LGBTQ+, meeting the inclusiveness objective of our approach. A single gender focus group was also organized with five girls aged 14 to 23.

In Poland, no focus groups could be conducted due to restrictions related to the pandemic, and recruitment of young people willing to speak about their experience of running away was particularly challenging. Two face-to-face individual interviews were conducted, one with a 21-year-old young woman and the other with a 32-year-old man.

In Greece, one mixed gender focus group session took place online with three young women and three young men aged 15-17 years old. Our Greek partners highlighted the technical problems related to online communication and the difficulty for young people to talk about their experiences with other youth they did not know. However, they did not observe any particular discomfort among the participants. A second mixed-gender focus-group took place online in Greece (three girls and two boys aged 14-18 years old). A sixth participant was recruited but declined to be recorded and therefore chose not to take part in the study.

Lastly, two focus groups were held in Portugal. These were two single gender groups, with three girls participating in each group.

Data collection

Interviews and focus groups were conducted between August 2020 and October 2020 in the participants' native language and audio recorded with consent from participants and their carers where necessary. They were then transcribed and translated into French by Translators Without Borders and subjected to thematic analyses. The aim was to answer the question raised by Paillé and Mucchielli (2012), 'What does the discourse of young people teach us about their reality and their experiences?' By identifying themes and sub-themes and highlighting contradictions, convergent and divergent points of views within the same theme or sub-theme we obtained to a complex representation of the phenomenon of running away.

We developed our analyses along two lines:

1) Cross-section analysis: this approach aims to gather the experiences of young people in Europe to obtain elements of answers to our research questions.
2) Analysis by country: this second level of analysis will enable us to identify recommendations and specificities particular to each of the country.

Safeguarding and ethical approval

The research was approved by the University of Liège Ethics Committee Board.

All participants and carers were provided with a detailed information sheet about RADAR and the research, as well as a confidentiality form and a consent form that was mandatory to sign for involvement in the research. During the focus group sessions, participants were reminded of the rules of confidentiality and anonymity, and that their participation was voluntary and open to withdrawal at any given time. Given the sensitive nature of the issues being discussed, the facilitators were asked to conduct a short debrief at the end of the discussion and to provide the participants with contact details of professionals in support organisations, if appropriate. A reference person from the partner organisation was present at all times.

Partner organisations recruiting the participants were provided with a Child Protection and Participation strategy and a template risk assessment to conduct prior to the research.

Pilot focus group

The research protocol for the focus groups developed by the University of Liège reviewed by the partners was piloted with two groups of young people between the ages of 15-25 who had no direct experience with running away. The test run aimed to assess the protocol's feasibility and whether the questions were easy to understand. It highlighted that some questions needed rephrasing and that the protocol needed to be shortened to hold participants' attention throughout the entire process. Based on these findings, the research protocol was restructured

before being submitted for a second round of approval by partners. Its development was therefore a collaborative process of exchange.

COVID-19 challenges

The development of the research protocols and the running of the focus groups took place against the backdrop of lockdown and post-lockdown measures related to the COVID-19 pandemic. Therefore, the semi-structured questionnaire included questions about the current situation.

Recruitment proved to be a particularly challenging phase of the project and the reality on the ground led to the research protocols being adapted. We made the recruitment criteria more flexible regarding the total number of focus groups per country and the inclusion of children from diverse backgrounds. Many of our partners reported difficulties in recruiting a minimum of six participants per group which led to the development of protocols for individual interviews.

For several of our partners, it was impossible to conduct face-to-face focus groups due to the COVID-19 measures in place, leading to online focus groups being conducted and recorded with the agreement of the participants and their carers.

Finally, the recordings of two sessions were damaged or lost. We requested a detailed report from the facilitators of these interviews and included these reports in a separate section, supplementing the analyses carried out on what young people say in vivo.

5.3 Results

5.3.1 Reasons for running away

When posed with the question 'Why run away?', the trajectories of 'running from something' and 'running towards something' were identified in the responses by participants. These responses build upon the trajectories identified by previous studies.[4] However, running away also appears to be a message, a call for help, a request for awareness and change when faced with a challenging situation. Other participants identified running away as an attempt to find a solution to a problem and a difficulty in adapting to the world in which they live in. Through the participants' discourse,

> *"And also, have a little consideration of the fact what we... what goes on in our heads, why we do it … it isn't because we're kind of crazy, but because we have problems, and that we're just tired, and that we just want to get away from all of these people around us who spend their time lying to us, and all of that. And, outside of school, in life, these people have to be more a little more understanding towards us. They have to understand that there is a reason to do it, and that you don't do it because you're crazy or to get attention."* Girl, individual interview, Poland.

[4] (Glowacz, Léonard and Courtain, 2020).

each of these situations gives rise to different trajectories, feelings, difficulties, and ultimately suggestions for prevention.

Above all, it appears that running away is not linked to a single trigger factor. For many of these young people, it is a response to a set of circumstances and factors that have come together and made them vulnerable.

5.3.2 An indicator for change

> *"When you run away, it's obvious something is wrong, and it must have happened three times before something changes."*

Participants indicated that running away is sometimes the final warning sign in the face of a problematic situation that was not spotted in time, despite attempts to draw attention to what they have been experiencing. The warning sign may be addressed to parents, significant adults in their life such as teachers, or directly to youth care services. For some participants, running away also functions as a punishment for the people in their lives who failed to detect that they needed help in a timely manner. Others showed a certain ambivalence, suggesting that they would not have planned to run away and that they had hoped for their request to have been heard sooner.

> *"It's a punishment. 'I think it's a punishment. We want to show people we have a problem, so we run away."* – Boy, focus group conducted in Greece.

Running away can also be a message, a request for recognition, affection, awareness, and a desire to be listened to. Although it is mainly their parents that young people address this message to, interviews conducted in Greece revealed identical thought processes among young people living in care homes. Several of the participants statements mentioned a request for love and special attention from the staff at their homes. By running away, they wanted to discover if someone would look for them and worry about them. These words tell us how significant the support and help of educators is for young people living in residential care, and how much young people can become attached to their adult guardians, crave their love and attention and sometimes even resort to solutions such as running away.

> *"…some children (in care homes) are certainly looking for love within the house and may not be receiving it."* – Boy, focus group conducted in Greece.

> *"And sometimes I cry, because… when I left home, I always thought about them, I missed them, but I was afraid to go back … what we really want to hear is "I like you" or "I love you" - that's all. But I've never heard it."* – Girl, focus group conducted in Portugal.

For some young people, running away is a request for change in the family dynamics and relationships with their loved ones. More than just running away, it is a means to distance themselves from a situation that is not protective or safe for them. In these cases, the hope seems to be that running away will raise awareness and bring change. Participants shared what they felt their parents could have or should have done to prevent them from running away. This hope for change seems to be a motivation at the beginning.

> *"My mother … she should have talked with me more often instead of shouting at me all the time, and when my father-in-law hit me, she should have intervened instead of just watching."* – Girl, focus group conducted in Belgium.

5.3.3 Running from something

A trajectory identified in the research as well as in previous studies[5] is that of 'running from' something. The family sphere or home they are living in appears to be the space where young people are most likely to experience problematic situations and one of the primary locations that young people find themselves running from. In these cases, running away goes beyond the request for change or need to bring awareness to a particular situation, but rather it is means of getting away from an experience that has become too difficult to bear. Economic difficulties, social insecurity, physical or psychological abuse, family breakups, mourning, domestic violence, parental drug use and conflicts between adults are some of the factors that can trigger a young person to run away.

> *"Well, in general, I feel like I shouldn't have done it, and yet I needed to because I was sick of all that. (…) And it just happened that I ran away because I did not want to listen to them arguing anymore. So, I decided to leave."* – Girl, individual interview conducted in Poland.

Young people mention they felt lonely and misunderstood by their parents. These situations are subtly different from running away as a cry for help – in those instances, the intention is to get away and distance themselves from a situation that is causing them to suffer, rather than to demonstrate a need for change.

The case of children acting as young carers was also identified, specifically among young girls. This is one of the only differences between girls' and boys' experiences that our results have brought to light. It calls professional attention to young girls who are obliged to assume adult responsibilities to the extreme, such as taking care of their siblings, cleaning, and cooking. Young people may run

> *"It was the umpteenth time I was taking on parental responsibilities because, since my parents were separated, they didn't always do their job as parents. They'd say, "Yeah, you can find a solution. "And it was the same with my younger brother, I had to sort things out myself… "* – Girl, focus group conducted in Greece.

[5] Glowacz, 2017; Glowacz, Léonard and Courtain, 2020.

away when these tasks become too heavy to bear and they then refuse to take them on. Young people who follow this trajectory often seem to worry about their siblings at home while they are running away. They call out for attention to be paid to the whole family in interventions.

> *"This whole situation at home made me close in on myself, so when I was at school, I was very quiet, and children who keep a low profile are victims of harassment and I was one of them. "* – Girl, individual interview conducted in Greece.

5.3.4 Running towards something

Some of the intentions behind running away conveyed by the participants appear to revolve around getting closer to a person or a situation they find more desirable than their current one. In these cases, running away is perceived as emotionally positive, associated with freedom, excitement, and joy. The responses of participants highlight a desire for empowerment, a rejection of the rules imposed by adults, and sometimes a yearning for an independent way of life with their own home and their own means of survival. At the time, running away was an impulse against this backdrop.

> *"I eventually left to go and meet X, so it seemed safe even though it wasn't safe at all, but I said to myself, I'm leaving, I'm going to go to someone who reassures me, someone I like a lot, so it was like that. I do not know if you understand how I felt, but that's how it was."* – Girl, individual interview in Belgium.

Running away is also a means to build a relationship with someone by meeting up with them outside the home environment. For young people living in care homes, running away may be way to be reunited with family members or people close to them.

> *Facilitator: "What might make you run away again?*
>
> *Participant: "Wanting to find my parents. Or someone important."* – Girl, focus group conducted in Greece.

5.3.5 Mental health

The responses of some participants illustrate the complexity of the situations that these young people encounter in various areas of their lives and the impact on their mental health. Emotionally-speaking, these young people's comments are coloured with confusion and feelings of despair, loneliness, and other mental health related difficulties. This group of young people do not seem to be running away from something or trying to reach a goal; instead, leaving appears to be the only possible response to their uneasiness and state of mind.

"…before I ran away, I was in a very negative mood. I was very depressed and very sad. I felt lonely and I didn't understand what was happening to me. It was distressing for me. So I told myself, if I don't leave, I'm going to do something stupid… I didn't necessarily want to do it, so the only escape I had was to run away." – Girl, individual interview conducted in Belgium.

"… It could even be the fact that we don't feel good in our own skin and that we have to leave. We need to, let's say, disappear." – Girl, focus group conducted in Portugal.

5.3.6 As a last resort or only option

For some young people, running away seemed the only possible solution to a situation that had become unbearable for them. The idea of an attempted solution leads us to start thinking about prevention, and to ask ourselves about other possible solutions that could have been offered. The factors contributing to making running away a last resort may be linked to the family environment, psychological health, social integration of the young person and their living conditions in care homes. Sometimes running away seems like the only possible option when the situation has become unbearable. Leaving home becomes a last-chance solution. Here it's about an all-consuming despair.

"I was scared and sad and had no solutions. With the feeling of not knowing what else to do, running away is undoubtedly the only thing left." – Girl, focus group conducted in Belgium.

5.3.7 Living conditions in children's homes

Young people living in institutions were able to talk about the difficulties of communal life and the tensions around sharing their living environment with many other children. Refusing certain rules imposed by the educators, feeling like they lack space, and conflicts with others may have contributed to their uneasiness and desire to run away. What is apparent in the discussions with these youth is not the desire to run away forever, but rather the desire to signal their discontent and distress. Most of them expect to be taken back which demonstrated the trust they place in the staff of their care homes.

"There aren't [just] one or two children living in the home, there are 10, 12, 15 or more of us, so a dispute between the children could lead to someone leaving or wanting to leave." – Boy, focus group conducted in Greece.

"Something going on in the house is what made me run away again… whether it came from the educators, the children or from outside… that made me reach the point where I was suffocating and feeling trapped, which made it necessary to run away." – Boy, focus group conducted in Greece.

5.4 After running away

5.4.1 Experiencing a moment of peace and downtime

Emotion can heighten a young person's decision to run away so we asked participants how they felt at the time of running or just before. It seemed that although participants could accurately identify their emotional state before running away, they found it more difficult to describe their feelings when they were leaving home. The dominant emotion was rarely fear which sheds light on young people's perception of risk.

Some participants described feeling a sense of freedom and a form of relief; freedom gained through the empowerment of leaving their living environment or the relief of being distant from a situation that caused them suffering. Others described feeling excited and recall a rush of adrenaline linked to leaving home.

> *"But I actually felt so relieved to have run away, I felt free. I didn't have to listen to them anymore, and I didn't have to see them arguing. Because I was just so tormented... and then I finally felt so free. "* – Girl, interview conducted in Poland.

For others, it was moment of calm and peace that allowed them to breathe from a difficult situation. This opens up potential prevention strategies whereby providing young people with time and a space to find a sense of calm could provide them with an alternative to running away.

> *"It's just that we've had enough of these things going on around us, we have to find a way out and running away brings us a lot of good things, you know? It's peaceful and calm, I'm alone, no one bothers me, no one talks to me, and basically, it's just "me, myself and I. I'm able to reflect on everything and decide what I'm going to do next."* – Girl, individual interview conducted in Poland

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5.4.2 Feelings of confusion, anger and guilt

Running away and the act of leaving home is also a source of confusion, stress, and anguish. Some questioned themselves about their decision, wondering if they had made the right choice and asking themselves how they were going to manage once they left home. The tension between the fear of leaving and the need to get away from a particular context is evident in their remarks, showing once again that running away can be a response to a difficult situation. Anger, rage, sadness, and boredom are other emotions that can motivate young people to leave whatever is causing their suffering, by running away. It seems that anger is mostly directed at family members. For some, mental health issues are reflected here, especially in the form of depression. The feeling of being misunderstood, and loneliness returns here too.

" I was also worried because I have a younger brother, and the situation at home wasn't the best. I was worried about him as well." – Girl, focus group conducted in Belgium.

Lastly, some young people expressed feelings of guilt about leaving. Most often, they feel guilty for having left their siblings in the very same situation that caused them to run away. Once again, they call for special attention to be paid to the siblings of runaway children, especially when they follow the 'running from' trajectory or when running away is a symptom of ACEs.

"I think that a lot of thoughts will go through the child's mind, like, "What am I going to do now? " … "Why did I decide to leave? " or something similar to that, but [also] for example, that it might be better at home, things like that, but there will always be thoughts going through the child's mind that allude to reasons that justify their running away, I think." – Boy, focus group conducted in Greece.

"I would use the words confused and anxious, because I didn't know if I'd done the right thing by running away, but I'd planned it all in my head, so that was the idea." – Girl, focus group conducted in Greece.

For children who were waiting to be adopted or fostered, fear and guilt took on a different form. They feared having let down their educators and being expelled from the institution. For the particularity of their experience, a specific section on runaway children in care institutions will be presented further in this report.

5.4.3 Risks and risk perception

"Let me add that at that age, I wasn't aware of the difficulties and all that." – Boy, interview conducted in Poland.

"I never thought about the dangers, as I wasn't scared. I simply wandered around." – Boy, focus group conducted in Greece.

This area is one of the key dimensions of our study and may shed significant light on how to approach prevention, and how to get the message across to young people who are running away or at risk of leaving home. Overall, it seems young people did not acknowledge the risks linked to running away at the time. However, in hindsight many of them can put their experiences into perspective and acknowledge that they are lucky that nothing happened to them. Participants who were younger when they ran away, or the youths who did not leave home but had planned to, are the most likely to recognize running away as a danger.

"Well, in the afternoons I would sleep at the train station, having had sleepless nights with basically no food nor drink. I tried to see if I could get something to drink because there had been a strike or a cancelled train, so they handed out free tea for the passengers who were supposedly waiting. So yeah, okay, they gave out tea and I finally got some, and also, I could buy some bread after five days of having barely eaten or drunk a thing." – Girl, focus group conducted in Belgium.

