

Missing Children: Incidences and Characteristics of Runaway Children and Resources Available to Them¹

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This is the first in a two-part series focusing on missing children. This first paper will take a closer look at runaways: who they are, the scope of the problem, and what professionals can do to help. We will also consider the related problem of "throwaways": children who have been abandoned or forced to leave their homes.

Introduction

The personal, emotional, and human impacts associated with runaway children are vast. While experts do not agree on exactly how many runaways there are, they do agree that the problem is a big one. According to the National Runaway Switchboard (2006), there are between 1.3 and 2.8 million runaway and homeless youths in America at any point in time. Other studies show that one out of every seven children will run away before the age of eighteen (NRS, 2006). The U.S. Department of Justice gives slightly lower numbers, indicating that close to 1.7 million children run away from home each year or are cast out. However, such numbers only hint at the seriousness of this issue.

Characteristics

Little information exists about runaways, mostly because they are a very hard group to reach. Most runaway episodes last only a few days, which does not give researchers enough time to locate and interview these youths. Also, many runaways do not wish to talk about their experiences, even years after the fact. Finally, most runaway cases are never recorded. It is believed that only 21% of all caregivers report their missing child. This means that police records and other figures, while they may give researchers a baseline number to work with, are incomplete and misleadingly low.

The most reliable and complete data we have on the issue comes from the Second National Incidence Studies of Missing Abducted, Runaway, and Thrownaway Children (NISMART-2), funded by the U.S. Department of Justice and completed in 2002. This study found that in 1999 an estimated 1,682,900 children ran away or were forced out of their homes.

Runaway children are those who leave their homes without permission and choose not to return for at least for one night. Children who have been

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“thrown out,” however, are those who have been asked or told to leave home, who have a parent or other household adult preventing their return, or who have been left behind. The literature calls these youth “throwaway” children (or “throwaways”) because they have been tossed out of their homes.

Throwaway children are grouped with runaways because these groups often overlap. A runaway child might be told not to come back, which would then make him or her a throwaway. Sometimes children leave on their own after parents threaten to throw them out.

Of the estimated 1.7 million runaway/throwaway children in 1999, most (68%) were in their late teens (fifteen to seventeen years old). About 28% were between the ages of twelve and fourteen. 4% were between the ages of seven and eleven. There were equal numbers of males and females, and no ethnic group or race was overly represented. An estimated 35% had run away before. Data from the National Runaway Switchboard (2006) indicates that most children who left home stayed with a friend or relative. NISMART-2 (2002) found that 99.6% of all the youth studied returned home by the end of the year and about half returned within a week. Most did not travel far (fifty miles or less) and only a few ever left their state.

More children run away during the summer when the weather is good and school is out of session. Oddly enough, though, the number of runaways does not go down very much during the winter. This shows that factors other than warm weather and lack of school supervision must shape a child's decision to run away. Some states attract more runaways than others. California, in particular, seems to be a popular choice for children who have left home, judging by the high numbers of emergency calls received by the National Runaway Switchboard from the state, and by the many homeless youth and child prostitutes police find there.

Some children leave home because of a conflict at school. Others run from institutions and foster care. However, most are trying to escape family problems, especially abuse. In fact, there has long been a known link between abuse and runaways. Previous research shows that in 1999, over 70% of runaways, or

approximately 1,190,900 children, were in very real danger of physical or sexual abuse (NISMART-2, 2002). Approximately 21% were being abused at home, and over three thousand were dependent on alcohol or drugs.

Resources for Families, Counselors, and Extension Agents

There are many resources that can aid families and professionals as they try to deal with the issues associated with runaways. These resources are also of use to runaways, throwaways, or any child facing problems at home.

Hotlines

Some national 24-hour crisis hotlines are aimed solely at helping children in crisis. These include, but are not limited to:

- The National Runaway Switchboard (1-800-RUNAWAY; <http://www.1800runaway.org>)
- KidsPeace National Centers for Kids in Crisis (1-800-334-4KID; <http://www.kidspeace.org>)
- Youth Crisis Hotline (1-800-HIT-HOME; <http://www.1800hithome.com>)

These toll-free numbers can provide the caller with immediate counseling, answer legal questions, give needed information, and act as a referral service. The Web sites provide additional resources for teenagers in distress, teachers, advocates, and the community.

Home Free Program

Greyhound Lines, Inc. offers a program for runaways called “Home Free.” It provides young adults ages twelve to twenty with a free bus ticket home. Participants can use this service twice before being charged for the ticket. This program has helped nearly 10,000 children get back home. More information is available at their Web site: <http://www.greyhound.com/company/contributions.shtml>.

