National Runaway Switchboard School Characteristics Study
Executive Summary

The School Characteristics and Youth Runaway study, an analysis of the National Longitudinal Study of Adolescent Health data set conducted by Jennifer Benoit-Bryan, a PhD candidate at the University of Illinois in Chicago, for the National Runaway Switchboard (NRS), is the first one to investigate the correlation between school characteristics and adolescent runaway behavior. It consists of interviewing a nationally representative sample of 12,105 American adolescents in grades 7 through 12 at two different points in their school career and analyzing the data through a hierarchical modeling approach. This study employs two types of dependent variables, both explicit runaway behavior and the more moderate behavior of spending a night away from home without parental permission.

The results of this study offer compelling evidence that running away from home as an adolescent is correlated with school level characteristics.

Key findings:

- Both runaway episodes and nights away without permission are more common for students in schools with average class sizes over 30.

- Parent involvement matters; in schools with more than 10 percent of parents involved in the school’s parent teacher association, the night away rate is 2.1 percent lower than in schools with lower levels of involvement.

- Students from schools in the South are the least likely to both run away (3.3 percent) and spend a night away (11.2 percent) from home. Students from schools in the West are the most likely to run away (5.2 percent) and spend a night away from home (16.2 percent).

- Students from schools in urban areas are less likely to spend a night away from home (12.4 percent) than students in either the suburbs or in rural areas (14.6 percent each).

- School level variables continue to be statistically significant predictors of runaway behavior with the inclusion of individual level controls of race, gender, age, parental economic status, birthplace, and prior abuse history.
  - Schools with lower attendance rates, larger average class sizes, and faster teacher turnover have higher runaway rates.
  - Schools in the Northeast, schools with lower attendance rates, and lower levels of involvement in the parent teacher association have higher rates of spending a night away without parental permission. Students from schools in the South are less likely to stay away overnight without permission.