One of the principal risks identified by participants was about the difficulties in finding food, shelter, and warmth, especially when they left home for several days. When asked if they were offered any help, several of them said they had been offered food and drink by strangers passing by. Some of them had to beg while away from home. Another risk identified by the participants is their exposure to older people with negative intention, although it is mostly girls who share these kinds of experiences.

For some participants, risk-taking behaviour came in the form of delinquency and committing petty crimes while away from home.

5.5 Returning home

The topic of reintegration into home life and community life is another one of our central research questions. Given the high rate of repeat episodes of running away, the return home is a delicate stage in the trajectory which requires careful attention. With the participants we discussed the

"We shoplifted. I'm really not proud of what I'm about to tell you. (…) And for a week, we just smoked joints all the time, all I did was smoke all the time. We would drink and then we ended up in stairwells." – Girl, interview conducted in Belgium.

moment of return in terms of the positive points, the moments of tension and the implications of the risks of running away again.

5.5.1 Experiencing change and growth

This theme reports on the factors that may have contributed to making the return to the family or to care a positive experience and a better situation than the one they ran away from.

The first contributing factor addressed is the question of personal comfort: participants were above all happy to have a roof over their heads, clean clothes, and food, especially if they were away from home for several days and were left to wander the streets. For others whose intention behind running away was to shed light on a difficult situation, running away helped attract the attention of adults and social services which brought about positive change in their living conditions.

"For me, running away helped me. When I got home, the police came to get me, I was placed in a care institution straight away and they placed my brother as well. So, for me, it was the last warning signal, but it helped." – Girl, focus group, Belgium.

However, this finding needs to be carefully evaluated as change may sometimes be positive for one sibling and not necessarily for another.

For other young people, leaving home was an eye opener that marked a before and after in their lives. They felt the experience had helped them to grow up and tended to want to take on more responsibilities. This awareness can also help young people become more aware of the people in their lives who care about them which appears to be a strong factor in preventing a repeat runaway episode. This theme was particularly explored by the young people who took part in the group exchanges in Portugal.

"… I've thought of running away again… I already know what would happen. I know that my father… he has panic attacks …he would have many attacks when I ran away. And he is the one I love most in the whole world. My mother too would be up the whole night looking for me… this has a significance, doesn't it? My sister would also be affected, and she is only a little girl…I won't do it because I know what my family will go through." – Girl, focus group, Portugal.

"It helped me a lot… to grow up. To grow up and see my parents - my mother, if I am honest - standing by me all the time and always there to support me. Knowing that my actions can hurt her opened my eyes." – Girl, focus group, Portugal.

5.5.2 Other responses

Many participants said they did not experience any change when they came back, and they reiterated the importance of paying particular attention to the 'moment of return' in their trajectories. When running away fails to bring about any change, young people find themselves in the same situation in which they were before they left, and this can bring about a sense of frustration and impatience. The need for being understood is still unfulfilled and still there. Certain participants say that they wished adults 'decoded' what they were looking for, when they talked to them about running away, instead of having to explain it to them. For others, the conversation between them and their carers, leads to further misunderstandings or is obstructed; leading young people to shut themselves away.

"Even when I got back, when the police took me home again…even then, she told me it was all my fault and that I acted stupidly, that I'd done something wrong… she didn't even hold me in her arms when I was found safe and sound." – Girl, focus group, Belgium.

Against this backdrop, parents' and carers' reactions can be a source of suffering for young people when they return home. Indifference, rejection, outrage and sometimes sadness all cause feelings of anger and can sometimes strengthen the desire to run away again. The very expectation or anticipation of these reactions is enough to turn the 'moment of return' into a moment of tension. The understanding young people hope to receive upon returning extends to other adults present in their lives, including teachers and social workers.

5.5.3 Running away again

We explored with participants the factors that could lead to repeat episodes of running away and which allowed us to outline particular trajectories for young runaways.

As previously mentioned, certain trajectories show that running away was a sign of distress. When coming back does not lead to the desired change, it seems necessary for young people to repeat their attempts to solve the problem, hoping that this time there will be someone who listens. Knowing this, returning home appears to be a delicate yet significant period to the point where some participants say that the way they are welcomed back can determine their decision whether to run away again.

> *"For me, nothing really changed. That's why I had to run away three times in total…"* – Girl, focus group, Belgium.

> *"I think that if I was aggressively or negatively received upon coming back, I believe I would have definitely run away again."* – Boy, individual interview, Poland.

In other instances, running away again is no longer a response to a difficult situation but rather, their situation may create or exasperate vulnerabilities that affect their mental health, mainly episodes of depression or suicidal thoughts. This revelation increases the need for carers and professionals to offer the correct support to children immediately upon returning home.

> *"If they had taken me back home to my parents, I would have had run away again or I would have considered suicide. I had suicidal thoughts then and running away was the last sign that I could use so if I had been taken back to my parents, it would have ended badly."* – Girl, focus group, Belgium.

5.6 Barriers to accessing help

Academic literature highlights that young people on the run are reluctant to ask for help. Previous research (Glowacz, Léonard and Courtain, 2020) comes to similar conclusions. One of our research objectives was to investigate what holds these young people back from seeking professional help. Deepening our understanding of this will be important in prevention work and for training professionals.

5.6.1 Lack of trust between young people and adults

Participants highlight the issue of trust and the difficulty of turning to adults to ask for their help. This seems to be the central issue for them, and their concerns stem primarily from a fear of being judged. Some participants relate back to the challenging relationship with their parents, which influences their perception of other adults and their ability to place trust in them.

> *"I think it's because we're scared that they won't understand. We're scared of being judged. And you're watched too closely. You tell yourself, "It's fine now, I'm getting older, I want to live my life, I don't need your advice."* – Girl, individual interview in Belgium.

> *"But, on the other hand, it's also difficult to trust an adult, because the majority of us here have parents who couldn't be there for us, parents who were adults, so at some point our trust in adults was lost and it became quite difficult to trust someone older than you."* – Boy, focus group conducted in Greece.

For some young people, the lack of trust stems from a feeling of being ignored, misunderstood, and encountering indifference by adults and professionals. This was an underlying point in all of the discussions among the participants however only some verbalized it.

> *"… the truth is that the majority of teachers only think about doing their lessons and going home as soon as possible."* – Girl, focus group conducted in Greece.

5.6.2 Anonymity and professional confidentiality

The matter of professional confidentiality appears to be a pillar in the relationship between these young people and professionals at all stages of running away. Some participants report experiences where they had their trust betrayed by professionals who disclosed information shared to them by the young person, and how this affected them. This fear of betrayal plays a role in their reluctance to ask for help and in their decision to shut themselves away in silence when they return, which hinders the dynamics of change and reintegration into the living environment. The concept of confidentiality seems to be a factor that needs to be strengthened and improved in the training of professionals and made more explicit to young people.

> *"I was already at a point where I didn't trust people because I was seeing a psychiatrist at the beginning and all that crap. I spoked to a woman about all my problems, and everything that was going on at home with my dad. (…) And she said something like "I would never tell your mother or anyone else anything, you can tell me everything". So, I told this woman everything, and in the end, she betrayed my trust and went to my mother and told her everything. So now I distrust most people, you see?"* – Girl, focus group conducted in Belgium.

5.6.3 Fear of not being believed

The issue of trust towards professionals extends to the fear of not being believed. Some young people share negative experiences in their exchanges with professionals which may have provoked a sense of injustice and a form of resignation. The general sentiment that results from this is "What good is turning to adults who won't believe me?" This dynamic seems to emerge around the before and after stages of running away and contributes to undermining young people's trust in professionals.

> *"Yes, I'd like to add that, generally, when you're a child and you confide in someone (whether it's a GP, a teacher or any person of authority), they don't believe you until they have proof. That's my opinion. It's literally like: "It's probably nothing, it's just a child making things up who just wants a bit of attention." And I think, in general, there are still a lot of changes to be made on this level."* – Girl, focus group conducted in Belgium.

Another participant indicated that a real change would be needed in the criminal justice system to make sure children are believed and trusted. In terms of child-friendly justice, the participant further indicated that children and young people should be consulted from an early age on all legal and court matters that directly affect them.

5.6.4 Lack of knowledge on support that is available

The majority of the participants who took part in this study are familiar with organizations, helplines and youth support services that deal with cases of runaway children. They generally have very positive feedback about their interventions (note, however, that the participants were contacted via these partner organizations, which may constitute a selection bias). However, some admit that they only learned that such services existed after the organizations intervened, and many of them admit not understanding how these services may or may not have been useful to them when they were thinking of running away. This lack of awareness on the role and extent of the services offered can lead these young people to dismiss the opportunity to ask for help even when it is known to them.

> *"Maybe it is a stupid question, but if you run away, why would you call Child Focus? I am not saying that spitefully, it just seems weird, the idea would never have occurred to me."* – Girl, focus group conducted in Belgium

5.6.5 Lengthy support processes

The participants mainly talked about the work of youth assistance before and after running away. A cause of concern related to prevention was the timing of support, which was not always efficient in delivering early interventions, in these situations leaving home is often seen as a call for improved professional attention. Interventions that followed after running away posed their own concerns for young people on reintegration into family life and other youth care services. Both themes will be elaborated further in this report.

This discussion leads us to consider the timeliness of support services and how it can influence the desire and the act of running away for young people faced with adverse experiences.

" We have always been monitored by social services, since we were born up until I ran away, and there was never any intervention. (…) It was only after I returned home that social services finally intervened. My brother was also fostered straight away. (…) I think they should have seen it at the time, yes definitely, because they were there throughout our whole childhood" – Girl, focus group conducted in Belgium.

"… they could have been a bit faster, because we had already made it very clear that it was serious, and my mother did too, but no, nothing happened. (…) Yeah, things dragged on for a bit, two years, and the contact… uh, we were not told about anything." – Girl, focus group conducted in Belgium.

5.6.6 Fear of judgement and shame

In their relationship with professionals, young people talk about the difficulty of turning to services they are unfamiliar with. In particular, they identify the intimidating nature that certain institutions may have. Their comments invite us to consider the effort it takes for these young people to take the first step and to invite the services to initiate contact with them.

"Well, I think you need a lot of luck and also a lot of courage, or even courage and strength to be able to do it … to be able to ask for help. " – Girl, focus group conducted in Belgium.

A strong element that forms part of the difficulty in asking for help is shame, and the fear of judgement already previously mentioned. Shame appears to be a strong barrier and it can take different forms. Some talk about experiencing shame at the stage of returning home after running away, for example when they realize they had made loved ones worry. Others talk about feeling ashamed of the challenges they were facing at home or of any abuse their family have been experiencing.

"I felt ashamed of myself and the situation I was in at home, so to my friends I pretended everything was fine. I usually never spoke about my family, and when I did, I only talked about the positive things. I did not want anyone to know. (…) I did not want the other kids and my friends to feel sorry for me." – Girl, focus group conducted in Greece.

5.6.7 Fear of returning home

On the flip side of the coin, some participants simply do not want to accept help for fear of having to return home and they describe the tension between knowing they were being looked for and

not wanting to be found. Some participants reveal the strategies they put in place to hide from adults and to avoid drawing their attention.

"I definitely knew they were looking for me. Because I saw a poster with my photo on it stuck to a pole. I was really worried that they were looking for me and that someone might be worried about me. It was very unsettling. (...) But going home? Probably not. I was really scared to go home because I knew things would be like before." – Girl, solo interview conducted in Poland.

5.7 Prevention and interventions

5.7.1 Who should be mobilised?

Schools and teachers were largely sought by young people on at different stages. School is considered a remarkable place to diffuse information and achieve prevention on a large scale. It's considered a safe space for some young people, somewhere they can seek refuge and ask for help. Teachers are important at the level of identification of children considered to be at-risk of ACEs, as well as in the role of a trusted adult for support sought by young people who need someone to confide in.

"… I think teachers can play a role … when we are young, we admire our teachers, and we want them to teach us. It is important to have a teacher who is close to you outside the classroom". (…) And teachers can see the signs, they can recognize what is wrong. They can talk to children." – Girl, Greece, focus group.

"… I think we can get a lot of help at school because they know what to do in these kind of case…and schools also offer good support because they always offer something." – Girl, individual interview, Poland.

Aside from schools, the family remains a particularly important space for young people. Obtaining a sense of understanding from parents, open communication, and caring and compassionate relationships are identified as pillars by young people that form a supportive family environment.

"…really trying to create a good relationship with the child is already a good thing, I think. To communicate well and to listen. Listening without judgement is important." – Girl, individual interview, Belgium.

"My parents helped me with everything; whether by supporting me, letting me say what was on my mind, giving me advice... everything." – Girl, focus group, Portugal.

The same pillars mentioned above also combine to form the figure of a trusted adult that children and young people often refer back to. A trusted adult can be a teacher, an educator, a psychologist, a person close to the young person or, in some situations, a stranger ready to offer them a listening ear. Participants speak of 'their' person and define them as a special adult who

would be available to them when needed. Whoever this person is, young people agree that the key characteristics they are seeking include the ability to listen, a non-judgmental attitude, stability and openness.

"I believe that if each child could find psychological support, someone they consider to be 'their' person, who could help them express themselves more easily and help them psychologically to empty their mind, I think we would all more or less give up on the idea of running away. But it is not easy." – Boy, focus group, Greece.

"I believe a conversation is the most important, and it would be nice to have someone you can trust, talk to, say what's in your heart - it is that simple (...)" The idea that someone already knows and can be relied on is a relief." – Girl, individual interview, Poland.

An original idea proposed by the participants is to include young people who have already run away as 'Life-Experts' in prevention programs. This idea stems from participants' desire to share their experiences and be able to pass something on to children in similarly challenging situations.

"There should be sessions where certain things are discussed or where children who have run away in the past can be called upon to talk about their experiences … so that people can understand, for example, what exactly the desire to run away is... So that kids can have it in their heads, so that they hear stories… so that they realize that running away is not as great as they think it is." – Boy, focus group, Greece.0.

"I would talk about my experience… And how it was not good. Maybe I could warn other kids that way. Whenever you think about it, do not do it, because it won't be right." – Girl, individual interview, Poland.

Other actors called into question as figures likely to provide support to runaway children are healthcare professionals, in particular counsellors and staff trained on mental health issues.

Other services such as NGOs and child hotlines or helplines also receive positive feedback from participants. They call for resources that can help expand services of child-oriented NGOs and hotlines and can help improve awareness of their work, to make them more accessible. However, some participants were in doubt as to whether a runaway child would call a hotline for support, raising questions on how communication can improve the connection between at-risk children and the role of child hotlines and helplines.

"For me, I think they can be useful in trying to find the runaway children. This is already super important; I think they are doing a lot of things. And for runaway children, when you say prevention, go to schools if possible, try to explain to them that young people can make contact, as you say, with the services…like I said, runaway people need help, maybe if they know you exist, they can phone if they don't want to be confronted with their parents or the family or quite simply, the police." – Girl, individual interview, Belgium.

The police and other law enforcement agencies have also been identified as actors involved in support and prevention. Participants identified flaws or failures in the system and were able to formulate proposals to tackle these. They call for police and law enforcement to be more proactive and to respond in a timelier manner for earlier interventions. Some participants also expressed that the boundaries set by law enforcement and the judicial system can sometimes achieve positive outcomes, but it is important to carefully evaluate when authority and control can be beneficial for young people and when not.

> *"I think the police and justice systems in general should play a more active role, because avoidance of these services is a result… because a child running away is the result of a situation they are facing, so I think we should focus on where the problem lies."* – Girl, focus-group, Greece.

> *"Although it is a judge who makes the decisions for us, at least the decision is made, and we have no choice but to accept it (…) even if it is a judge and educators, but they succeeded in setting up a framework, they succeeded in setting rules for us, in setting objectives and that really helped us more."* – Girl, individual interview, Belgium.

Another suggestion, particularly concerning the search for runaway children is to improve multi-agency information sharing and to involve public transport and other community services in the network.