Project Safe Place

Project Safe Place, started by the YMCA in 1983, provides emergency help to children and teens who need assistance or feel afraid. A yellow and black sign that children are taught to recognize is placed outside of participating agencies, businesses, public libraries, and even in the side window of some city busses. Once the child is there, an employee will find a comfortable spot for the child to wait while he or she calls the local Safe Place contact phone number. Then a Safe Place volunteer will come to talk to the child and take them wherever they need to go, whether that is an agency for counseling or support, or a shelter to spend the night. Children learn about this program through school, ad campaigns, and word of mouth. Most schools also give contact information cards to their students. These cards are small enough to keep in a pocket or notebook. Project Safe Place is always looking for more agencies and businesses to take part. To learn more about becoming a part of Project Safe Place, or for more information on the services they provide, please visit <http://www.safeplaceservices.org>, or call (502) 635-3660.

Emergency Shelters

Emergency shelters provide youth in crisis with a safe place to spend the night. There are many different kinds of shelters, but all provide necessities like beds, food, and blankets. The one that services Alachua County (as well as ten other Florida counties) is Interface, part of the Corner Drug Store, a local nonprofit. Interface can house up to 40 children a night. It also offers its services to other at-risk teenagers, such as children who often skip school or who cannot get along with parents and adults. Clients are assigned a counselor, and a case worker is available. Shelters such as Interface often are connected to other services, such as drug rehab, family counseling, and independent living programs, to provide better care to their clients. Interface can be contacted 24 hours a day at their toll-free number (1-800-854-5377). Administration services can be reached at (352) 334-3800 during normal business hours. To find an emergency shelter outside of Alachua County, contact the area's division of the United Way, or call the local police department or social services agency for assistance.

Internet Resources

The Internet provides a wide variety of resources. They range from well-planned teaching curriculums like the ones posted by the National Runaway Switchboard on their Web site (<http://1800runaway.com/educators/educators.html>) to a "choose-your-own-adventure" type story (http://the_runawaygame.com/index.html). The Teens in Trouble Web site (<http://www.lv.psu.edu/jk11/teens/runaways.html>) is a good place to start, and Yahoo provides a directory with a list of some major resources (http://dir.yahoo.com/Society_and_Culture/Cultures_and_Groups/Teenagers/Runaways/), but the best way to find information about a particular location or program is to do a Web search. Remember, though, that not all Web sites provide good, or even accurate, information. Sites posted by government agencies, university studies, and national nonprofit programs are usually much more reliable than other sites, but even they have their problems at times.

Things You Can Do in Your Community

There are many things that individuals can do in their community to help all who are faced with the problems and issues associated with runaway children.

Invest in Your Own Community

First, find out what resources are available to runaways and children in crisis in your area. Take a look at your local emergency shelter. Is it in good condition? Is it large enough to house all the runaways in the area? Maybe the building is big enough, but the services aren't addressing the real problem. A trained counselor can be just as important to these children's well-being as a warm bed and food to eat. If there is something lacking in the local emergency shelter, then local citizens, Extension, and other change agents can help. They can raise money to improve the shelter, and they can volunteer to help it serve its clients.

Team Up and Coordinate

If there aren't any programs or facilities for runaways or unwanted children in your town, then it's time to establish one. It is always best to work with people and organizations who already know the area. You might simply ask an existing organization if they can expand into your town. If that isn't an option, then consider teaming up with another agency that has the resources and expertise to help your cause. Local service providers, hospitals, churches, police, and civic organizations could all contribute.

Work With, Not Against, the Local Authorities

Every state has different laws regarding runaways. Every county handles runaways and homeless youth differently. Some police stations will actively search for runaways, while others do not have the time or resources to look for them. Some judges are strict when assigning punishment and might make the family pay fines or keep the incident on the child's permanent record. Other judges are much more easygoing. It is important to understand the policies your town has about runaways. Talk to officials before starting any program, and always work with police and the judicial system, not against them. This way, your efforts and theirs will help serve children who face difficult times, instead of creating a more stressful and confusing experience for them.

Be Proactive

Children most frequently run away because of conflict with their parents. Well-timed family counseling could stop thousands of youths from ever running away in the first place. There should be at least one organization in every area that can provide affordable family counseling to those in need. A proactive and supportive school system can also help stop children from running away. Teachers can address the issue of running from home in their classes. They should let children know that running away is not romantic, adventurous, or a safe way to deal with their problems. Children need to know that life on the streets is nothing short of grim. Students also need to know where to turn if they ever do run away, become throwaways, or feel like they need to run away. Most importantly, teachers should help

students learn better ways to solve conflicts and always let their students know that someone is willing to listen and help them.

Be an Advocate for Change

If you think your community isn't doing enough about the runaway/throwaway issue, or if you think things should change on the national level, do not be afraid to speak out. Advocacy has been shown to work.

Fundraisers are a good way to start collecting money and increasing awareness. They are also fairly easy to organize. Showing your support and voting for government officials who address the problem of runaways is another way to help. Writing to your local representative or collecting signatures for a petition might influence future legislation. On a group level, you could organize an ad campaign or even hire a lobbyist. You could even organize your own demonstration at the state or national capitol. No matter how you decide to help, be ready to accept small victories and numerous setbacks. Being a child advocate is not a simple task, but if you think that the issues facing runaways and "throwaways" are worthy of more attention, you should consider becoming a voice for change.

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