

## Executive Summary

*(This report includes supplemental research findings to “Why They Run: An in-depth look at America’s runaway youth, presented by the National Runaway Switchboard” – May 2010)*

# Running Away from Foster Care: Youths’ Knowledge and Access of Services

## Background

A sizable fraction of older youth in foster care run away from their placement at least once; many run multiple times. Estimates vary but indicate a serious problem. Courtney, Terao, and Bost (2004a) found that 46 percent of 17 year olds in substitute care in Illinois, Iowa, and Wisconsin stated that they had run away from care at some time; in Illinois alone the rate was 52 percent (Courtney, Terao, and Best 2004b). Nearly two-thirds of those who ran away did so more than once. A similar study of 17-year olds in Los Angeles foster care found 36 percent had run away from care at least once (Pergamit and Johnson 2009).

Unlike other runaways, youth who run away from foster care are generally not trying to escape from abuse or neglect, although they may experience conflict with caregivers. Having been separated from their families and friends, youth who run away from foster care are sometimes seen as running to something rather than running away (Courtney, et al. 2005).

While away from their placement youth may have need of shelter, medical care, counseling, and other services. These may be services they need because they are on the run (e.g. shelter) or services they need due to a specific event (e.g. becoming ill or injured). They may have been receiving some types of services while in care, such as counseling, medication, or substance abuse treatment, and being away from their placements may disrupt progress. Little is known about the extent to which foster youth use services while away from their placement or what knowledge they have of services.

This report constitutes the third part of a study on runaway youths and their knowledge and access of services. A description of the full study can be found in Pergamit and Ernst (2010a). This report is based on Interviews with a sample of youth who ran away from foster care placements in Chicago and Los Angeles. The information provided by these youths will help us to understand better why they run away and what can be done to prevent youth from running away from foster care. We also learn where these youth go when they run away. As with the other two parts of the study, an important aspect of this report is to give the opportunity to youth to express themselves, to “give youth a voice.” No one from the foster care system was interviewed for this report.

## Methods

The sample was derived from lists provided by the Departments of Child and Family Services in Illinois and California containing names and contact information for youth in a foster care placement who had run away at least once in the previous twelve months. One-on-one Interviews were conducted with youth in their current foster care placement in Chicago and Los Angeles from December 2008 through July 2009.

All the interviews were conducted by the same person and were audio-recorded with the youth’s permission and transcribed for analysis. The protocol left all the questions open-ended, allowing the youth to tell their story. After the fact, a coding frame was developed that allowed the open-ended responses to be reduced to a set of coded responses.

The interviews took approximately 45-90 minutes and gathered information about the runaway event itself as well as the circumstances in the youth's life precipitating the runaway episode. Most questions were the same as those we asked of runaway youth on the street and in shelters with some extra questions pertaining to foster care experiences. Each youth was also asked to fill out a short self-administered questionnaire with basic demographic information and simpler versions of questions that would be asked in the full interview. Youth were paid \$30 for their participation.

### Runaway Foster Youth Sample

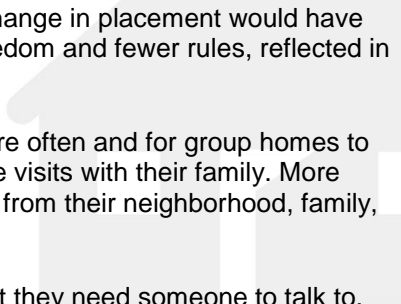
The sample consists of 50 youth in foster care at the time of the interview, 25 in Chicago and 25 in Los Angeles County. To be included in the sample, a youth had to be 14-17 years old, in out of home care under the supervision of the child welfare system, placed in the City of Chicago or in Los Angeles County, and have had at least one runaway episode in the previous twelve months.

Roughly half of the sample is seventeen years old, a quarter is sixteen, and a quarter is fourteen or fifteen. Compared with the lists provided by the two Departments, our sample is somewhat older, primarily with more 17-year olds and fewer 16-year olds. Females constitute 70 percent of the sample, only somewhat more weighted toward females than the original lists. The sample is mostly heterosexual with approximately one in five youth identifying as lesbian, gay, bisexual, or "something else."

Roughly half of the sample is African-American, about one-third Hispanic and only 4 percent white; the remaining 10 percent identified themselves as another race or multiple races. The level of educational grade attainment shows most of the sample roughly on track for their appropriate grade, based on their ages. Forty percent are in eleventh or twelfth grade and only six percent are not yet in ninth grade.

### Key Findings

- Most youth in this sample have run away from foster care multiple times. Only one in eight had run away a single time while one in four youth had run more than ten times.
- The reasons youth run from their foster care placements can be classified into two basic categories: (1) wanting to be with family and friends and (2) disliking their placement.
- After a runaway episode, most youths return to care voluntarily. Reasons for returning included wanting to be back at their home, wanting to go to school, and avoiding getting themselves or others in trouble.
- The majority of sample youth ran away to a friend's home, including boyfriends and girlfriends. About one-third spent their first night at a relative's home. Only three youth reported spending any time of their most recent episode in an outside location such as a squat, a park, or an abandoned building. As a result, these youth do not seek services while they are on the run from a placement.
- Less than one quarter of sample youths reported having been in touch with their caseworker while on their runaway episode and most of those youths did not contact their caseworker right away.
- Youths who run away from foster care have more knowledge of services available than found for high school aged youth in general. Youth with foster care experience generally had similar or less knowledge than other runaway youth. In particular, youth in the foster care sample had less knowledge of services that typically comes from street experience including free meals, drop-in centers, street outreach and free showers.
- The biggest barrier to foster youths seeking services while on the run is that they believe they will be turned in, either directly to DCFS or to the police.

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- Youths who were unhappy with their placements felt that a change in placement would have prevented them from running away. Youths wanted more freedom and fewer rules, reflected in more trust and more respect.
  - Youths felt that they should be allowed to see their family more often and for group homes to give out passes more easily. Help should be given to facilitate visits with their family. More needs to be done to obviate the effects of being placed away from their neighborhood, family, and friends.
  - In general, there was a widespread feeling among youths that they need someone to talk to, who will listen to them and help work through problems. Many felt they couldn't talk to their foster parents. Youths in group homes felt that therapists in group homes turn over too frequently.
  - Youths feel that caseworkers do not provide the support they need. They feel that caseworkers should visit more often and find out how the youth is doing. Caseworkers should take time to talk to the kids to understand them and try to make things better. Youths feel they are not asked their opinion and that caseworkers rely on the foster parent or a visual inspection to determine if everything is fine. Basically youths wanted caseworkers to listen to the youth, try to understand, be reasonable, and be flexible.
  - Most youths do not hate the system or blame it for having to remove them from their home; they just want it to work better.

## References

Courtney, M., Skyles, A., Miranda, G., Zinn, A., Howard, E., and Goerge, R. (2005). "Youth Who Run Away from Substitute Care," Chapin Hall Working Paper, available at [http://www.chapinhall.org/sites/default/files/old\\_reports/174.pdf](http://www.chapinhall.org/sites/default/files/old_reports/174.pdf)

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Pergamit and Ernst (2010a). "Runaway Youth's Knowledge and Access of Services." Available at [http://www.nrscrisisline.org/media/documents/NORC\\_Final\\_Report\\_4\\_22\\_10.pdf](http://www.nrscrisisline.org/media/documents/NORC_Final_Report_4_22_10.pdf)

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