> *"But I had received fines on the train and apparently they had not informed the controllers that I had run away from home. I could have been taken off the streets sooner if it had been communicated to this country or to the train staff that I had run away."* – Girl, focus group, Belgium.

Finally, care homes and its staff members are seen as having a key role in helping runaway children, whether the child runs away from the care home itself or is placed there after an episode of running away from elsewhere.

> *"I think that for children like us who are in the system, the best people to tell us about it (support and help available) are our educators, those who can also advise us."* – Boy, focus group, Greece.

Peers were relatively absent in the discourse of the participants and when asked why, some of the young people mentioned the need to turn to adults because of their maturity and because they perceived adults as more capable of protecting them. The experience adults possess is perceived as a resource for providing advice and support which friends might not be able to provide.

5.7.2 The social link and other themes

The theme of social ties was not part of our initial research questions however it spontaneously emerged from the discourse of young people. The social link identified refers to the importance that runaway children attach to the feeling of being part of a social fabric, of being involved in

activities and with people who matter to them and for whom they matter. The social link is a means to tackle the loneliness identified by some runaway children and the indifference they sometimes perceive from the people around them. Several participants expressed the feeling that people were not interested in what they were going through and were indifferent to their experiences, whether it was before, during or after the act of running away. They thus appeal to the bond and social cohesion that they seem to lack.

Another theme that emerged through conversations with participants is about the need to create 'an anchor' for prevention. An anchor refers something or someone that is valuable to the young person; for instance, knowing that someone would miss them if they left or taking part in a regular sports activity are considered sufficient anchors that could prevent children from running away.

"What I want to say is that it's good to have a hobby. That way when something bad happens, you can do whatever you want, you know? " – Girl, individual interview, Poland.

"I was also good at sports, so I felt proud of myself, because at my house I felt useless, and I had something that made me feel good. It made me feel useful." – Girl, focus group, Greece.

5.7.3 Offering alternative solutions to running away

The participants statements and scientific research have invited us to think about running away as a symptom of adverse childhood experiences and as an attempt to find a solution to a problematic situation. Against this backdrop, an effective preventative strategy could be to broaden the range of possible solutions and alternatives to running away for children and young people. Participants confirmed this notion and discussed that during the planning phase of running away, they were open to changing their minds had they had effective alternative solutions presented. Another alternative solution proposed by participants is going out to get some fresh air, to take a minute and find a place to be calm and reflect.

5.7.4 Early identification of children at risk of ACEs

This theme and the themes that follow refer to stages in the process of helping young runaways or children at risk of running away for which the participants in the study have made recommendations and which they specifically called attention to. Notably, these young people have stated the need for professionals to be proactive in spotting children at risk of ACEs and not to hesitate in reaching out to them. This theme is closely followed with the theme on information sharing between professionals and the speed at which multi-agency cooperation happens.

"I think that this would have really helped me; if I had spoken to my teacher and they had immediately alerted the police or Child Support Services, then I would have gotten the help that I needed. But what happened? You go to see the teacher, ok, he has to do a report, so it's flagged, then it's sent to one person, then another, maybe another one still, but during that time, you're stuck waiting." – Girl, focus group, Belgium.

The question of training professionals has only been explicitly addressed once. However, the issues brought up in conversations with these young people indirectly indicate avenues for training.

"The police … they scare you, so you have to educate cops. (…) Yeah, we have people (looking) to punish us everywhere, like the government, the police, school. (…) It's all a question of education." – Boy, focus group, Greece.

5.7.5 Disseminating information about existing support services

Recommendations of participants are to extend prevention efforts to a larger scale and to start from an early age. so that everyone has a "toolbox" with the necessary information in case they need it. The issues mentioned include involvement of multiple professionals, possibly young experts with experience, providing pertinent information, and raising awareness. They ask for more information on where runaway children can to and for what specific needs each service targets. Explaining the role of services and phone numbers for support lines is part of this process.

"I think that it would be better for organizations like The Smile of the Child to go into schools and do presentations on this subject so that the children know more; it doesn't matter if you can't talk to your parents (...) you know that you can call me on this number, no problem, no one gets involved or punishes you for something or because you're talking to a stranger, we're not really strangers, we're an organization that's here to do exactly this". That is my suggestion. – Girl, focus group, Greece.

" I don't know if this is a dumb idea or not, but for example, every year at school they could do a lesson on the subject, like if things aren't going well at home, you could go see this person at school." – Girl, focus group, Belgium.

Another recommendation put forward by participants is the use of targeted, creative, and eye-catching images and messages to raise awareness.

"I would say, do a lot of prevention on social media, because young people spend a lot of time on social media, and I think making short videos that could be shown on Facebook, Instagram or even TikTok, short videos that are a little shocking, I mean, because there needs to be something shocking for it to click(...) above all, don't hesitate to do something shocking, because if you don't, they'll say, "Oh, it's not a big deal", when it actually can be really serious." – Girl, individual interview, Belgium.

5.7.6 Youth outreach

This thematic area highlights an original proposal from young people regarding outreach that could be offered when they run away. Such programs already exist in the United States, for example. The study by Gwadz et al. (2018) suggested that the young people who had access to such programs could identify the positive and negative points via an assessment.

Participants suggested a range of different outreach services that could be offered. Above all else they identify the importance of having access to a safe place and material support when they run away (housing, food, warm clothing). Accessibility to these places at all times of day and night would allow young people to avoid certain risks while wandering away from home and help them avoid sleeping in public spaces. Some participants would expand these services to include psychological assistance and support for social re-integration after an episode of running away.

"Umm, having money, providing warm clothes because it's very cold at night. Having a roof over your head and psychological assistance, meeting someone that could have put us back on the right track, I think. Even if I do not know if I would have listened, but... Something to stay warm, something to eat, because we ate almost nothing. And someone sensible who could tell us "What are you doing over there, wake up! » (...) I do not know if it exists, but what would be cool, are places specifically for youths who have run away. A place where they can go to take refuge, and on the other hand, staff of these places could warn the authorities or the parents and tell them 'they are here." – Boy, focus group conducted in Greece.

In response to prevention work and the timeliness of assistance, which in their opinion is not given early enough, participants proposed the creation of crisis centres or 'preventative shelters', to which children thinking of running away could turn and get immediate shelter. Unlike the shelters which young people access after running away, such a crisis centre would serve as a safe place to go when a child wants to get away from a challenging situation. It proposes an alternative solution, provides services and prevents the child from running away while it is safe and its whereabouts are known.

"I also think that there should be more area for emergency preventative assistance. If you are on the brink of running away and you tell your teacher about it, okay. What could the teacher do? Where should this person go? (...) they could have said earlier, for example, 'we're going to get you out of your household, and together we can find you a place where you can stay for a fortnight, for example, to see what needs to be done'. This emergency assistance is available faster, or you can be accommodated faster, so especially preventative measures, emergency shelter." – Girl, focus group conducted in Belgium.

" I don't think you can completely prevent kids from running away, but what is lacking, for example, is a safe place to go to. Imagine that you break your leg, you go to hospital. But suppose that you are on the brink of running away, you don't have a place of refuge or something, where you have a temporary safe place, where you are truly safe. (...) I mean, something like a place of refuge that's open 24 hours a day." – Girl, focus group conducted in Belgium.

Lastly, participants suggest an increase in the availability of outreach centres and note that existing ones are overcrowded.

5.7.7 Peer support groups

We asked young people what programs and strategies might be considered to prevent repeated running away. This question seemed to be difficult for some participants and gave way to a sort of fatalistic attitude: if a young person wants to run away again, nothing or no one can stop them. Dialogue appeared as the only conceivable alternative: dialogue between young people and adults, but also dialogue between young people themselves, for example through support groups between young people who have run away from home.

> *"Setting up support groups for young people with experience of running away. That way, they can talk about their experience, they can say how they feel, and the fact that they found... and the fact that they all experienced the same thing, it could help them open up and not stay in their bad state of being, or in denial, or in their state of rebellion."* – Girl, individual interview, Belgium.

> *" … it's overcrowded everywhere. You have to find a place to go before someone can help you."* – Girl, focus group conducted in Belgium.

This last theme regarding prevention appears to overlap with other previous themes and is at the heart of numerous aspects of their conversations. Their message is about treating children and young people as people, and not just children. Thus, they call for adults and professionals to evaluate what the image of a runaway invokes and to encourage non-judgemental and genuine

> *"We're not just students, we're also people. We are children."* – Girl, focus group conducted in Greece.

> *"I think you should, say, speak more with your children, for example, and take your kids seriously when they say something and not simply think that they invented it or something like that, even if they are nine years old for example, a child isn't just going to lie about something. (...) And I think that beginning at a certain age this is forgotten, you forget how you were when you were a child, and you start making rules and all that stuff, rules that have been well thought out, and there will be good rules, but sometimes the opinion of the child needs to be included."* – Girl, focus group conducted in Belgium.

listening. Their sentiments also show the necessity of including young people in prevention and assistance strategies and to ask their opinion for the development of strategies.

5.8 Runaway children in care

Scientific research, including that which we have previously discussed (Glowacz, 2017; Glowacz, Léonard and Courtain, 2020), and clinical interventions to assist young people, refer to the specific experiences of young people who run away from institutions. Some of the participants in this study are included in this category, markedly in Greece. They require particular attention from professionals because the motivations and needs prior to running away, and also the

recommended actions upon returning home, are not the same as those for other young people not living in care.

Several motivating factors could cause these young people to run away, but one of the most common is part of the 'running towards' something trajectory. They are running away to go somewhere, whether it is to be with their friends, to do some sort of activity or to be with their family of origin. This last factor bears even more significance during the pandemic when some young people had contact and visits with their parents restricted or suspended due to the measures in place. The current pandemic situation could therefore act as a trigger and set plans to run away in motion.

For others, running away is a tell-tale sign about the care situation becoming difficult to tolerate. The number of children in the home, the arguments, the rules, and the limits set by staff members can push young people to flee. Young people running away from acre homes tend to leave in shorter time periods, sometimes only for a few hours. They usually expect to be caught up with and sometimes even hope that they will find them. In this respect, running away seems to be a message.

> *"There are not only one or two children who live at home, there are 10, 12, 15 or more... As a result, an argument between the children can lead someone to leave, or to want to leave."* – Boy, focus group, Greece.

The stress for some of these young people between the foster care placement and the birth parents should make us think about the connection that these young people make with their support workers and the staff at care homes, and the need to strengthen and focus on this connection. Staff members should not only appear to be trusted people to whom young people could trust if they encountered difficulties, but also as people "who would be missed" or "who they would miss" if they had to leave.

This connection is detectable in particular through the guilt that some of these young people are reminded about having run away and causing concern to important people for them. This guilt could also have been put into words by young people talking with their parents, which highlights the special bond between them and their teachers. Young people speak of a type of ambivalence in comparison to what they may have left behind by running away and taking the risk of being excluded from the institution.

> *"By leaving and understanding that you are all alone and seeing the outside world, you understand that maybe, it was not the best decision after all, and that the help that is given to us through the house placement is important, and thoughts begin to come like, for example, "Where will I be going? What am I going to do now? Are they going to come looking for me? that sort of a thing."* – Boy, focus group conducted in Greece.

In conclusion, the journey of young people running away from care homes requires special attention to several points. The teachers and the staff of the care home appear as pillars important at different stages of the process of running away and can help reduce the chances of repeat episodes. Maintaining regular contact with the parents could be a path to reduce the tension

between two environments and the need to run away again to find their family. The conditions of care placements, especially the number of children and the management of relationships between them, appear as another path to improve the living conditions of these young people and lessen the risk of the repetition of running away. If it is sometimes expected and even hoped for, the return to the care home after running away can be a source of anxiety and it would benefit from being a moment of special attention. For these young people, returning home after running away is a new transition that calls for consistency and a response to the attachment that young people may feel towards their educators.

5.9 Analysis by country

We had wanted to conduct an analysis by country, in order to identify specific issues and cultural elements specific to that country, and to make use of these differences when adapting prevention strategies. Overall, however, we noted that young people convey a common message. The experience of running away appears quite similar from one country to another, and few specificities arise. Their experiences appear to differ according to the socio-economic context in which the youths are growing up in, the legal framework of their home country or their current situation (for example, protective care). This section encourages us to consider the way in which economic conditions and legal frameworks can influence the lived experience of runaway children or children at risk of running away and take into account these limitations during the development of prevention strategies.

5.9.1 Belgium

One key finding from the comments collected from the Belgian participants is the question regarding youth support. Overall, they have a good knowledge of the mechanisms of youth support services with which almost all of them have dealt with. These young people, perhaps more than others, speak of slow justice procedures whereby they do not always feel understood. Many of them propose possibilities for improvement, advocate for communication between services, the implementation of emergency programs, and more attention given to the opinions of children.

5.9.2 Greece

"Also, here in Greece, when a child goes missing, the police start looking for the child only after 48 hours." – Girl, focus group conducted in Greece

The primary specificity of the focus groups conducted in Greece is that they brought together a large number of young people living in care. This factor does not allow us to deepen our consideration towards cultural factors specific to Greece, because it may well come down to a simple selection bias. Participants from Greece also expressed comments regarding how youth support functions and the areas that should be improved.

" Ok, I think that we have to change everything, because I know that, in my experience with Smile of the Child, when a child wants to leave home, the first thing according to our law is that the guardianship is passed to the government, if an organization takes them from their home, this child can't do anything, and neither can the organization. The child has to first live in a hospital (hostel) until the government decides where the child should live, maybe with their parents still, or in another house, or with a relative, and I know kids who decided to leave home, and they're younger than 18, in that case the guardianship is transferred to the government who forces them to stay in a hostel for maybe 5 months, without going to school, without any friends, without being able to see their existing friends or make any new ones. I was really angry at the government about this aspect." – Girl, focus group conducted in Greece.

5.9.3 Poland

Our partners told us they experienced a lot of problems with recruitment due to the COVID-19 pandemic and the lockdown situation. This is another example of how social, legal, and political contexts can influence people's lives. Our partners also observed how difficult it was for young people to speak about their past runaway experiences.

The stories that young Polish participants shared were around the challenges of being on the street. One of the participants was really quite young when they ran away and resorted to begging for money and food as they could not find other means of surviving. However, it is difficult to determine if this sort of experience is typical in Poland.

5.9.4 Portugal

In Portugal, the focus groups revealed an interesting element that had not been observed in other countries: the presence of gangs that are prone to recruiting minors. The participants told us what they had witnessed, explaining how children younger than 12 years old can be lured into leaving home during the night to meet with these gangs, not returning until the morning. This situation is more likely when young people are experiencing difficulties at home.

This discussion highlighted another trajectory of 'running from' and has provided an area to focus on for prevention programs.

5.10 Individual interviews from Belgium

Two of the interviews conducted in Belgium were not able to be recorded. Therefore, our partners provided us with detailed reports based on the notes taken during the interviews. As we did not have a verbatim transcript of the participants' interviews, we could not include their discussions in the thematic analysis. However, it is still important to provide an account of their experiences. The salient points taken from these interviews will be included in this section.

As these are reports, verbatim will not be included in these sections.

5.10.1 Interview one

The participant identified as belonging to the LGBT+ community. Hearing his story has been extremely beneficial as it has enabled us to identify some of the vulnerabilities these young people have and to think about more inclusive prevention strategies. Additionally, the scientific literature, of which the majority of comes from the US, has highlighted that LGBT+ young people are overrepresented amongst young runaways.

This young person told us about the difficulty he had coming out. He ran away due to his parent's reaction, the tense environment that was sometimes violent and the feeling of no longer being welcome at home.

His time away from home was a peaceful time for him. The people that he met and lived with when on the run provided a lot of support. He also mentioned getting help from a psychologist and an adult who took on the role of confident, liaising between him and his parents. He suggested that the support services offered to young runaways could take on this role and allow for a period of reflection. Another suggestion was to provide young runaways with the contact details of services that are likely to help, associations that work specifically with LGBT+ issues are considered to be invaluable support, helping young people to find a safe place to live when away from home and being available to listen and provide advice. His experience emphasizes that it is crucial to engage with these associations when developing prevention strategies that deal with the trajectories of runaways from the LGBTQ+ community.

