A Decade of Trends in Crisis Connections Handled by the National Runaway Safeline

An analysis of trends in crisis connections handled by the National Runaway Safeline through its 1-800-RUNAWAY crisis hotline and www.1800RUNAWAY.org online services for the period 2002-2012.

Report Author: Jennifer Benoit-Bryan,
PhD Candidate at the University of Illinois-Chicago

Report Release Date: April 2013
# Table of Contents

- **Executive Summary - 2013** ................................................................. 3
- **Research Methodology** ............................................................................ 4
- **Status of Youth in Crisis** ......................................................................... 6
- **Age of Youth in Crisis** .............................................................................. 8
- **Means of Survival for Youth in Crisis** ..................................................... 10
- **Length of Time on the Street for Youth in Crisis Before Contacting NRS** ... 12
- **Whereabouts at Time of Contact for Youth in Crisis** ................................ 14
- **Issues Raised by Youth in Crisis** ............................................................... 16
- **Relationship of Individual who Contacted NRS to Youth in Crisis** .......... 18
- **Gender of Youth in Crisis** ......................................................................... 20
- **Contact Information** ................................................................................ 21
Executive Summary - 2013

A number of important trends emerge through analysis of the past 11 years of crisis call and online chat data from the National Runaway Safeline (NRS). Individuals in crisis who contact NRS are increasingly dependent on the safety net of shelters. Youth are reporting higher levels of economic problems, an increase of 14 percent over the past year. Youth also report being less able to rely on personal funds (down 14 percent), employment (down nine percent) and friends or family (down three percent), to survive. Instead, they are increasingly turning to shelters for support, a rise of 10 percent over the past year. There has been a corresponding increase in shelter agency personnel contacting NRS about a youth in crisis over the past year, 34 percent.

Over the past year, there has also been an increase in crisis contacts from youth who are contemplating running away from home (22 percent). This increase is mirrored in the fact that more youth are contacting NRS from home than in the past (16 percent increase over last year). This is a heartening sign that youth are reaching out for help before the crisis point of running away from home.

Unfortunately, the National Runaway Safeline has observed an increase of every kind of abuse report that it tracks (a 7 percent increase in all categories combined over last year). The largest increase over the past year has been from youth reporting neglect, 14 percent, followed by emotional/verbal abuse, up 10 percent, physical abuse, up 4 percent, and sexual abuse, up 3 percent. The increase in reports of neglect by youth in crisis may be linked to the 11 percent increase in the number of youth who are throwaways over the past year, those who have been kicked out of the home by their parent or guardian.

Another trend in crisis connections over the past year is a decrease in the number of contacts from very young individuals. Contacts from youth aged 12 and under are down 9 percent over the past year and 49 percent over the past three years. However, contacts from youth slightly older, aged 14, have experienced the largest percentage increase of all ages of youth who contacted NRS with a rise of 29 percent over the past year.

There have also been changes in the length of time youth are on the street before connecting with NRS. Crisis contacts from youth on the street for a relatively short period of time (one week or less) and a relatively long period of time (more than two months) have both dropped over the past year by 2 percent and 37 percent, respectively. Connections from youth on the street one to four weeks have increased 5 percent while contacts from youth on the street one to two months have increased 8 percent over the past year.
Research Methodology

The National Runaway Safeline (NRS) has analyzed records of crisis connections to 1-800-RUNAWAY for the last 11 years 2002-2012, providing a 10-year trend horizon. These reports have always included crisis calls handled by NRS, and this is the first report to also include crisis online chats through the live chat service NRS added in 2011.

Each year, NRS handles more than 100,000 incoming and outgoing calls. Incoming calls can come from runaway, homeless and at-risk youth, their friends, family members, teachers, social service organizations, law enforcement officials, and anyone who cares about helping today’s youth. Outbound calls are calls made by NRS on behalf of a caller to a local shelter, Greyhound Lines, Inc. regarding NRS’ Home Free program, or other local resource.

