

Missing Children Missed Opportunities

186,000
Incidents of
missing
children in
England

x5

The average number of times that care-experienced children who went missing across England and Wales were reported missing last year

x2

Care-experienced children are twice as likely to go missing repeatedly than other children in Wales

x3

Care-experienced children are three times more likely to go missing repeatedly than other children in England

13,600
incidents of
missing
children in
Wales

Comparing missing incidents of care-experienced children across England and Wales

Children across England and Wales are going missing from their homes and from care at an alarming rate. A child is reported missing every hour in Wales. In England, more than twenty children are reported missing every hour.



Care-experienced children and young people are significantly more likely than other children to be reported missing across England and Wales. Yet the support children and young people receive before and after a missing episode differs dramatically by local authority, and by country. We have compared the approach to preventing and responding to missing children in both countries, to call for a better approach across England and Wales.

In England, some oversight of the reasons that children go missing is possible. This is because every child or young person that goes missing is entitled by law to an independent 'Return Interview'. This is an in-depth discussion that aims to "identify and deal with any harm the child has suffered [...] and to understand and try to address the reasons why the child or young person ran away, help the child feel safe and understand that they have options to prevent repeat instances".

Missing the full picture

Return Interviews are not a statutory requirement in Wales, making it less likely that drivers for missing episodes are routinely understood. However, we have recently produced a report 'Missing the Point', supported by public and third sector organisations as well as all four Police and Crime Commissioners in Wales, calling for an independent return interview offer to be legally required when children return home.

Changes to where children live

In England, there has been a sharp increase in 'Out of Area' placements, to the extent that two in every three (64%) children living in a residential home now live outside of their home postcodes boundary.

In 2018/19, 27% of all children in the care of local authorities across Wales were living outside of their home local authority. A further 6% of children were living outside of Wales. Children living out of area are exposed to a greater risk of criminal or sexual exploitation and are more likely to go missing than other children. The Children's Society recently reported that 71% of police forces have raised concerns about increased risk factors for children living out of area.

Similarly, the number of children in England aged 16 or 17 who are placed in unregulated settings has more than doubled since 2009. Unregulated settings include 'semi-independent' or 'supported accommodation' placement types which are not inspected by Ofsted.

Policy	England	Wales
Every missing child is entitled to a Return Interview upon return within 72 hours	Green	Red
Guidance on Return Interviews is statutory, meaning public sector bodies must follow it	Green	Red
Statutory requirement for Return Interviews to be conducted by an independent person	Green	Red
Child Rights Approach to Policing embedded across police forces	* Orange	* Orange
National protocol on reducing unnecessary criminalisation of looked-after children and care leavers	Green	Red
Pilot project of 'Independent Child Trafficking Guardians' who support children who have been, or are at risk of being trafficked.	** Orange	Green
NYAS steering group exploring links between missing episodes, crime and children's rights.	Red	Green

*The National Police Chiefs' Council introduced a National Strategy for the Policing of Children and Young People in 2016. However, police forces vary in their use of the approach.

**The Independent Child Trafficking Guardians' pilot is active in Wales/Cymru, East Midlands, West Midlands Combined Authorities, Croydon, Hampshire, Manchester and the Isle of Wight.

In 2019, our NYAS Return Interview Service found that the most common reason for children to go missing is a breakdown in communication with their carers. This led to us launching our Missing the Point campaign in both England and Wales, which recommends new ways to reduce missing episodes among care-experienced children and young people and offer better protection if they are reported missing.

There is also evidence that Return Interview's reduce the likelihood of repeat missing episodes. In England 11,530 care-experienced young people went missing in 2018, and each went missing an average of 6.1 times. Where an independent NYAS return interview was offered, this number reduced to 2.8 times.



NYAS is a socio-legal charity that campaigns for the rights of care-experienced young people across England and Wales, championing their voices to be heard in the decisions made about them. NYAS Cymru lead the All-Wales Missing the Point steering group, working in partnership with the four Police and Crime Commissioners, the Youth Justice Board, and other key public and third sector partners. Last year, NYAS in England contributed to an All-Party Parliamentary Group report on missing children and out of area placements and gave oral evidence in parliament on this topic.

Across the Border Briefings are a series of NYAS reports that draw on our experience of working within the different national systems of England and Wales. They aim to highlight best practice, and where improvements need to be made to ensure the rights of young people are protected in line with the UNCRC. Care-experienced children and young people must receive the most effective support no matter where they live.



This report was written by
Lucy Croxton and Ben Twomey
Winter 2020



national youth
advocacy service

gwasanaeth eiriolaeth
ieuenctid cenedlaethol

0808 808 1001 www.nyas.net @NYASservices help@nyas.net