The barriers to seeking assistance mentioned by this participant are particularly revealing and are echoed in the body of scientific research undertaken in the US. He was concerned that the support services were not familiar with the subject matter or lacked expertise and was afraid of being stigmatized or medicated. Furthermore, he was already of age when he ran away and did not know if he had a right to support.

In relation to returning home, this participant spoke about his hope that things would have settled down. His running away had been intended as a warning sign and a call for his parents to change and be more tolerant. He discussed how the tense environment and lack of understanding from his parents could be difficult to live with and was conducive towards him leaving again.

His recommendations once again call for adults to listen to young people. He recommended, in an original way, of extending awareness and education campaigns to parents so that they can become more understanding. Anonymity is also very important here as he suggested creating anonymous and affordable places for listening in person, not just by telephone. A third suggestion is to act as a liaison between parents and runaways, a recurring theme in this participants' story. This approach would give each party the chance to be carefully listened to and to ensure confidentiality. Acting as a liaison would calm the situation and facilitate communication. Much as others had done in previous interviews, he suggested investing in a diverse range of professionals working with children and young people.

5.10.2 Interview two

The second interview was an account of a young man's journey and his experience of running away. This interview was very informative and allowed us to draw from and emphasize some of the elements that were examined during the thematic analysis.

This young man went over the need for freedom and escape, especially for young people experiencing psychological challenges. For him, substance abuse was a way of coping with the difficulties that he had experienced in life. He highlighted that social services had been slow to react before he ran away and clearly stated that talking is not enough.

The extended family appeared to be providing support. This young person explained that when someone addressed him as an adult, not as a child, it made him feel like he could trust them, relating to the cross-cultural theme identified by young people that children are people too. Being non-judgmental was also an important element. This young person identified barriers to seeking assistance as distrust and fear of being placed in an institution or under medical care, as well as not being understood.

The role that friends play was mentioned. Similarly to what other young people have said, he did not discuss plans to run away with them because he did not feel he could confide in them or that they were able to keep a secret.

One of the positive points of his return home was how his parents responded to some of his needs and wishes and how they softened their stance towards some areas of discipline. In spite of this, dark and suicidal thoughts continued after returning home, pointing to the necessity of supporting runaways long after they return.

His recommendations for prevention tended to confirm and validate the outcomes of the thematic analysis: the need to create an anchor and to be firmly embedded in society, and for more compassion towards children, to listen without judgement. He raised another point, which is not to force the conversation: this would allow trust to build until the young person is ready to start talking about his or her experience, respecting the child's own rhythm, especially after returning home. In his opinion, young runaways need to be protected and made to feel safe.

5.11 Conclusion

The present study reaffirms some points also identified by previous research (Glowacz, 2017; Glowacz, Léonard and Courtain, 2020). The dialogue of young people tends to confirm that it is impossible to identify one single profile of a runaway but rather that they all follow a variety of trajectories, with their own motivations, risk factors, and resilience factors. Following on from the previous study, running away appears to be an attempt to find a solution to a very challenging situation that has become difficult to bear. According to *the risk amplification model*, rather than a single trigger, our study calls for consideration of the whole set of risk factors and ACEs that can lead to running away.

Our research questions and the themes that have emerged from the young people's dialogue have allowed us to develop some recommendations for prevention and training of professionals.

First, it seems that young people generally perceive risk and danger to a small extent while they are on the run. This awareness sometimes occurs long after the runaway returns. Also, risk-based prevention does not appear to be the best way for these young people. As one of them jokingly said, saying "Don't run away" is not enough.

This poses the question about what information is most effective to relay? Young people propose that practical and factual information should be made available to them, this includes who to turn in case of difficulty, where to go once outside, and how to access food and basic needs. Many young people describe not knowing the role of child hotlines or those of NGOs. Communication and dissemination of information should focus on improving their reach to children.

Who should be involved in the prevention and the help for young people who run away? We assumed that a peer group could be preventative actors, however it appears that peers are frequently left out of plans to do with running away due to a lack of maturity and if they are perceived as wanting to dissuade them or warn someone. On the other hand, runaway children have called for the mobilisation of multiple other actors. Schools and teachers appear as important references in the lives of the young people, as do health workers, youth workers, staff at care homes, and family (including extended family), all of whom have been identified as having a role to play in the lives of runaway children. The concept of a trusted adult is identified as being of significantly importance.

Participants in this study also valued the transfer of experience by experts, including young people who have already run away, as "life experts" in prevention strategies, which appeared to be an interesting direction. By sharing their experiences, starting a dialogue with the young people who are at risk of elopement, these experts would aim at raising awareness and the knowledge transfer based on their own knowledge, anchored in the ground. This proposal expresses a will and a desire within the participants to do something using their experience, but also to prevent other young people from encountering the same difficulties as they did, with "shock" messages.

Another suggestion surfacing from the prevention proposals by young people and other themes discussed, is that of training for professionals, especially in terms of interpersonal skills. Many young

people identified a need for acknowledgement ("Children are people") and to be listened to, and they denounced any form of stigma. It is sometimes difficult for them to turn to an adult for fear of not being believed and being identified as "a problem young person". They want dialogue and seek support from trusted adults. These remarks require us to reflect on the images and prejudice young people who run away evoke in ourselves, and require us to work on deconstructing these stereotypes, not only among professionals but also among adults in general.

The main obstacles for accessing professional support identified by young people are the issue of professional secrecy and confidentiality, the accessibility of services, collaboration between professionals, and the timeliness of the intervention appear to be important points for improvement.

Our results also highlight that the return home after running away is a particularly tricky time. It seems necessary to dedicate careful attention to this moment, monitoring not only the risk of a repeat episode of running away, but also the family dynamics and siblings where applicable, and the mental health of the young person returning (particularly depression and suicidal thoughts). Here again, trusted adults and professionals can be mobilised. Being able to make sense of the act of running away, in a non-judgmental tone and at the young person's pace, facilitating conversation and implementing change if needed, are recommendations based on positive experiences of young people.

This brings us to a theme that arose spontaneously from the discussions with young people: social connection. This theme is related to the issue of stigma, as discussed above. Young people call for a strengthening of the social fabric, paying more attention to each other. For them, this translates "someone they would miss or who would miss them, or something they would be missing" which prevents them from running away or from repeating this behaviour. This can be investment in an activity or a pastime or forming meaningful connections with people who are important to them, such family members, including siblings, teachers, health workers, other adults. Prevention should target this need of young people at risk of running away and would gain in effectiveness by forming strengthening the young person's social connection.

Regarding services for young people, an original proposal came up: young people suggested the creation of "welcome centres" or "preventative shelters" which they could turn to after running away. These places could provide not only material support such as food and a safe and warm place to stay, but also a space for reflection and to enable and prepare for a return. Young runaways could safely enjoy their much needed "break" from the problems experienced at home, while reducing the risks and avoiding that they go missing. This proposal, while very rich, however, raises ethical questions: What type of information should be relayed to the parents? How long can the young people stay in this place? The risk would be moving from an emergency reception to a long-term reception, thus prolonging and solidifying the runaway episode. This is a proposal that must be carefully thought through.

Personal interviews and previous research invite us to pay special attention to young people from the LGBTQ+ community. Coming out is a sensitive moment and when the family is not welcoming this constitutes an additional risk factor for running away. Moreover, these young people may fear being stigmatized or medicalized by professionals based on their sexual orientation, or a

professional's lack of expertise on the matter – all making it more difficult for them to reach out for support. It seems necessary to provide reassurance and communicate clearly on these points, and to include awareness-raising of experiences of LGBTQ+ youth in trainings for professionals. The young people also call for involvement of organisations working on the issue of sexual orientation and gender identity in runaway prevention.

Finally, we should pay special attention to young people who run away from care homes, or institutions. It seems these young people sometimes run away to go " to " the birth parents, which highlights the tension they may feel in themselves, between their placement in alternative care, and their parents. Through the young people's words, mechanisms of attachment and the attention and love they crave from the referent teachers becomes apparent: these adults are key actors for these young people. The living conditions in the alternative care home, but also the isolation experienced by some of these young people following the COVID-19 pandemic call for re-examining the needs of these young people, adapting prevention strategies aimed at them, and investing in deinstitutionalisation, and quality alternative, family-based care. .

6 RADAR Delphi Study Analysis Report

6.1 Executive summary

6.1.1 About the study

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

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

The Delphi Study questionnaire was developed on the grounds of contemporary research and on the key findings from the Focus Groups conducted as part of RADAR with 28 runaway children. These two pieces of research are complemented by two quantitative data reports from European missing child hotlines and child helplines.

6.1.2 Key findings and recommendations

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

Key finding 1: Runaway children are frequently subject to stigmatisation by professionals and may lose the opportunity to receive support as a result. Children with multiples incidents of running away are identified as those most likely to experience stigmatisation by professionals. Underlying causes are listed as:

a. Provoking a feeling of failure and frustration among professionals (particularly when working with repeat runaway children).
b. The misconception that runaway children are to blame for running away and for the risks they are exposed to during the episode of running away.
c. The belief that runaway children will not change their behaviour and there is little that can be done to support them.
d. Runaway children are sometimes not perceived as minors at risk.

Recommendations:

- Initiating a process of de-stigmatisation of runaway children and children at risk of running away will help change the existing perception. Proposed steps to achieve this include

campaigns for prevention on larger scales and developing ethical and anti-stigma policies for professionals in local authorities, public bodies and organisations.

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

Key finding 2: Runaway children of different groups (i.e., runaway migrant children, runaway children in care, etc.) are likely to experience different trajectories and be exposed to different risks. For example, girls who runaway and runaway children from the LGBTQ+ community are identified as a group at increased risk of sexual exploitation, compared to other groups of young runaways. Among young people more likely to run away, children in alternative care were identified as one of the most at-risk groups of young people with increased probability of running away and experiencing difficulty in accessing help.

Recommendations:

- Raising awareness and including training among professionals of the different at-risk groups of runaway children and how these influence their runaway trajectories. Applying the element of *training to train others* was proposed to help professionals disseminate the information and skills acquired. Training to train others provides professionals with the tools to raise awareness and develop skills of caregivers, children and other professionals involved.
- In addition to investing in deinstitutionalisation and in family-based alternative care, we need to improve security and comfort in children's homes to make them smaller, child-centred, and to help young people find stability in the place they live. For children living in care homes, this includes maintaining a continuous link with the same social worker over time and reducing the number of moves from placement to placement.

Key finding 3: A barrier to accessing help for runaway children is the lack of trust between young people and the adults in their lives. The lack of trust is considered to be a consequence of different factors, including the child's history with professionals, contextual factors, or factors related to adolescence.

Recommendations:

- Creating and strengthening the bond of trust between runaway children and adults. A key element to this is improving the training of professionals on skills that involve effectively listening to and communicating with children.
- Promoting access to help and to professionals through online platforms and existing technologies that increase accessibility to all children and young people and help overcome barriers.

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

Key finding 4: Schools have an important role to play in prevention and in supporting youth at risk, and the expectation that teachers should be trusted adults for young people was reinforced by participants. However, participants also highlighted that schools cannot replace the role of families which remains for many of them the first place for intervention to prevent running away.

Recommendations:

- Focusing on family support work as a key element for effective prevention work, this should include training and awareness raising for caregivers on communication with adolescents and supporting children's mental health and wellbeing as well as encouraging parents to seek support through a non-judgemental approach.
- Strengthening the relationship between students and teachers to help them become trusted adults and introducing counsellors or staff with mental health training as regular school members.

Other key recommendations:

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

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

6.2 Introduction

6.2.1 Study background

The Delphi study builds on previous research results collected by the RADAR project through focus groups and a mapping of stakeholders and good practices. The focus groups and individual interviews were completed with young people in four countries across Europe who have experience of running away or of being at risk of running away. A total of 28 young people shared their experiences and made recommendations for support and prevention, and highlighted areas of improvement on which to focus prevention on (e.g., stigmatization; runaways from welcome centres, etc.). The results of the focus groups have allowed us to identify gaps in

the literature, new issues and risks around running away, and to identify the themes for the Delphi study questions.

Together with focus groups, RADAR's Steering Group which is made up of seven project partners and a Board of Professional Experts from different areas of work, carried out a mapping of stakeholders who have a role to play in the response and prevention of young runaways. This mapping was used to select the Experts who participated in the Delphi study. A total of 61 stakeholders were identified in more than 20 countries across Europe. These different research contributions were synthesized to develop and implement the methodology and protocol of the Delphi study.

A second mapping was conducted by the Steering Group on existing good practices and innovative initiatives in the field of runaway assistance and prevention in Europe. This mapping is under evaluation and will form part of the content for the training and the Massive Open Online Course which will be developed in the next half of RADAR.

6.2.2 The Delphi methodology

The Delphi method is a structured survey approach that relies on soliciting a panel of experts on one or more topics to reach a general consensus of the topics' value or purpose. The Delphi method makes it possible to formulate commonly agreed upon recommendations based on the field experience of each of the experts on the panel. This process takes place in two rounds.

In the first round, using open-ended questions, participants were asked about their concrete practices, the difficulties they encounter, and the original solutions and initiatives that they can propose. Respondents have two weeks to participate and are free to review and complete their answers as many times as they wish. Above all, we sought to draw out content that was as close as possible to their concrete practices and concerns, illustrated by examples of good practices where possible. Their responses were collected and synthesized by the researcher.

During the second round, participants had the opportunity to give feedback on this synthesis, to modify their comments, to add information, and to validate or oppose the information collected. This dynamic process allows a co-construction of results between the research team and the field professionals. This second round is also an opportunity for participants to learn from the opinions and practices of other professionals and to share their expertise. Participants were given one week to provide feedback.

For each of these two rounds the platform used was Mesydel.

In accordance with the continuity approach of the RADAR project, professionals were invited to respond to questions put forward by contemporary research, issues identified by young runaways who took part in the focus groups and provide examples of best practices in their countries.

The Delphi study questionnaire can be found in Appendix 7.

6.2.3 Study sample

A total of 21 professionals from 14 European countries participated in Round 1 of the Delphi study (57,14% women), which represents a participation rate of 34.43 %. Countries represented are:

- Austria
- Croatia
- Estonia
- France
- Greece
- Italy
- Lithuania
- Luxembourg
- Netherlands
- Poland
- Slovenia
- Spain
- United Kingdom
- Ukraine

The area of work of the participants varied: social care (31,58%), charity (21,05%), law enforcement and security (21,05%), education (15,79%) and law (15,79%). Media, public services and administration, healthcare and research sectors were also represented in the study. It should be noted that respondents had the option of selecting more than one option.

A total of 63,16% of respondents work directly with runaways, notably in targeted assessments and interventions (41,67%), youth projects and research (33,33%), as therapists (25%), for educational purposes (25%), as social workers (16,67%) or law enforcement officers (8,33%).

Around 94,74% of respondents work on a regular basis with institutions that support runaways.

Seven Experts took part in the second round of the survey (42,86% women). One of these individuals had not participated in the first round. Countries represented are:

- Denmark
- Estonia
- France
- Lithuania
- Netherlands
- Slovenia
- Ukraine

The area of work of the participants includes social care, law enforcement, and security. Most of respondents work directly with runaways, notably in targeted assessments and interventions, or for educational purposes. All respondents work on a regular basis with (institutions that support) runaways.

6.3 Results

Throughout the report we will refer to the participants as 'Experts'. Some of the Experts made references to good practices or research documents from their countries which are presented throughout. The results of the study presented in this report are the product of a synthesis of all the responses in Round 1, where the Experts were invited to provide feedback on different themes, and Round 2, where they were invited to review and adjust their responses. We found that the proposed synthesis was largely validated by the Experts themselves.

6.3.1 Stigmatization of runaways

Young people who took part in the focus groups during the previous stages of the research highlighted a feeling of stigmatization by professionals and society as a whole. They proposed addressing the stigmatization of runaways through the training of professionals on interpersonal skills and the development of awareness campaigns. We relayed this feedback to the Experts and sought their opinion on the initiatives proposed to tackle the problem of stigmatization.

