



Photography: Bruce Burkhardt/Corbis

Running away

Teenage runaways roaming the streets can lead to increasing crime and costs as they are continually picked up by the police and other agencies. A project in Cheshire aims to get to the root cause of the problem, cutting crime and getting youngsters back on track. Syreeta Lund reports

How many times have you been called out to deal with a teenage runaway? Chances are as an officer, you will find yourself dealing with missing persons on a fairly frequent basis. It's often the same people; they don't want to return home and will do the same thing again. This can be incredibly frustrating but it's estimated that 100,000 young people run away from home or care each year, citing reasons such as neglect, abuse and violence.

It is a cycle that the Talk...Don't Walk project, set up by the Relationship Centre, a charity based in Cheshire and supported by Cheshire Police,

is trying to break. They have introduced an innovative scheme to tackle issues early on and prevent runaways becoming involved in crime. In the Warrington area of Cheshire alone, where the project is based, 744 recordable crimes were directly attributed to runaways in 2003, a figure that has been reduced by 72 percent, to 207 in 2006 since the inception of the scheme.

The number of runaways has also been massively cut, from 1,235 in 2003 to 297 in 2006, according to the project.

DC Alison McCausland has been a police officer for 28 years and put together the initial outline for the

project after coming into contact with vulnerable young runaways. She now works as the project manager, seconded from the force, as the project operates from the voluntary sector as part of the Relationship Centre.

Breaking the pattern

Working with runaways as a police officer before initiating the project, DC McCausland just saw the pattern of runaways being repeated with generations within the same families. Many had a common theme and she wanted to identify the consistent factors involved when young people decide to leave home.

“They were often not happy young people and would get involved in crime; it’s all part of the breakdown in relationships and those who feel disaffected from their families and society.”

She added that the psychology of runaways is that the first time they run away from home, it then becomes an accepted response to deal with any issues and because there are no rules on the streets, they then become involved in crime.

DC McCausland says: “The kids are often the one’s who demonstrate the affect of a family problem, going on the street and getting involved in anti-social behaviour and crime, but it is the family and the parents who are often the cause of the problem. If they feel they are not valued by their families you then find a ‘Vicky Pollard’ attitude in them of, ‘am I bothered?’”

This is how the prevention strategy began and, after submitting an

of them said they had become runaways before they ever became involved in crime. Peter Fahy, chief constable of Cheshire Constabulary, said: “The long term social benefits of schemes such as Talk...Don’t Walk are hard to measure. Running away is often the first step towards a life of crime, substance and sexual abuse. By addressing the problem at its root cause, children are taken out of the criminal justice system who would have been impacted for life.”



Photography: Abraham Menashe/Alamy

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“There is no one to weigh their actions against, it’s like a person who smokes; they often start when they are young, if they were older with more experience, they know it’s incredibly bad for them so they are much less likely to start doing it at 40 years old. When they are young though, a habit has formed and it’s much more difficult to get out of that habit.”

application for funding to the government, the initiative kicked off in 2004. There are two permanent family workers from counselling backgrounds also involved in mediation and a young persons’ worker at the project which was initially funded by the government, and has recently been extended through the local authority

The initiative is also supported by a number of other partnerships such as the Children’s Trust, Cheshire Constabulary, the local Primary Care Trust and the voluntary sector.

A number of professionals worked with DC McCausland and interviewed young offenders, finding that a huge 98 percent

Fact box:

- Every year around 100,000 young people run away before the age of 16 which costs £340 million nationally in services needed to deal with the problem
- Runaways under 16 are five times more likely to have problems with drugs and three times more likely to be in trouble with the police
- Runaways face immediate danger and 25 percent of them are rough sleepers
- Around 5,000 underage girls who are sexually exploited through prostitution in Britain have been runaways