

## STREET CHILDREN IN BRITAIN

Producing a single definition for 'street children' is difficult, primarily because of the variety of needs and situations faced by children around the world. However, the term is widely used to denote children (defined under the Convention on the Rights of the Child as young people under the age of 18) whose lives and livelihoods are primarily understood in terms of their relationship to the street.

Concern for street children in the UK has been low, principally because not many are seen: the last rough sleeper count found only two under-18 year olds sleeping rough. However young people who run away often choose to sleep in dangerous places, and the number of runaways is increasing, leading to growing concern about street children in Britain.

### **Who can we call street children in the United Kingdom?**

There are three categories of young people who could be considered street children in a UK context:

- *Children who run away, leave home or are thrown out, commonly referred to as 'Runaways'*: young people who stay away from home for at least one night without the permission of their parent or carer. About a quarter of runaways will sleep outside.
- *Homeless*: someone who has no home where they can be expected to live, and who may be staying with friends, in a hostel or in a shelter.
- *Street homeless*: someone who is homeless and sleeping rough outside on the street or elsewhere.

### **How many young people are involved and where are they?**

**'Runaways'**: The Children's Society estimates that about 100,000 children under 16 run away from home every year. Most stay away for between one and three nights, but some stay away for longer. The Social Exclusion Unit estimates that at least one in eight runs three times or more. Most do not travel long distances; only one-fifth travel further afield than the nearest city. The majority will stay with friends or sleep in garden sheds, fields or bus stations.

**Homeless**: There are few statistics on youth homelessness. Centrepoint in London provides a place to stay for over 500 young people every night; in 2000 one in five were 16 and 17 year olds.

**Street Homeless**: The last rough sleeper count found only two under-18 year olds sleeping rough on the streets. However young people who run away often choose to sleep in dangerous places.

### **Why do young people run away or become homeless?**

These are just a few of the reasons why a young person might run away and possibly become homeless:

- Being forced to leave
- Bullying
- Drug and alcohol problems
- Living in care
- Loneliness
- Physical, sexual or psychological abuse
- Pregnancy
- Problems at school
- Relationship problems
- Trouble with parents or carers

### **What risks do they face?**

Young people who run away or are homeless are at risk from many factors. These include:

- Attack
- Drug or alcohol use
- Physical and mental ill health
- Rape
- Sexual exploitation

In the longer term, runaways are more likely to become homeless. Some groups are more vulnerable, including younger children, repeat runaways, young children running from care and young people aged 16 and 17.

This page was written by Charlie Bretherton (SSSK Trustee) on 28<sup>th</sup> March 2005, and is based on information from the Consortium for Street Children – for further details see [sssk.org.uk/?Links](http://sssk.org.uk/?Links)