Several Experts in the study confirmed the existence of stigmatization of runaways by professionals. They identified the risk of losing the opportunity to help these young people as a result of the stigmatization. This may happen as a result of a breakdown in the trust between the young person and the professional, leading to repeat episodes of running away or engagement in other risky behaviours.

Other Experts pointed out the risk of underestimating the seriousness of running away, especially when the young person has already run away several times. They suggested that stigmatisation starts with the misconception that there is nothing to be done and that the young person will not change their behaviour. As a result, any responses and searches for runaways may be delayed or not actively pursued.

Some Experts also noted that it is sometimes 'forgotten' that runaways are minors at risk. Consequently, runaways are blamed for their actions and are considered responsible for the risks that they face. This misconception is considered a product of society as a whole.

The follow suggestions were proposed by the Experts as means to tackle the stigmatization of runaways.

- Training of professionals. Areas of training proposed were trauma, attachment processes, needs and psychology of adolescents..
- Development of scientific research.
- Awareness campaigns. Key messages that were suggested are: "Runaways are minors"; "Every runaway has a first time", "Every experience of running away places a young person in danger" (to convey the message that youth who have already run away several times need to be searched for quickly and to overcome the trivialization that these at-risk youth sometimes encounter).
- Ethical code and anti-stigma policy to be applied in services and organizations working with young runaways.

The solutions favoured by the Experts during the second round were the training of professionals, the use of awareness campaigns, and the development of an ethical code. They recommended that this ethical code be applied to all professionals, whether or not they work directly with young runaways, and not only within institutions.

6.3.2 Distrust of adults

The young people who took part in the focus groups talked about experiencing a lack of trust between young people and adults, which often constitutes a barrier for them to access help. The Experts confirmed the existence of this phenomenon, sometimes related to adolescence, life history or contextual factors. The research team proposed the following solutions to the Experts:

- Developing professional training with an emphasis on skills that involve listening to and welcoming the participation of young people;
- Ensuring that a secure and confidential framework is established;
- Working towards active collaboration between professionals.

The Experts supported these propositions and proposed additional solutions to tackle the problem of distrust:

- Train professionals in the detection of child abuse;
- Work to make the young person's home a safe place to live, for example through interventions in the family environment or material improvement of shelter conditions. One of the Experts added that young people who run away are often at risk of losing their place in a children's home, and the move to a new accommodation makes it more difficult to build a bond of trust with new social workers.
- New technologies to facilitate communication between young people and professionals;
- Creating social bonds, for example through sports;
- Raising public awareness to initiate destigmatisation.

Improving young people's living conditions, raising awareness, and reinforcing social bonds are the Experts' preferred propositions.

6.3.3 Youth most at risk among runaways

During the focus groups, the young people identified the need for more tailored prevention and action programs for young people running away from children's homes and for young people of the LGBTQ+ community. Contemporary research also calls for major focus on children in migration and children experiencing mental health issues.

According to the Experts, looked after children are generally identified as "at-risk" youth who are more likely to run away and experience more difficulty in accessing help. They identified young people who run away from shelters and those who run away repeatedly as a group of young people who experience the most stigmatization; their 'behaviour' is said to provoke a feeling of failure and frustration among professionals, especially when they are faced with a heavy workload.

The Experts also highlighted the importance of understanding the specificity of different trajectories for runaways, for example for young migrant runaways or refugees. An example brought forward by some of our Experts is that of Spain, where the trajectory of runaway children tends to lead them to group together in gangs rather than fall into the category of 'isolated youth'.

During the second round, one of the Experts highlighted the increased risk of sexual exploitation for girls and LGBTQ+ youth running away, compared to other groups of young runaways.

The recommendations made by the Experts focus on raising awareness among professionals of the different at-risk groups of runaways and adapting prevention strategies to these different trajectories.

One Expert talked about a practice from Austria, where the Criminal Intelligence Service (Bundeskriminalamt) implemented an EU-funded project that focused on the circumstances of young people living in residential care. The project included a preventative angle. The Experts from our study approved of this initiative and explained that they believe it is beneficial for professionals to be trained on different response strategies for different possible trajectories of runaway children.

6.3.4 Prevention for young runaways

The theme of prevention was discussed with the Experts, who emphasized that prevention by risk (i.e., prevention strategies that emphasize the risks of a behaviour and the negative consequences) was not necessarily the best way to raise awareness among young people, these forms of strategies are not always considered to be effective.

According to the Experts, the use of television, social networks, and schools are the most effective channels for the dissemination of prevention campaigns. Experts made various recommendations as to the content and form that these prevention campaigns should take:

- Sharing true stories of young runaways;
- Highlighting the difficulty of meeting basic needs such as eating or sleeping during a runaway episode;
- Indicating what help is available for runaways and building trust. One Expert proposed the following campaign message to build on: "*You can be heard, ask for help, they are waiting for you here. Don't take the risk*";
- Highlighting the increased risk of being a victim of violence, including sexual violence, health and safety risk. This proposal is in line with the model of risk-based campaigns;
- Raising awareness among youth about the impact of running away from home on their loved ones.

Other prevention strategies have been put forward by our Experts. The development of young people's skills to cope with the risks of running away is one avenue; achieving this through the use of role-playing was suggested as it allows them to practice facing real-life danger and build up a "toolbox". In Greece, for example, experiential preventive interventions have been developed for migrant and refugee children whereby after discussing the risks, young people were asked to develop theatrical plays to imagine how they would respond to those dangers. Young people

were invited to think about how they would verbally respond to a 'risk posing invitation', to explore behavioural patterns that suit them and that they feel would be appropriate to face certain dangers.

Creativity, social skills, and problem-solving abilities are other key resources proposed. The Experts provided several examples of existing initiatives such as, One Family People from Sierra Leone, INEX from Czech Republic, Oltalom Sports Association from Hungary.

Among the recommendations proposed, the Experts identified those believed to be most effective for young people: sharing true stories, indicating that help is available and how to access it, developing skills, and raising awareness about the consequences of running away on young people's loved ones.

Several young people in the focus groups suggested the inclusion of life-Experts in prevention campaigns and through direct work with young people. Life-Experts refers to individuals with previous experience of running away who have overcome their obstacles. This was proposed to the Experts who provided feedback that allows us to consider different ways of conceptualizing the role of life-Experts:

- As mentors for young runaways.
- To be included in professionally supervised discussion groups.
- Sharing their experiences through video, writing, images, rap music, theatre plays. In the United Kingdom, for example, Ben Westwood wrote books based on his experience of living on the streets from a young age ("*Poems of runaway*"). According to the Experts, this method is more effective if the story is told by a 'significant person' or a public figure.

The inclusion of famous people sharing their experiences in prevention campaigns**,** as has been done in an initiative by NGO Magnolia as well as other organizations, is welcomed as an interesting avenue by the Experts. However, it may be difficult to implement in different countries.

Life Experts may also be effective for runaway children in migration. In Spain, national campaigns have been used to disseminate the discourse of adults who migrated as unaccompanied children and who share their experiences and motivations.

However, some Experts have expressed they find it more effective to offer awareness and training activities to parents, youth and professionals, to avoid resorting to prevention focusing on risk. The objective would be to train adults to make sure children want to stay home and prefer not to run away.

The role of prevention for younger children at risk of running away was also addressed with the Experts. They proposed adapting runaway prevention strategies to small children through creative activities, video clips, sport, strengthening social bonds, comic strips, and practical strategies such as learning emergency telephone numbers. While some Experts valued the inclusion of younger children in prevention strategies, others recommended focusing prevention work on the parents/carers and professionals involved. The Experts indicated that providing support in the family

environment would be an effective option to prevent running away; the support suggested included training and sensitizing parents on the issue of running away, improving communication within with adolescents and supporting children's mental health and wellbeing, as well as encouraging parents to seek support for parenting if necessary.

According to the Experts, reinforcing social bonds, adapting runaway prevention strategies to children, and focusing prevention work on professional's training are the primary avenues to focus on.

6.3.5 The role of schools

The Experts confirmed some of the data already brought to light by the young people participating in the focus groups and which allow us to formulate more concrete proposals for schools. Schools are identified as an important place for the prevention of runaways and to support at-risk youth. However, schools cannot replace the role of families, which remains for many Experts the first place for intervention to prevent running away.

The Experts were asked to identify good practices that should be encouraged in school environments. They reinforced the notion that teachers should be trusted people for young people and recommended achieving this by strengthening the relationship with students by reducing the number of students per class and including educators and psychologists in schools.

Preventing violence in school, including bullying, is another way to reduce the risk of running away. Schools are a place where collaborations with other services can be established. In Ukraine, for example, Juvenile Police Officers often visit schools to conduct workshops with children on the prevention of running away. Collaborations as a whole between the different services and effective cooperation with young people's families is identified as a key factor for effective work.

6.3.6 Training for professionals

Experts indicated a need for ongoing training and education for professionals working with young runaways. This includes psychologists, social workers, educators, teachers, doctors, nurses and paramedics, lawyers and judges, police, people working in migration and in NGOs.

Different training areas were identified by the Experts:

- Detection of abuse, including emotional abuse;
- How to build and maintain trust;
- Trauma and dissociative processes;
- Adolescent psychology;
- Attachment process;
- Conscious affection as professional competency;
- Mental health;
- Sale and sexual exploitation of minors;
- Sexual violence;
- Alcohol, tobacco and drugs;

- Harassment and violence between adolescents;
- Migration issues and refugee trajectories;
- Use of new technologies and problematic online behaviour.

One of the objectives of the training of professionals should be to enable the dissemination of acquired skills and knowledge among young people and families (social skills, skills in virtual space but also specific needs of adolescents). In other words, it is about training to train others. Some Experts talked about existing programs for parents and families, which involve social skills training, mentorship programs for children and youth at risk, and educating professionals to work directly with children and parents. Other Experts have pointed out a lack of such preventive practices for parents in their own countries.

The idea of training parents and children applies in particular to the theme of grooming. Teaching parents to set limits, informing them about risky (sexual) behaviour online, but also developing young people's knowledge of their emotional and sexual life is a path that our Experts deem important. For this theme, more than any other, continuing education should be a necessary requirement to ensure that professionals can effectively respond to the rapid evolvement of new technologies used for grooming. The Experts also recommended the development of specific detection tools.

Experts recommended to start prevention campaigns in elementary years and to disseminate them through the media. An example of a good practice raised by one Expert is the "Kiko and the hand" Training for trainer's manual developed by Espirales Consultoria (Spain) for the Council of Europe on pre-school prevention of child sexual abuse. The Council of Europe further has a number of manuals and resources on grooming and digital parenting[6]. Examples of online campaigns against grooming include #dontbeaneasycatch by PEN-MP and Europol's "Say No!" campaign against online sexual coercion and extortion of children translated in all European languages.

6.3.7 After running away

Returning from an episode of running away is identified by young people as a delicate moment. Both research and good practice point to the need for more targeted intervention at this stage. The Experts identified different ways to support families upon the return of a runaway child:

- Before the return, parents should be supported in preparing to respond and welcoming the child back. Questions to ask are: what will they tell their child, how did they feel, what will they say to their child, how will they welcome their child back? Prepare the parents for a review that will allow them to initiate changes in the family dynamics.
- Offering mandatory psychological support upon return for the young person and his or her parents. In Croatia, a social service called "Measure of professional help and support" makes it mandatory for parents to receive professional support on parenting if their child has run away.

[6] https://www.coe.int/en/web/human-rights-channel/end-online-child-sex-abuse

- Parenting support on improving communication and better expression of needs.
- Mediation between the young person and his or her parents/carers. According to our Experts, a mediator must be involved from the beginning to provide support. This measure exists in Austria, whereby the youth welfare authority must provide a mediator without delay. This provides a safety net for the family involved. The family situation is immediately recorded, and developments can be observed and also possibly re-directed. This method could be more difficult to envisage in some countries according to the Experts.
- Improved responsiveness of social services and collaborations.
- Continuous monitoring of the development of the young person and his or her family, for example via new technologies or by phone. The network of 116 000 missing children hotlines and child helplines in Europe provide free and immediate emotional support, as well as other types of support 24/7. Consistent awareness raising is necessary to make sure children and their families are familiar with the hotline and the services they offer.
- Maintaining contact with professionals.
- Prioritize and encourage a relationship of trust rather than punishment and authority.

Working with parents to prepare them for the return of their child and developing collaborations between services are the Experts' preferred propositions; although they deemed all propositions valuable.
The use of Return Home Interview was addressed, including an assessment of the mental health and risks encountered by the young person whilst away from home. Several Experts indicated that such procedures were in used in their countries.

Some Experts recommended a two-step intervention, providing the young person with a warm welcome as the first step, followed by a second step that entails working with him or her to understand the reasons for running away. However, the first step is considered to be challenging for both parents and professionals, who are often affected or involved in the young person's departure. The presence of a third person to accompany the child throughout the procedure is therefore considered necessary.

Other Experts, on the contrary, recommended that an interview about the reasons for running away should be conducted as soon as possible, without going through different steps, in order to assess the existence of immediate risks.

The procedure of conducting return home interviews and risk assessments raises certain questions. Who should conduct the interview? With what training? Does he or she follow up with the family afterwards? To what extent should mental health professionals be involved? How can young people be motivated to take part in the interview/assessment?

One Expert suggested that the first interview could be implemented by a psychologist who would be contacted by the police once the child is found/returns. This would require clear and strict collaboration procedures between law enforcement and psychologists. Another option would be to involve a mediator or a trusted person in the process of the interview and assessment. A third

proposal made was to offer a space for a meeting between young runaways when they return from running away.

6.3.8 Gangs

The issue of gangs was presented as a theme in the Delphi study. Although not all Experts encounter this problem in their own countries, some leads have been identified to tackle the emerging phenomenon. Social inequalities and the need for affiliation of young people appear to be the primary reasons for involvement in gangs. The Experts recommended, above all, to develop young people's resilience skills and critical thinking to avoid involvement in delinquent processes. The passing on of values was also considered an important element to deter from gang involvement.

One of the Experts suggested helping young people to create or find alternative role models, outside of gangs. Schools was suggested as a good place to initiate encounters and activities between children and potential role models, such as local firefighters, scouts, rescue workers, etc.

6.3.9 COVID-19 and health crisis

According to the Experts, the COVID-19 pandemic may have contributed to an increase in the number of runaways in some countries. The solutions proposed by the Experts to support young people who run away or are at risk of running away are the following:

- Develop interventions through new technologies. Some Experts note, however, that new technologies are insufficient for certain aspects interventions;
- Provide clear instructions and protocols on a local and national level: where to take young people when they return from running away? What to do if shelters are closed? What about the risk of contamination? This proposal is affirmed by the Experts in the second round of the Delphi study.
- Engage more resources and professionals, which is essential according to the Experts of the second round;
- Maintain and strengthen collaborations;
- Provide self-help and skills development tools for young people and their parents;
- Raise awareness of domestic violence and encourage people to report it;
- Maintain contact with trusted people for youths.

The role of missing child hotlines and child helplines were also addressed. The cooperation and division of tasks between missing child hotlines and child helplines varies per country, however the need to record thorough and comparable data is an important common element for both networks. Effective and ongoing cooperation is therefore key.

6.3.10 A place to land... Welcome centres

On the basis of proposals from the focus groups and on existing initiatives (for example in the United States), we submitted to the Experts the proposal to create reception centres in which young people could find a place to stay during their runaway episode.

Several Experts stated that such centres did not exist in their countries. They named some of the difficulties encountered in existing placement centres, such as centres closing down during the confinement related to COVID-19, no longer allowing the reception of young people and sometimes precipitating the return to their families, which may have led to further running away episodes. Other Experts said that these placement centres needed to be improved, and that the process of placing children in care or in centres can be stigmatising for young people and their families.

Other Experts, notably in Austria, Poland and Estonia (where SA Kudunud have a small network shelters), told us that similar centres already exist in their countries. They provide an alternative to the dangers of the street, including begging and delinquency. They shared some of the good practices that are being implemented:

- Support and listening to the young people by phone before the reception desk;
- Search for contacts as an alternative to the centre
- Communication with parents: reporting that the youth is safe, conveying a message from the young person, initiating communication with the family;
- Provide a secure place to sleep for several nights.

