



Runaway Youth: A Research Brief

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How Running Away is Defined

According to the U.S. Department of Justice, a child who leaves home without permission or does not return home when expected and stays away overnight is considered a runaway. Another group of young people the Department of Justice is concerned about are children who are forced to leave or prevented from returning home by an adult.¹ Although these young people leave home under different circumstances, their experiences while away from home are often similar to those of runaways. In fact, research suggests that the distinction between these two groups maybe artificial, as many young people who have run away from home also report having been thrown out by caregivers at other points in time.²

Why this Issue Matters

The actual number of youth who run away from home, as well as those who are thrown out of their homes, each year is unknown. However, the most recent estimate, based on findings from the Second National Incidence Study of Missing, Abducted, Runaway, and Thrownaway Children (NISMAART-2) conducted in 1999, was that 1.7 million children ran away or were forced out of their homes that year—approximately 1 in 43 minors.³ In most cases, runaway episodes are brief. Research indicates that the majority of youth who run away return home within a week.⁴ A small percentage, however, never return home. The more adept children become at living on the streets (e.g., searching for food in dumpsters; stealing for survival; trading sex for food, shelter, money, or drugs) the less likely they are to return home.⁵

Running away is a status offense in 39 states.⁶ In 2010, 15,070 cases nationwide were petitioned to juvenile court on allegations of running away from home—a 35 percent decline since 2001, when the total was 23,244. Over the same period, the number of arrests for running away also dropped—in 2001, 133,259 youth under the age of 18 were arrested for running away; by 2009 that number had decreased by 30 percent.⁷

Of the five major status offenses (which also include truancy, liquor law violations, curfew violations and incorrigibility), running away is the only offense for which the proportion of females petitioned to court is greater than the proportion of males—with girls accounting for approximately 60

RESEARCH BRIEFS

A product of the Status Offense Reform Center (SORC), the Research Brief series presents information on key status offense behaviors, focusing on their prevalence and scope, as well as what we know and don't know based on the available research.

What is a status offense?

Status offenses are behaviors that are prohibited under law only because of an individual's status as a minor, including running away from home, skipping school, violating a curfew, drinking under age, and acting "incorrigibly." They are problematic, but noncriminal in nature.

What is SORC?

SORC provides policymakers and practitioners with tools and information to create effective, community-based responses for keeping young people who engage in noncriminal behavior out of the juvenile justice system. The Center is a project of the Vera Institute of Justice and is supported by the John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation's *Models for Change* Resource Center Partnership.

percent of all runaway cases since the mid 1990s.⁸ Given evidence that nearly the same proportion of boys and girls run away from home, this suggests that law enforcement and the status offense system respond differently to male and female runaways.⁹ Girls who run away from home appear to be at greater risk of system involvement than boys.

Furthermore, compared to youth who were charged with other status offenses, young people who were adjudicated for running away from home were at greatest risk of being ordered to out-of-home placement, although probation was the more common response to the behavior.¹⁰

What We Know

The consequences of running away from home are numerous, and, for some youth, extend well beyond adolescence. Research consistently shows that youth who run away from home have higher rates of substance abuse, sexually transmitted infections such as HIV, and abuse and victimization.¹¹ In addition, running away from home has been linked to commercial sex work among juveniles and adults.¹²

Who Runs Away from Home? Data from NISMART-2 suggests that most young people who run away from home are 15 to 17 years old and white.¹³ In addition, evidence suggests that many young people who run away may identify as lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgendered, or queer (LGBTQ).¹⁴ In a study involving homeless youth in Massachusetts, approximately 25 percent identified as LGBTQ.¹⁵ However, since this research was not conducted on a nationally representative sample, a more accurate estimate of the national prevalence of runaway youth who identify as LGBTQ is needed.¹⁶

Behavioral and Situational Risk Factors. Research has identified the following as leading risk factors for running away from home: mental health and emotional distress, family instability, delinquency, substance use, and physical and sexual abuse. In addition, problems at school have been identified as risk factors for running away from home.¹⁷ Studies of school-based and shelter-based samples of youth reveal that many young people who have run away from home also reported having a learning disability of some kind.¹⁸ Specifically, studies have found that:

- Youth who have run away from home have higher rates of depression and lower levels of self-esteem than young people who have never left home.¹⁹ Self-harm is also prevalent among these teens.²⁰ Research suggests that many of the mental health challenges runaway and homeless youth endure are associated with family conflict, sexual abuse, and victimization.²¹