Various proposals were made to create or improve such centres:

- Increase of staff and financial resources;
- Psychological support and a focus on understanding the reasons for running away;
- Networking;
- Maintaining the confidentiality of the child's location;
- Transitional nature of the intervention;
- Work and exchanges with the family;
- Inclusion of life-Experts as mentors or educators;
- Advertising via social networks of the centres;
- Involvement of street educators to encourage the youth to go to the shelters;
- Information on these homes via the hotlines.

However, the Experts also identified certain risks in relation to the development of these initiatives. In some countries, such centres would be illegal because the young person would have to be reported to the police and brought back to the family, which would undermine trust. This raised important questions about the possibilities of implementing such centres in practice.

6.4 Conclusion

The results of the study allowed us to identify areas to be developed for prevention and assistance to young people who run away or are at risk of running away. Below is a review of the proposals to promote access to help, recommendations for the training of professionals, their responses to the issue of returning after running away, and an evaluation of their feedback on previous suggestions (development of shelter centres and life Experts).

Overall, there is a certain homogeneity in the good practices proposed. Rather than oppositions, we note a consensus among Experts and practices that, while they may be different, are complementary. There appears to be a form of shared culture around what should be done to help at-risk or runaway youth across different EU countries. Cooperation, continuity, and raising awareness are key notions. However, one point is worth mentioning: the notion of transparency and confidentiality. This issue becomes more difficult when professionals are faced with two objectives: 1) to find young runaways and bring them home and 2) offer help and support. National and institutional policies may prioritize one of these objectives over the other, resulting in very different interventions. This issue should be debated during training sessions for professionals.

The following overview of recommendations by the Experts can serve as a guide to develop good practices for runaways.

6.4.1 Promoting access to help

The recommendations by the Experts identify certain avenues to promote access to help and the development of bonds of trust between young people and professionals. The first step is to initiate a process of destigmatisation of young people who are runaways or at risk of running away. The use of prevention campaigns as well as training or developing an ethical code and anti-stigma policies are proposed as solutions.

The second step is to create or strengthen the bond of trust between young people and adults, which goes hand in hand with the destigmatisation of runaways. This approach aims to interrupt the escalation into risky behaviours, prevent the risk of recurrence of running away, and to improve the effectiveness of the assistance offered to young people. In order to achieve this, Experts recommended developing training of professionals on skills that involve listening to and welcoming the comments and participation of young people.

Ensuring that a secure and confidential framework is established is another pillar in (re)building trust between young people and adults. However, there may be a challenge in balancing support and authority, especially when it comes to searching for the runaway child and making sure they return safely. Improving collaborations between services and institutions appears to be another major challenge. Schools appear to be an important player in prevention and the role of teachers as trusted people is emphasised as a significant prevention element. However, according to the Experts, prevention can only be thought of in a global way that must involve psychologists, social workers, educators, teachers, doctors, nurses and paramedics, lawyers and judges, police, people working in migration and NGOs, but above all the parents and the young people themselves.

The experience of professionals tells us that young people who run away from institutions are particularly at risk of stigmatisation and rejection by professionals. This observation leads us to develop specific recommendations regarding these young people and the conditions of their housing: in addition to investing in deinstitutionalisation and family-based alternative care, it is important to reduce the size of, and improve security and comfort in children's homes, making them more child-centred and allowing young people to find some form of stability in the place where they live, maintaining a continuous link with the same social workers.

Another venue to explore in order to facilitate access to assistance would be to promote access to professionals through online platforms and technologies. Finally, the issue of social ties, already raised by the young people during the focus groups, appears among the Experts not only as a means of facilitating access to help but also as a prevention strategy, for example through sports and other extra-curricular activities.

In order to facilitate access to help, it also appears necessary to raise awareness among young people through prevention campaigns specifically addressed to them. The Experts put forward different approaches to prevention aimed at young people themselves. One of the proposals that emerged was the sharing of true stories, whether from runaways themselves or by public figures, for example through artistic media (theatre, music, images).

Experts suggest that prevention should focus on a positive message. In this approach, the accessibility and availability of professionals would be the central message conveyed by prevention campaigns ("*You can be heard, ask for help, they are waiting for you here. Don't take the risk*"). It is necessary to raise awareness from an early age. However, prevention campaigns must be adapted (e.g., creative activities) and developed in close collaboration between young people, parents and professionals.

6.4.2 Training of professionals

The results call upon continuous and extensive training of professionals. Some of the training needs identified by professionals are:

- Detection of abuse, including emotional abuse ;
- Trauma and dissociative processes ;
- Adolescent psychology ;
- Attachment process ;
- Conscious affection as professional competency ;
- Mental health ;
- Sale and sexual exploitation of minors, sexual violence and grooming ;
- Alcohol, tobacco and drugs ;
- Harassment and violence between adolescents, included at school ;
- Migration issues and refugee trajectories ;
- Use of new technologies and problematic online behaviours.

Experts also highlighted the diversity of trajectories that can lead to running away and the risks for each of them: young people living in children's homes, migrant children, refugees, LGBTQ+ youth and girls appear as a group of particularly at-risk children. The Experts propose to adapt prevention campaigns and to raise awareness of professionals on these themes through training.

Professionals also have a role to play in disseminating information and skills: one of the most promising objectives is training to train, in other words, to provide professionals with the tools to raise awareness and develop skills of parents, young people and other professionals. The development of young people's skills to cope with the risks of running away is one avenue.

Creativity, problem solving, social skills are among the key competencies. Providing parenting support and developing communication and listening skills is another promising avenue.

6.4.3 Return from running away

Both the literature and the comments of the young people in the focus groups affirm that the return from an episode of running away is a particularly difficult time.

In general, Experts recommend preparing a warm welcome for children, rather than intervening through prevention and authority. Return home interviews would help to better understand the reasons for running away and to prevent recurrence. Families and care homes where young people live, appear to be the key players in the process, with whom the response to returning home should be prepared. Schools and teachers also play a significant role in offering a positive return and should work closely with families and other child protection agencies involved.

Other interventions can also be mobilized: mandatory psychological support upon return for the young person and his or her parents; mediation between the young person and his or her parents; monitoring and continuous follow-up of the family situation, involving parenting support and skills development if needed; proposing peer support groups; supporting the relationship with trusted adults for the young person or offering support to the young person and their family after the return through hotlines.

Here again, responsiveness and collaboration between social services are important.

6.4.4 Other avenues: welcome centres and life Experts

Other proposals have emerged from previous phases of the RADAR research, which include the use of life-Experts and welcome centres. They were submitted to the Experts for feedback and evaluation.

We submitted to the Experts the proposal to create welcome centres in which young people could find a safe place to stay during their episode of running away. The Experts shared their views on the benefits and risks associated with the creation of such centres. They also came up with concrete ideas for developing or improving such centres:

- Development of staff and financial resources ;
- Psychological support for the youth and understanding of the reasons for running away ;
- Networking ;
- Confidentiality of the youth's location ;
- Transitional nature of the intervention ;
- Work and exchanges with the family at the same time as the reception ;
- Inclusion of experience experts as mentors or educators ;
- Advertising via social networks around these centres;

- Involvement of street educators to encourage the youth to check in at the centre;
- Information on these centres via the hotlines.

They point out, however, that such centres must be transitional and that the intervention can only work if preparation for the child's return with the family is happening in parallel. Legal issues, depending on the context of each country, may be an additional obstacle.

We also suggested the inclusion of experience experts in prevention campaigns. The feedback from the Experts allows us to consider different ways of conceptualizing their role. These young people could be spokespersons for prevention campaigns based on the sharing of true stories. They could also be solicited as educators or mentors for at-risk youth or take place in speaking groups supervised by professionals. However, some Experts would find it more effective to offer awareness and training activities to parents, youth and professionals to avoid resorting to prevention by focusing on risk.

7 Preliminary recommendations and critical elements for change

7.1 Policy recommendations for National Governments

1) Recognising the link between Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs) and running away in relevant legislation and policies and accompanying this recognition with awareness raising and the promotion of non-judgemental responses and attitudes towards runaways and their families.

2) With the support of Local Authorities, developing statutory national guidance and protocols on children run away from or care. This should include clear roles and responsibilities for different actors when responding to a runaway case.

3) With the support of Local Authorities, developing statutory national guidelines to ensure follow-up with children and families that indicate concerns of ACEs. The follow-up should focus on support and not only on investigation. Proposed protocols to include are on existing referral and case management systems, information sharing, and services to offer.

4) Introducing Return Home Interviews (RHI) by an independent person as a recommended practice after a child has run away. The introduction should include guidelines on implementing and conducting the RHI, following up on the RHI, including recording and sharing information.

5) Invest in and facilitate the capacity of child hotlines and helplines to offer online psychological support to runaway children and their families and for them to develop protocols for responding to runaway calls in cooperation with other actors.

6) Improving reception conditions for children in migration at risk of running away. This includes shorter processing procedures and high-quality guardianship systems.

7.2 Policy recommendations for Local Authorities and Public Bodies

1) Introducing mandatory training for local authorities and public bodies on the trajectories of different groups of children who runaway. For example, runaway children in migration, runaway children living in care, young carers who run away, runaway children from the LGBTQ+ community, and so on. Proposed trajectories should also include gender dimensions and experiences. Training should work on prejudice towards certain groups and it is important to develop specific lists of resources and services for referral.

2) Introducing mandatory training for local authorities and public bodies on ACEs and integrating this into basic child protection courses. The training should focus on the identification of ACEs, adequate responses, and reporting, and establish the link with running away as symptom of adverse experiences. An element of prevention should be clearly addressed and should focus on encouraging prevention work to be about the identification of early ACEs, with support from public bodies, and for it to begin at an early age.

3) Introducing training on the importance of a positive return home or to care for the prevention of repeat incidents of running away and the exposure to further ACEs for children.

4) Enhancing the effectiveness of training to professionals with the use of real-life case studies.

5) With support from public bodies, standardising the inclusion of counsellors and staff with mental health training in schools from early years.

6) With support from public bodies, advocating for leisure activities and clubs to be widely and freely accessible to all children and young people, and for these to encourage a sense of inclusion, belonging and social cohesion.

7) With support from public bodies, improving the dissemination of valuable information for children and increasing efforts (funding and resources) to connect children with existing services. Proposed tools to use to achieve this are social media and online platforms easily accessible to young people, the creation of phone apps, and accessing strategic areas such as schools and runaway hotspots. Information that is deemed as valuable to dissemination includes:

   - Children's rights
   - Mapping of existing organisations and their services
   - Identification of trusted adults
   - Means of reporting concerns (anonymously too)

8) With support from public bodies, building and strengthening bridges between children/young people and local authority figures, mainly police and social services. Proposed actions for this recommendation are:

   - Involving local authority figures in leisure activities for children and young people.
   - Introducing, in an informal manner, local authority figures as part of regular school activities.
   - Improving continuity between local authority professionals and the children and families they work with.

*All local authority figures must be successfully trained on working with children prior to being involved in leisure or school activities.

9) Encouraging and facilitating the relationship between children living in care and their families. Proposed actions to achieve this are:

   - Developing visitation schedules in partnership with children and young people.
   - Facilitating regular and consistent contact between children in care and their families.
   - Making mediation readily available for children in care and their families.

10) Advocating for increasing safety work within communities through the creation of safe spaces for children and young people and funding for training of youth services staff. Additional proposed actions for this are:

- Increasing the provision of informal youth drop-in services.
- Developing welcome centres for children thinking of running away.
- Improving generic services with open access for children.

11) Integrating communities (such as public transport, late night staff, etc) into multi-agency responses and protocols. On top of this, increasing efforts to improve the ability of communities to runaway and homeless children, engage with them, and report their concerns is a necessary step in the protection of children. Proposed actions are:

    - Offering mandatory training on ACEs to public transport staff and late-night staff.
    - Including communities in regular multi-agency conferences and meetings.
    - Developing awareness raising campaigns targeted at communities.

12) Increasing efforts towards more widespread use of Street (Youth) Outreach for runaway and homeless young people.

13) Encouraging mediation and parenting workshops after a child has runaway.

14) Advocating for local authority figures and public bodies to receive training on working with children. This should include training on listening and communicating and overcoming unconscious bias and attitudes.

Critical elements for change:

1) Introducing/increasing efforts to reduce stigma and existing negative perceptions about runaway children and on running away. Further significant areas that require increased efforts to reduce stigma are mental health, being a victim of violence, and families accessing help. Proposed actions for this recommendation are:

    - On a large scale, developing awareness raising campaigns targeting different audiences based on the messaging.
    - On a more local level, developing ethical codes and policies with local authorities and organisations to decrease stigmatising behaviour and improve reporting.
    - Developing training on providing non-judgemental support to parents and families.

2) Establishing consistent and widespread inclusion of child participation among child protection institutions and policy work. To achieve this, there needs to be a shift in attitudes towards children and young people's competences and towards an understanding of them as meaningful partners within child participatory frameworks. Proposed actions to improve the inclusion of children and young people in service designs and policy work are:

    - Meaningfully involving children as partners in the development of interventions and services.
    - Involving children and young people in trainings to professionals.

- Developing "co-operator protocols" between children, young people and professionals.
- Introducing young people as "Life-Expert" and mentors in services for other children and young people.
- Creating Youth Ambassador roles among different child protection institutions.

7.3 Policy recommendations for the European Union

Runaway children and the risks they are confronted with are overlooked or tackled through policies designed for other, sometimes overlapping, vulnerable categories of children, such as homeless children, trafficked children, children living in institutions, and children experiencing violence, abuse and exploitation. To advance protection for runaway children, significant efforts should be made to ensure that **runaways are accounted for as an individual vulnerable category of missing children in all relevant European policy and legal frameworks including those on homelessness, anti-trafficking, deinstitutionalisation, and combating violence and abuse**. Only in this way can their specific needs be tackled and conceptualized through their unique experiences of risk.

One of the reasons why runaways are often overlooked as a vulnerable category of children is the lack of comparable data on the subject. The "Study on missing children: mapping, data collection and statistics on missing children in the European Union" published in 2014, with data from 2010-11, is sadly the most recent on the topic. We strongly recommend an **update of this report,** including a review of the follow-up on its recommendations. In addition, an **obligation on member states to annually report data on missing children** separated out by category of missing, is necessary to monitor the problem.

A key policy instrument that can support the prevention of and services for runaway children is the **Child Rights Strategy 2021-2024** which presents several priority areas all of which are relevant to runaway children. The rights of runaway children should be considered in implementing the Strategy to ensure that actions taken will address their individual need. This includes, for example, addressing (the risk of) running away in the planned **networks of families, schools, youth and other stakeholders involved in children's mental health;** as well as in the **EC expert group on supportive learning environments** as both mental health and irregular school attendance are related to running away. **Support for accessible, online services for children at risk of running away** is another area where the strategy can be helpful.

The **European Child Guarantee and the European framework for action on mental health** and well-being are other significant tools that can improve the protection of runaways. Mental health has been identified as a prevailing adverse experience in the life of runaway children, both before and after running away. The unique experiences of runaways should be addressed by both frameworks in the context of mental health, social exclusion, abuse, children living in alternative care, education and schools, and children experiencing homelessness.

Violence and abuse are risk factors and potential consequences of running away, therefore the **Centre to combat child sexual abuse** which the European Commission proposes in its Strategy against Child Sexual Abuse, from its conception, will need to make the link between missing and child sexual abuse, and cooperate closely with the network of 116000 hotlines.