- Problematic family relationships are highly correlated with running away from home. Studies show that young people who run away from home frequently report strained relationships with caregivers, such as family conflict, parental rejection, harsh punishment, poor parenting, lack of parental supervision, and instability in the home.²² On the other hand, research indicates that strong, positive relationships with parents reduced the risk of leaving home.²³
- Adolescents who engage in heavier drug use are more likely to run away from home than teenagers who rarely use drugs and alcohol. Moreover, the longer young people remain on the streets, the more likely they are to develop a substance abuse disorder.²⁴ Thus, substance use not only increases the risk of running away, but more intense use may also be a consequence of the behavior. The prevalence of substance use is particularly concerning because of its link to high-risk sexual behavior and HIV.²⁵
- Researchers found that young people who engaged in drug use or skipping school were more likely to run away from home than those who did not engage in any delinquent activity. In addition, having friends who engaged in minor deviance, irrespective of their own behavior, increased young peoples' risk of running away from home.²⁶
- Sexual abuse is correlated with the age at which young people have their first runaway episode. Youth who have been sexually abused often report running away at earlier ages than runaway and homeless youth who report never having been sexually abused.²⁷

While research suggests that the aforementioned risk factors are correlated with running away, the research designs used in these studies only permit conclusions about associations, not causal relationships. Therefore, we cannot be sure whether running away preceded these problems or occurred after these problems emerged. Regardless of the direction of these relationships, studies demonstrate that youth who run away from home contend with a range of challenges.

Endangerment and Victimization. Data from NISMART-2 indicates that sexual abuse, drug use, engaging in survival sex, and young age increase runaway and homeless youths' risk of endangerment and victimization.²⁸

- One study examining the effect of child abuse on high-risk behaviors among youth who have run away from home found that young people who had been sexually abused were more likely to engage in unprotected sex, have more sex partners, and use

more drugs and alcohol. In addition, young people who had been abused before the age of 13 were more likely to engage in sex work than runaways who had not been sexually abused.²⁹

- After controlling for demographic and behavioral factors, another study found that early sexual abuse increased the likelihood that runaways would be sexually violated again.³⁰
- Research also suggests that being younger at the time of one's first runaway episode, identifying as LGBTQ, engaging in deviant subsistence strategies (e.g., selling drugs), and engaging in survival sex increase young people's risk of being sexually victimized by strangers and acquaintances. Risk factors, however, differed by gender. Among girls, use of hard drugs was associated with sexual victimization by a stranger; meanwhile, girls who engaged in deviant subsistence strategies and survival sex were at greater risk of being victimized by someone they knew.³¹ For boys, engaging in survival sex was correlated with sexual victimization by a stranger, whereas sexual victimization by an acquaintance was associated with a higher number of runaway episodes and identifying as gay.
- There is also empirical evidence that older youth who have been away from home for an extended period of time, participated in criminal activity, and have a history of mental illness are most at risk of engaging in survival sex.³² One study found that white males were more likely to have engaged in survival sex.³³ Findings from a small interview study involving 40 homeless youth suggest that most young people trade sex because they are desperate and feel they have no other alternatives. Interviews with youth also revealed that coercion, manipulation, and force are ways that young people become introduced to trading sex for goods or shelter.³⁴

The risk of victimization does not disappear when teens return home. Young people, especially girls, remain at risk of sexual victimization, substance use, and risky sexual behavior, even after they are back with caregivers; and few of these teens (and their families) receive services for the underlying factors contributing to the runaway episode—such as mental health services, family counseling, or substance abuse treatment.³⁵

Spotlight

Research suggests that runaway and homeless youth identifying as LGBTQ are especially at high risk of victimization and endangerment.

Results from an eight city survey of homeless young people indicate that, compared to youth identifying as heterosexual, a higher percentage of lesbian, gay, or bisexual adolescents reported substance use, child welfare involvement, and attempting suicide.¹ Runaway and homeless lesbian, gay, and bisexual teens were also more likely to report that they were physically or sexually abused by a caregiver, engaged in risky survival strategies (e.g., drug dealing, survival sex, and shoplifting), and were sexually victimized while on the streets.² Furthermore, the prevalence of risky sexual behavior among LGBTQ youth living on the streets is correlated with the prevalence of HIV among this population.³ Sexually transmitted infections are only one health risk associated with homelessness among this population. Research also shows that homelessness among LGBTQ youth is associated with subsequent mental health issues, including depression, anxiety, and conduct problems.⁴

¹ Leweeuwen et al., 2006; Bryan Cochran et al., "Challenges Faced by Homeless Sexual Minorities: Comparison of Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual, and Transgender Homeless Adolescents With Their Heterosexual Counterparts," *American Journal of Public Health* 92, no. 5 (2002): 773-777.