Abbreviations

RADAR	Running Away: Drivers, Awareness, Responses
MCE	Missing Children Europe
EU	European Union
NGO	Non-Governmental Organisation
ACEs	Averse Childhood Experiences
RHI	Return Home Interview
LGBTQ+	Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer/Questioning, and others
MOOC	Massive Open Online Course

Appendix I: 2019 116000 hotline survey questions specific to the category of runaways

	Contextual quantitative questions
Q	Please specify the number of new cases opened in 2019.
Q	Please specify the total number of missing children you supported in new cases opened in 2019.
Q	Please specify the total number of ongoing cases from the previous years that were supported in 2019 by your organisation?
Q	Please specify the number of missing children in new cases opened in 2019 of a cross-border nature per category.
Q	Please state the total number of missing children in all cases opened in 2019 with an element of violence, abuse, neglect and exploitation (including online) in each category

	Demographic questions
Q	Please state the total numbers of the gender breakdown of missing children **per category**
Q	Please state the youngest and median ages of the missing children supported in 2019 per category.

	Qualitative questions
Q	Please describe a cross-border case of missing children supported by your organization.
Q	Please describe an example of a best practice in dealing with missing children in 2019 or an example of a case that challenged your organization which served as a learning experience.

Multiple choice qualitative and quantitative questions

Q What is the number of runaway children whose cases were opened in 2019 who were found in:

- Less than a week, child found alive
- Less than a week, child found deceased
- Less than a month, child found alive
- Less than a month, child found deceased
- Less than 6 months, child found alive
- Less than 6 months, child found deceased
- Less than a year, child found alive
- Less than a year, child found deceased
- Child not found

Q The total number of repeat runaways registered by your hotline in 2019

- Ran away twice
- Ran away between 3-5 times
- Ran away between 6-10 times
- Ran away more than 10 times

Q How many children were running away from or pushed out of:

- Home/child's family
- Foster family
- Institution
- Unknown
- Other

Q What were some of the most common reasons why children ran away (please answer only if the information was retrieved directly from the child/parents or police during or after the case was resolved)

- They experienced problems at home (incl. foster family)
- They experience problems in the institution where they were placed
- They experienced problems at school
- They experienced mental health issues (including intention to commit suicide)
- They experienced drug/alcohol abuse issues
- They were looking for adventure or personal discovery
- They ran away with a friend/under peer pressure
- They ran away (to be) with a lover
- They ran away/were pushed away prior to/after/related to their coming out as LGBTQ+
- Unknown
- Other

Ranking qualitative questions

Q If the children you worked with "experienced problems at home", please rank the most common problems

- Change in family dynamics (divorce, newly composed family, new baby, death of a family member)
- Period of heightened conflict/tension in the family
- Climate of (physical or emotional) violence in the family
- Abuse (physical, verbal/emotional, or sexual)
- Neglect
- Parental alcohol or drug use
- Authoritarian parenting style (lack of autonomy)
- Other

Q If the children you worked with "experienced problems at the institution where they were placed", please rank the most common problems

- They missed their family and wanted to re-join them
- Period of heightened conflict/tension at the institution
- Climate of (physical or emotional) violence in the institution
- Abuse (physical, verbal/emotional, or sexual)
- Neglect
- Authoritarian climate in the institution (lack of autonomy)
- Other

Q If the children you worked with "experienced problems at school", please rank the most common problems

- Truancy (voluntarily missing school activities)
- Exclusion (school decided to exclude them from school activities)
- Bullying

- Peer pressure
- Learning difficulties
- Other

Appendix II: List of Respondent Child Helplines

The **child helplines listed below in bold type** have submitted data and responses to Child Helpline International's RADAR Survey. The child helplines designated with one asterisk (*) indicate child helplines that partially submitted data for the RADAR Survey. The child helplines designated with two asterisks (**) indicate child helplines that reported no contacts related to runaways and runaway behaviour in 2019 for the RADAR Survey. The remaining child helplines have been included in this report using a portion of their data from our 2018 and 2019 annual surveys.

Europe	Albania	ALO 116 Albania
	Austria	**147 Rat Auf Draht**
	Azerbaijan	**Azerbaijan Child Helpline**
	Belgium	Jongerenlijn AWEL**
	Bosnia and Herzegovina	Plavi Telefon (Blue phone)**
	Croatia	Hrabritelefon
	Cyprus	Call 116111 Cyprus
	Czech Republic	**Linka Bezpeí***
	Denmark	BørneTelefonen
	Finland	Lasten ja Nuorten Puhelin ja Netti - Child and Youth Phone**
	Germany	Kinder- und Jugendtelefon**
	Greece	**The Smile of the Child**
	Iceland	Red Cross Helpline 1717 - Hjálparsíminn 1717
	Ireland	ISPCC Childline
	Israel	NATAL Helpline**
	Italy	Telefono Azzurro
	Latvia	Uzticibas Talrunis - Child & Adolescent Helpline 116 111
	Lithuania	Vaiku Linija (Child Line Lithuania)
	Luxembourg	Kanner Jugendtelefon (KJT)
	Malta	Kellimni.com**
	Moldova	Telefonul Copilului 116111 Moldova
	Netherlands	**De Kindertelefoon**
	Poland	**Telefon Zaufania (Trust Phone for Children and Youth)**
	Portugal	**SOS Criança**

Romania	Telefonul Copilului 116111 Romania
Serbia	NADEL - Nacionalna Dečija Linija Srbije**
Slovenia	National Telephone Helpline - TOM
Switzerland	**Pro Juventute Beratung + Hilfe 147**
Spain	Teléfono ANAR de Ayuda a Ninòs y Adolescentes
Ukraine	**Ukraine National Child Toll-Free Hotline**
United Kingdom	**Childline UK**
United Kingdom	BEAT

Appendix III: Country Level Overview Total Numbers

When focusing on the total number of contacts related to Runaway Behaviour per country, we can see that the United Kingdom (58.6%) accounts for the highest number of contacts in this category, followed by the Netherlands (20.0%) and Poland (7.4%).

Total Number of Contacts 2019 per Country (as reported on the RADAR Survey)

Country	Girl	Boy	Non-Binary	Unknown	Totals
Austria	76	49	0	0	125 (5.3%)
Azerbaijan	No Data Submitted	3	0	0	3 (0.1%)
Greece	32	19	0	0	51 (2.2%)
Italy	33	19	No Data Submitted	3	55 (2.3%)
Netherlands	331	115	3	21	470 (20.0%)
Poland	69	105	0	0	174 (7.4%)
Portugal	14	3	No Data Submitted	No Data Submitted	17 (0.7%)
Switzerland	12	9	No Data Submitted	2	23 (1.0%)
Ukraine	15	39	0	0	54 (2.3%)
United Kingdom	861	341	20	152	1 374 (58.6%)

Total Number of Contacts 2018 & 2019 Annual Survey

Our Annual Surveys collect data on Runaway contacts in Europe. Countries with an especially high number of contacts in 2018 are France (37.4%), Spain (22.0%) and the United Kingdom (14.5%). In 2019, Spain (25.1%), the United Kingdom (20.7%) and the Netherlands (14.3%) had a high number of Runaway contacts.

Country	2018 Runaway Contacts	2019 Runaway Contacts
Albania	16	3
Austria	117	124
Azerbaijan	31	27
Belgium	187	0
Czech Republic	No Data Submitted	244
Denmark	215	192
France	1 559	No Data Submitted
Germany	137	244
Greece	79	No Data Submitted
Hungary	79	No Data Submitted
Ireland	1	6
Italy	31	32
Latvia	No Data Submitted	13
Lithuania	54	147
Luxembourg	1	No Data Submitted
Netherlands	No Data Submitted	478
Poland	No Data Submitted	174
Portugal	5	23
Romania	28	26
Slovakia	25	No Data Submitted
Slovenia	12	19
Spain	917	837
Ukraine	72	54
United Kingdom	606	692
TOTAL	4 172	3 335

However, not all countries submitted data for both years, and there was a variation in the number of total child helplines that submitted data for runaway contacts. For this reason, the table below provides an overview of countries where child helpline international has multi-annual data on runaway contacts.

Based on these 18 reporting countries below, there was an average of a 6.7% increase of reported contacts between 2018 and 2019. This minimal increase implies that runaway contacts are a consistent issue for child helplines, and we expect that this will at least stay consistent or continue to increase for 2020.

Country	2018 Runaway Contacts	2019 Runaway Contacts
Albania	16	3
Austria	117	124
Azerbaijan	31	27
Denmark	215	192
Germany	137	244
Greece	79	51[7]
Ireland	1	6
Italy	31	32
Lithuania	54	147
Portugal	5	23
Romania	28	26
Slovenia	12	19
Spain	917	837
Ukraine	72	54
United Kingdom	606	692
TOTAL	2 321	2 477

[7] In the case of Greece, there was no reported data on runaways in 2019 from the Annual Survey, therefore, the reporting data from the RADAR Survey was used.

Appendix IV: Country Level Overview Age

The youngest age and the median age of children and young people with runaway behaviour varies per gender and per country. As reported in the analysis, the median age is a more accurate representation of the contacts related to runaways or runaway behaviour received by child helplines.

Youngest Age of Runaway Behaviour Contacts per Country

Country	Girl	Boy	Nonbinary	Unknown
Austria	10	12	No data	No data
Azerbaijan	No data	8	No data	No data
Greece	13	13	No data	No data
Italy	No data	7	No data	No data
Netherlands	8	8	No data	No data
Poland	10	7	No data	No data
Portugal	11	15	No data	No data
Switzerland	13	11	No data	15
Ukraine	10	10	No data	No data
United Kingdom	4	7	12	7

Median Age of Runaway Behaviour Contacts per Country

Country	Girl	Boy	Nonbinary	Unknown
Austria	15	17	No data	No data
Azerbaijan	No data	10	No data	No data
Greece	16	15	No data	No data
Italy	13	14	No data	No data
Netherlands	14	14	No data	No data
Poland	13	13	No data	No data
Portugal	14	16	No data	No data
Switzerland	19	17	No data	16

Ukraine	14	15	No data	No data
United Kingdom	11	12	14	12

Appendix V: Child Helpline International's RADAR Questionnaire

Understanding your child helpline's context of runaway and runaway behaviour

Q Does our child helpline record or document contacts related to runaway behaviour?

Related Qualitative Q:

How does your child helpline categorise contacts related to runaway behaviour? What categories does your child helpline use? Please explain your response.

Related Qualitative Q:

How do your counsellors support children support children and young people who contact your child helpline when the contact was related to runaway behaviour? Please explain your response.

Q Total Number of Contacts

Please indicate the total number of counselling contacts related to runaway behaviour in 2019 below. Please disaggregate the number of counselling contacts per gender (Boy, Girl, Non-binary, Unknown).

	Boy	Girl	Non-binary	Unknown
Counselling Contacts Related to Runaway Behaviour				

Please indicate the total number of new and ongoing counselling contacts related to runaway behaviour. Please disaggregate the number of counselling contacts per gender (Boy, Girl, Non-binary, Unknown).

	Boy	Girl	Non-binary	Unknown
Number of counselling contacts related to runaway cases ongoing from previous year (2018)				

Number of new counselling contacts related to runaway behaviour in (2019)				

Background Information (disaggregated by gender)

Q Age by Gender of the child or young person

Please provide the total number of Counselling Contacts related to runaway behaviour your child helpline received in 2019 per age group and gender of the children/young people concerned (Boy, Girl, Nonbinary, or Unknown) of the child or the young person concerned.

	Boy	Girl	Non-binary	Unknown
00-03				
04-06				
07-09				
10-12				
13-15				
16-17				
18-24				
25+				

Q Youngest age by Gender of the child and young person

Please provide the ages of the youngest and the median age of Counselling Contacts related to runaway behaviour your child helpline received in 2019 per gender of the children/young people concerned (Boy, Girl, Nonbinary, or Unknown) of the child or the young person concerned. *(Drop down menu, 0-25+).*

	Boy	Girl	Non-binary	Unknown
Youngest counselling contact related to runaway behaviour				
Median age of counselling contacts related to runaway behaviour				

Q The total number of repeat runaways registered by your child helpline in 2019 who:

	Boy	Girl	Non-binary	Unknown
Ran away twice				
Run away between 3-5 times				
Run away between 6-10 times				
Run away more than 10 times				

Related Qualitative Q:

Q Do children and young people talk/ mention about their past concerns or contacts relating to repeat behaviour, in particular runaway behaviour? Please explain your response.

Related Qualitative Q:

Q If your child helpline does not collect data on the number of repeat runaways registered by your child helpline, can you please provide a qualitative description of the frequency and relevance of repeat contacts related to runaway behaviour. Please explain your response.

Q How many children were running away from or pushed out of:

	Boy	Girl	Non-binary	Unknown
Home/child's family				
Foster family				

Institution				
Unknown				
Other				

Related Qualitative Q:

Q Does the living situation of the children and young people concerned best indicate why children ran away? Please explain your response.

Q Caller

Please provide the total number of Counselling Contacts related to runaway behaviour your child helpline received in 2019 per Caller and gender of the children/young people concerned.

	Boy	Girl	Non-binary	Unknown
Child				
Child on behalf of another child				
Adult on behalf of a child				

Multiple choice, ranking, quantitative and qualitative questions asked for runaways:

Q What were some of the most common reasons why children ran away (please answer only if the information was retrieved directly from the child/parents or police during or after the case was resolved).

- They experienced problems at home
- They experienced problems at school
- They experienced abuse or exploitation (physically, verbally, sexually)
- They experienced mental health issues
- They were looking for adventure or personal discovery
- They left home with the intention to attempt suicide
- *They left home for reasons related to drug abuse*
- *They left home for reasons related to grooming*
- Unknown

- Other

Related Qualitative Q:

Q Do the common reasons above best represent why children ran away? If no, what additional reasons do you identify as underlying drivers or reasons for children to run away based on the contacts received by your child helpline? Please explain your response.

Q If some of the children you worked with "experienced problems at home", please rank the most common problems (please answer only if the information was retrieved directly from the child/parents or police during or after the case was resolved).

- Change in family dynamics
- Neglect
- Abuse
- Other

Q If some of the children you worked with "experienced problems at school", please rank the most common problems (please answer only if the information was retrieved directly from the child/parents or police during or after the case was resolved)

- Bullying
- Peer pressure
- Learning Difficulties
- Other

Q Connection to violence, neglect, and/or abuse

Please provide the total number of Counselling Contacts related to runaway behaviour your child helpline received in 2019 with an element of violence, neglect, and/or abuse per gender of the children/young people concerned.

	Boy	Girl	Non-binary	Unknown
Number of Counselling Contacts Related to Runaway Behaviour with an element of violence, neglect, and/or abuse				

Q Connection to cross-border element

Please provide the total number of Counselling Contacts related to runaway behaviour your child helpline received in 2019 with a cross-border element per gender of the children/young people concerned.

- *Cross-border element: Refers to contacts where a child or young person crosses a country border, while referring to situations in which a child or young person is missing, has disappeared, and/or cannot be found.*

	Boy	Girl	Non-binary	Unknown
Number of Counselling Contacts Related to Runaway Behaviour with cross-border element				

Q Related reasons for contacts

For contacts related to runaway behaviour, were they related to any of the following reasons for contacting the child helplines:

Please provide the total number of Counselling Contacts related to runaway behaviour your child helpline received in 2019 per additional reason of contact and gender of the children/young people concerned.

	Boy	Girl	Non-binary	Unknown
Missing children				
Violence				
Mental health				
Physical health				
Accessibility				
Discrimination and exclusion				
Family relationships				

Peer relationships				
School				
Sexuality				
Other				
Only reason for contact was runaway behaviour				

Related Qualitative Q:

What are the main concerns raised by the children and young people who contact your child helpline when the contact was related to runaway behaviour and to your top reasons for contact related to runaway behaviour?

Related Qualitative Q:

Please describe the contacts your child helpline tends to receive for your top 3 additional reasons of contacts based on the quantitative data provided in the table above.

Related Qualitative Q:

Is there a recurring associated theme or information to contacts related to runaway behaviour which you often work with and which is not captured by the categories used above? Please specify in the space below.

Actions Taken

Please provide the total number of **Actions that your child helpline has Taken** for contacts relating to runaway behaviour in 2019 per type of action, including various types of referrals.

Type of referrals	Boy	Girl	Non-binary	Unknown
Recommendations				
Referrals to school counsellors				

Referrals to child protection agencies				
Referrals to law enforcement agencies				
Referrals to healthcare professionals				
Referrals to other organisations				
Direct interventions by the child helpline				
Other				

Related Qualitative Q:

Q How does number of actions taken for children and young people related to runaway behaviour compare to other types of contacts your child helpline receives? On average, does your child helpline take more, less, or the same amount of actions for contacts related to runaways as contacts related to, for example, mental health or family relations? Explain your response.

Case Summaries

Quantitative data are crucial to identify trends, but case summaries are essential to support the stories told by the numbers. The human mind is such that stories are more convincing than numbers for most people. Child Helpline International wishes to use evidence-based methods to make decisions (on advocacy, trainings, and capacity-building), and use narratives to convince people those decisions are the right ones.

Therefore, in this section, we kindly ask you to provide case summaries. We ask you to provide specific types of case summaries related to runaway behaviour:

1) One case related to a **contact related to runaway behaviour**, where runaway behaviour was the main reason for contact.

2) One case related to one of the **three largest additional reasons of contacts related to runaway behaviour** in your child helpline in 2019.

Appendix VI

Before running away
• Ask participants to think back on their own experience(s) of running away: What state (of mind) were you in? The moderator writes the answers on a sheet of paper visible to all. Another option is to propose to each of the participants post-its on which to write down these answers, which the participants will come to put on a common sheet of paper around the word "runaway". The common work is then summarized by the moderator.
• Ask participants to continue thinking about the time(s) they ran away: Based on your experience, what makes someone run away from home?
• "Did you receive any help?
• What do you think you would have benefited from? What would have been helpful for you at this time to find another solution to this situation? The moderator can consider choices: someone to talk to, information, personal space, a safe place to be, basic needs, emotional needs as affection, etc).
• Who do you think could have helped? What about your parents? School? Friends? Professionals or institutions? Other adults?

During a running away episode/ away from home or care
• When you think about your experience away from home, were there things that were very difficult for you?" Did you feel that you were taking risks? Did you feel in danger? At what point?" The moderator helps participants to develop and synthesize their ideas.
• When you recall your experience away from home, can you think of something that has been helpful for you? "What helped you? Or who?
• What (else) would have been helpful for you at this time?
• Did you have a trusted adult to talk to or to call?" What makes it possible to turn to an adult when you need help? What makes it difficult? Suggestions for the moderator: A parent, a carer, a teacher, a social worker, other professional worker, another relative, the parent of a friends, a sports coach, or other?
• Did you have a friend you could talk to or call? What help would you expect from a friend in this situation? Have you heard about children's support service, such as the 116000 hotline, the child helpline, or any other organization? Do you think it is/could be helpful? How could it work to be useful?

After running away/ support and prevention

• When you returned home, what did you fid difficult? Was there anything you considered positive? Suggestions for the moderator: talking to carers or parents, returning to school, seeing that nothing had changed, or others. The moderator writes the answers on a sheet of paper visible to all. Another option is to propose to each of the participants post-its on which to write down these answers, which the participants will come to put on a common sheet of paper.
• Who would you say you received the best support/help from after running away? How?
• Who would you say you received the least support/help from after running away? Why?
• What could make you leave again?

Prevention
• Let's talk about prevention. What do you think needs to be done so that young people don't run away from home?
• What do you think needs to be done to help young people who are or have been runaways?
• What do you think are the changes that adults need to make to help runaway youth? What about school? And parents/carers?
• For you and for other runaway children, how would it be in an ideal society?
• What information do runaways need and who should give it to them?
• If you had to come up with a slogan, what would it be?

Additional Covid-19 questions

- When you think about Covid-19 pandemic and the quarantine, what links can you make with your experience?
- How do you think the Covid-19 pandemic and the quarantine are affecting children currently running away or thinking about running away? Both positively and negatively.
- How do you think children with experiences similar to yours can be best supported during a situation like the Covid-19 pandemic?

Appendix VII: Delphi Study Questionnaire

A. Stigmatization

During the first phase of research, we arranged focus groups and individual interviews, in several European Union countries, with young people who had already run away from home or who had considered running away. We observed that these young people said they were **stigmatized** by adults and society in general. They felt that they were identified as juvenile delinquents, who sought attention, suffered from mental illness and were in conflict with adults. This stigma can be a barrier to seeking help.

In order to illustrate this, here are two excerpts from an interview with a young girl in Poland:

"*'What's going on in our heads? Why do we do it?' That's what they should take into account as well - (...) it's not because we are a bit crazy, but because we have problems and we are (...) tired and we just want to get away from all those people around us, those who spend their time lying to us and all that".*

"Outside of school, in life, people should be a little more understanding towards us. They should understand that we do it for a reason, and that we don't do it because we're crazy or to get attention."

A.1. Have you ever observed the stigmatization of runaways by professionals? In your opinion, how do professionals contribute to creating and maintaining stigma? What is the impact of this stigma on runaways? Illustrate your response with a concrete example.

A.2. In your opinion, what actions could be developed in order to deconstruct these representations and thus facilitate the search for help? Are you aware of any initiatives taken in this direction (in your country or abroad)?

B. Risk perception

Data from interviews indicate that young people **do not necessarily perceive the risks associated with running away**. For many, awareness of the risks comes after they run away, and sometimes years later. This is illustrated by the following comments:

"*I never thought about dangerous things because I wasn't afraid. I just wandered around. I wasn't afraid.*" Young man, Greece.

"*And let me add that, at that age, I was not aware of the difficulties and all that."* Young man, Poland.

Furthermore, studies show that risk-based prevention campaigns are ineffective in many areas of youth care (Döring, 2014; Kantor et al., 2008). Thus, the **knowledge of the associated risks does not appear to curb cases of running away.**

B.1. Have you ever noticed this difficulty in perceiving the risks of running away from home among young people? In your opinion, on which dimensions should prevention campaigns focus?

B.2. Can you cite examples of campaigns that have been carried out that you think are particularly effective?

During the focus groups and interviews, the participants suggested that young people who were **"life experts"** should be involved in prevention campaigns. By sharing their stories, these young people would discuss the negative aspects of running away, based on their own experiences. These comments illustrate this approach:

"*I would talk about my experience, for example. I would talk about my experience. And how it wasn't good. Maybe I could warn other people in this way. [I would you say] 'Every time you think about it, don't do it, because it won't be good'. So, I think I would talk about my experience.*" Young girl, Greece.

B.3. As a professional, how do you position yourself with regard to this proposal? In your opinion, how could "life experts" be put in place in prevention campaigns? Illustrate your answer with a concrete example.

B.4. Could you cite an example of a "good practice"/campaign/service that uses life experts?

The NGO Magnolia (Ukraine) produces **video clips for prevention**. These clips have been created based on children's recommendations and they therefore follow the process **of including of young life experts in prevention strategies**. The first video highlights the risks of running away and is designed as a video game that conveys the message "Don't play this game! . The second video features the story of a popular Ukrainian singer who tells the story of his childhood and conveys the message "The street is not a solution".

B.5. What do you think of this initiative? Do you think it could be implemented in your country, depending on the social, political and economic context of your country? Why?

C. Distrust of adults

One of the factors that prevents youth from seeking help before, during or upon returning from their runaway is their **distrust of adults**. Youths fear that they will not be heard, recognized or respected for what they say. They are afraid that they what they say might be told to their parents or that they might be forced to return if they ask for help while running away. Finally, some feel that adults cannot or will not do anything for them.

The following are two excerpts from interviews with youths in Belgium and Portugal:

"*I think it's because we're afraid that they don't understand us. We are afraid of of being judged. And that we're too sensitive. We say to ourselves 'Now it's good, I'm growing up, I want to make my own way in life, I don't need your advice'.*" Young girl, Portugal.

"*Yes, I'd like to add that generally, when you're a child and you have something to say to someone you trust (whether it's a general practitioner, a teacher or someone in authority), they don't believe you until they have proof. That's my impression. It's really like, 'It's probably nothing, he's just a kid making things up, and he just needs a little attention'. And I think, generally speaking, there's still a lot of changes to be made in that area.*" Young girl, Belgium.

C.1. Have you ever noticed this difficulty? What do you think hinders this trust? Illustrate your answer with an example.

Among the **avenues** envisaged to improve young people's confidence in relation to adults, three dimensions emerge from the initiatives and measures identified in Europe:

Developing professional training with an emphasis on skills that involve listening to and welcoming the comments of young people who sometimes show mistrust towards adults;

Ensuring that a secure and confidential framework is established;

Working towards active collaboration between professionals.

C.2. Are there other dimensions that you think promote trust between adults and youth? How can they be concretely implemented? Illustrate your answer with an example.

D. The role of school

During the focus groups and interviews, many participants called on schools and teachers to identify youths at risk of running away. This could be achieved for example by promoting active listening and exchanges between pupils and **teachers**, who were often seen as persons of trust. Schools were also seen by the young people as an important places for the dissemination of **information**, which would be useful for preventing cases of running away.

Schools could also **collaborate** with other institution and launch initiatives aimed at preventing from running away. In Belgium, De Kruiskenshoeve collaborates with a number of schools for young people in difficulty aged between 15 and 21. On this farm, work, sport and space are used as tools to provide young people with new perspectives and opportunities to get their lives back on track. In Portugal, the ANAR foundation is also present in schools and it conducts **awareness and training activities** that are not only aimed at young people in difficulty but also at parents and teachers. Other prevention campaigns, such as "The duck goes...", developed by Smile of a Child (Greece), are aimed at young children from nursery school onwards.

D.1. What do you think about giving the school a central role in preventing runaways? Do you have examples of "good practices" in this area in the school setting? Illustrate your answer.

D.2. How to involve the youngest? With what objectives?

E. Returning from runaway

The **return of runaway** is a particularly critical stage, which crystallizes tensions and can lead to repeat instances. Young people note the difficulty of returning to an environment in which nothing has changed; they need help and support to deal with the return to their family or institution.

Here are two excerpts from our interviews :

"*I think that if my return had been received in an aggressive and negative way, I think I would have certainly run away a second time.*" Young man, Poland.

"*And my mother asked me why, but I don't think anything has changed, because after a few days everything was the same as it was before.*" Young girl, Greece.

E.1. In your opinion, how can we accompany young people in this moment of transition? What mechanisms could be mobilized? Illustrate your answer with examples.

E.2. Could you cite an example of a "good practice", a prevention campaign or an existing support service that you think is particularly effective?

In the United Kingdom, there is a **return home interview protocol** that takes place within 72 hours of the young person's return to his or her home environment. The purpose of this interview is to identify the reasons for the runaway and the dangers to which the youth may have been exposed during their runaway;, to prevent recurrence; and to provide information on the help available (see attached document, pages 14 to 16).

Furthermore, during the focus groups, some of the young people told us about the appearance of suicidal thoughts and depressive affects after returning home. Interviews could therefore include a **mental health risk assessment**.

E.3. As a professional, what do you think of this initiative? Can you consider implementing it in your country, depending on the social, economic and political context?

F. Training of professionals

In Europe, good practice in the field of runaways values the training of professionals who work with young people who are runaways or at risk of running away and the integration of elements dealing with **mental health, sexual assault and the risks of prostitution of minors or substance abuse.** Moreover, during the isolation imposed by the COVID-19 pandemic, professionals have noted an increase in runaways and violence against **LGBTQ+ youth**. The contemporary context also invites us to pay particular attention to the issue of **young migrants.**

F.1. Do you think these different training areas are relevant in your country? Are there any other elements that seem important to you for the training of professionals?

F.2. In your opinion, what other professionals or sectors might be in need of training?

In Italy, the **police** have developed an application to report cases of drug sales and harassment and are now extending it to other types of offences. This application allows for reporting that can be immediate, anonymous, and supported by photographic or video evidence taken via smartphone.

F.3. What do you think of this initiative? What would be your recommendations for improving police response to runaways?

G. Calling lines

The focus groups indicate that youth have a good knowledge of the youth support systems, call lines and services such as Child Focus. However, they perceive these systems as having more of a **control function** that focus on returning them home or back to their community. This is a barrier to accessing these services.

G.1. In your practice, have you ever noticed this? How do you respond to this difficulty? How can we improve the functioning of call lines? What messages could be communicated to youth?

H. Grooming

Grooming is defined as: "*the act of establishing a relationship, trust and emotional bond with a child or adolescent with the intent to manipulate, exploit and abuse them. Children and youth can be groomed online, in person or both - by a stranger or someone they know*" (NSPCC definition).

Research indicates that runaways are at risk of being manipulated by adults and sexually solicited. Some runaways experience this during their runaway experience. Excerpts from focus groups with youth indicate that runaways are particularly vulnerable when on the street and that low risk perception is an additional risk factor.

H.1. In your opinion, is it important to educate youth about sex and how to recognize the signs and risks associated with grooming?

H.2.What are the best ways to educate youth about grooming? Which social organization/institution/government agency should play the most important role in this project?

H.3. Do you think that professionals (social workers, teachers, health practitioners) are sufficiently trained to approach and support children on the issue of grooming? If not, what are the needs of professionals at this level?

I. Involvement in gangs

Research indicates that there are strong links between running away, grooming and **gang involvement**. Children who run away frequently and for long periods of time are at risk of becoming involved in criminal activity or being sexually exploited by gangs. Breaking the youth's ties to gangs can be more difficult than removing them from gangs.

I.1. Could you give examples of practices, prevention campaigns or services that you feel are particularly effective in dealing with these issues?

I.2. In what ways do you think socio-economic, cultural and political inequalities in your country increase the risk of running away? What policies and actions need to be developed at this level?

I.3. In what ways do you think socio-economic, cultural and political inequalities in your country increase the risk of runaways becoming involved in gangs? How do you think we can address these contexts?

J. COVID-19

The magnitude of the **COVID-19 pandemic** and the associated health measures taken differ in the different countries of the European Union. However, data show an increase in domestic violence, which may put children who would seek to escape violence at increased risk, especially if they are no longer allowed to leave the home. During the focus groups, youth also highlighted the difficulty of accessing help during these periods of confinement, including during their runaway.

J.1. What do you think is the impact of the pandemic on runaways and youth at risk of running away from home in your country?

J.2. How can professionals, police and governments best mitigate the impact of the pandemic on runaways?

K. A place to land... welcome centres

The interviews allowed us to address the needs of the youth during runaway and the best way to offer them help. Here are a young girl's (Belgium) answers to the question "What would you have needed?":

"Uh, have money, bring warm clothes because it's very cold at night. To have a roof and psychological help, to meet someone who could have put us back on the right track, I think. Although I don't know if I would have listened, but... Something to keep warm, something to eat, because we really almost didn't eat. And someone who tells us 'What the hell are you doing here, you have to wake up!' ... I don't know if there is such a thing, but what could be nice is places

specifically for runaways where they can come and take refuge, and on the other hand, the staff of these places can warn the authorities or parents by saying, 'They are here'."

"*Really places where you can run away to and have confidence, and if someone is running away, they don't really what to do, they're in denial. Yes, try to set up places so they don't sleep in the streets or hang out in the neighbourhoods, but otherwise I wouldn't know what to say. (...) To leave the door open for them, but without forcing them. Try anyway, but without being too 'Come on, you have to go home'. Try to explain things a little so that they say, 'Ah, maybe I'll go home, yes'."*

In the United States, there are **shelters for runaways and homeless youths**, where they can stay temporarily and talk with professionals. Studies indicate that these centres provide a time to pause, reflect and re-mobilize of resources, as well as a safe alternative to wandering the streets (Gwadz et al., 2018). Focus group participants spontaneously discussed the possibility of establishing similar centres in their home countries.

K.1. What do you think about the implementation of this type of structure in your country? What do you think are the main advantages/disadvantages of such a structure? Can you justify your answer with a concrete example?

In Slovakia, the PRIDE program aims to develop the skills of host families and provides information to better understand the situation and history of the children they take in. The PRIDE program **can be extended to all young people who are separated from their families**. It could serve as a guide for the creation of reception centres in Europe: an evaluation of the program and its impact on young people's journeys could be carried out to assess this.

K.2. What do you think about it? Do you have any suggestions?

Conclusion

L.1. Are there any other aspects that you would like to see addressed in the next questionnaire? Indicate in a few words, with an example, the subject in question.