² Les Whitbeck et al., "Mental Disorder, Subsistence Strategies, and Victimization among Gay, Lesbian, and Bisexual Homeless and Runaway Adolescents," *Journal of Sex Research* 41, no.4 (2004): 329-342; Cochran et al., 2002; Kimberly Tyler, "A Comparison of Risk Factors for Sexual Victimization Among Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual, and Heterosexual Homeless Young Adults," *Violence and Victims* 23, no. 5 (2008): 586-602; Mark Friedman et al., "A Meta-Analysis of Disparities in Childhood Sexual Abuse, Parental Physical Abuse, and Peer Victimization Among Sexual Minority and Sexual Nonminority Individuals," *American Journal of Public Health* 101, no.6 (2011): 1481-1494.

³ Rashmi Gangamma et al., "Comparison of HIV Risks among Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual and Heterosexual Homeless Youth," *Journal of Youth and Adolescence* 37, no. 4 (2008): 456-464.

⁴ Margaret Rosario, Eric Schrimshaw, and Joyce Hunter, "Homelessness Among Lesbian, Gay, and Bisexual Youth: Implications for Subsequent Internalizing and Externalizing Symptoms," *Journal of Youth and Adolescence* 41, no.5 (2012): 544-560.

Interventions. While some interventions aim to prevent future instances of running away from home, many address problem behaviors associated with running away, such as drug use.³⁶ There is very little research, however, on the effectiveness of these interventions.³⁷ The transient nature of most runaways' lives makes them an especially difficult population to provide assistance to, let alone study. Nevertheless, the available research does provide important insights about the needs, service utilization patterns, and challenges of serving these youth.

- One study of the service utilization patterns of runaway and homeless youth in Los Angeles, California found that most youth used the following services: drop-in centers, youth shelters, and medical care provided in these settings. Looking at service use by

race and gender, the authors reported that African American and Latino youth were more likely than whites to use shelter services; and that males were more likely than female to access medical and dental services.³⁸

- Qualitative interviews with young people living on the streets revealed the following barriers to service utilization: extensive paperwork, requirements to disclose personal information, age limits, limited availability of customized services, and lack of longer-term assistance for transitioning from life on the streets.³⁹
- A study comparing shelter use by first time and repeat runaways found no difference in their ability to access services. Length of stay at the shelter, however, was correlated with risk of subsequent runaway episodes. Youth who spent more time in shelters were more likely to runaway a second time.⁴⁰

Studies looking at interventions targeting particular problem behaviors exhibited by runaways suggest that these programs can be effective at reducing young peoples' engagement in such activities.⁴¹

- Runaways reporting higher levels of depression and greater drug use are typically more motivated to change their substance use behaviors.⁴²

Gaps in the Research

Outdated prevalence data. While we know a great deal about risk factors associated with running away, there is a definite need for updated estimates on the number of runaway and other missing children, such as homeless and abducted children, in the United States. The data collection currently underway for NISMART-3, the long awaited follow up to the 1999 national incidence study of missing children, will fill many of the gaps in what we know about the prevalence and scope of the problem. The absence of up-to-date information about juvenile arrests for running away, however, will persist indefinitely. For reasons that are not entirely clear, the Federal Bureau of Investigation's Unified Crime Report (UCR) no longer includes data on arrests of runaways. The consequences of this omission are far-reaching. Given that, in 2010, 62 percent of youth petitioned to juvenile court for running away were referred by law enforcement, the loss of information going forward about arrests will severely constrain our understanding of the extent of runaways' contact with law enforcement, an important area in need of further research and examination. Not only is there a need for more research on the extent of runaways' contact with police and other law enforcement agents, it is also important for research to explore how police handle cases involving runaways in order to identify the most promising practices.

Disparity of system responses. According to data presented in Juvenile Court Statistics, 2010, 21 percent of all black children petitioned to juvenile court were referred for running away compared to only eight percent of white youth.⁴³ Research into why this disparity exists, as well as the disparity in the proportion of males and females petitioned to juvenile court for running away, is very much needed, as are studies exploring the role that gender and sexual orientation play in how runaways are treated by the status reform system. Possible research might include looking at differential rates of entrance into the status offense system and comparisons of dispositional outcomes by race, sex, and sexual orientation.

What works for runaways? More needs to be known about the effectiveness of interventions targeting youth who have run away from home, particularly programs and initiatives designed to address underlying factors that may increase young peoples' risk of running away. Not only would program evaluations expand our understanding of "what works" with runaways, but they might also provide insights into strategies for preventing youth from running away in the first place. Finally, research into judicial decision making is needed to determine why runaways are more likely than any other status offenders to be placed in detention.⁴⁴ Studies such as this, as well as others that compare the outcomes of court responses to runaways with those of community-based responses are needed to advance our understanding of the most effective ways of responding to youth who runaway and reuniting them with their families.

Endnotes

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⁴ Ibid.

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