The contact numbers calculated in this report are those where NRS specifically provided crisis intervention services. In 2012, these crisis intervention services were mostly provided by phone (90 percent) but were also provided by online chat (10 percent). In 2012, NRS handled 1,535 crisis chats and 15,606 crisis calls for a total of 17,141 crisis connections. We will refer to the crisis calls and live chats throughout the report as “crisis contacts” or “crisis connections”. The sample sizes of the categories in this report vary due to the fact that not all categories are pertinent to providing crisis intervention and therefore may not be addressed in every crisis connection. In addition, the response category “unknown” was excluded from analyses in the categories of crisis contact’s means of survival and whereabouts.

Absolute and percentage change across years were calculated. This data was analyzed using Chi Square Statistical Analysis to determine statistical significance using a confidence interval of 95 percent or above. All data is significant at the 95 percent level or above unless the category has a symbol next to the variable name. An * signifies that the change is not significant for the one-year trend, a + signifies that the change is not significant for the three-year trend, and a – signifies that the change is not significant for the 10-year period.

The Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention (OJJDP) defines a runaway episode as one that meets any one of the following criteria:

- A child leaves home without permission and stays away overnight.
- A child 14 years old or younger (or older and mentally incompetent) who is away from home chooses not to come home when expected to and stays away overnight.
- A child 15 years old or older who is away from home chooses not to come home

---

and stays away two nights.

The OJJDP defines a throwaway episode as one that meets either of the following criteria:

- A child is asked or told to leave home by a parent or other household adult, no adequate alternative care is arranged for the child by a household adult, and the child is out of the household overnight.
- A child who is away from home is prevented from returning home by a parent or other household adult, no adequate alternative care is arranged for the child by a household adult, and the child is out of the household overnight.
Status of Youth in Crisis

Runaways made up the largest group of crisis contacts to the National Runaway Safeline (NRS) in 2012 at 33 percent (see Fig. 1). The second largest group of individuals contacting NRS was youth in crisis who have not yet run away from home at 32 percent. NRS also received contacts from youth contemplating running away (15 percent of contacts), homeless youth (13 percent of contacts), throwaway youth (6 percent of contacts), and suspected missing youth (1 percent of contacts). Connections with NRS from homeless youth have increased by 18 percent over the last year, 25 percent over the last three years and by 61 percent over the last decade (see Fig. 2). Those youth who are contemplating running away increased 11 percent over the past year, 17 percent over the past three years and 27 percent over the past decade. Contacts from throwaway youth have increased 11 percent over the past year, and 42 percent over the last decade. (NRS defines youth as young people up to 21 years old).

Figure 1: Distribution of Status of Youth in Crisis who Contacted NRS in 2012
Figure 2: Trend Analysis of Percentage Change in Status of Youth in Crisis who Contacted NRS from 2002-2012 (Based on a combined sample of 160,895 for all 11 years)
**Age of Youth in Crisis**

The largest group of youth in crisis who contacted the National Runaway Safeline (NRS) in 2012 was age 17 at 21 percent (see Fig. 3). Age 18 (15 percent), age 19 (14 percent), and age 16 (13 percent) were the next largest groups. The largest increase in crisis connections over the last year came from youth aged 14 with a 29 percent increase. Crisis contacts from youth aged 12 and under decreased by 9 percent over the past year, the largest decrease of all the age groups (see Fig. 4).

*Figure 3: Distribution of Age of Youth in Crisis who Contacted NRS in 2012*
Figure 4: Trend Analysis of Percentage Change in Age of Youth in Crisis who Contacted NRS from 2002-2012 (Based on a combined sample of 84,858 for all 11 years)
Means of Survival for Youth in Crisis

The majority of contacts from youth in crisis to the National Runaway Safeline (NRS) in 2012 were surviving through assistance from friends and relatives at 73 percent. Twelve percent of youth reported using shelters to survive in 2012 (see Fig. 5). The number of youth who report using shelters to survive has increased by 10 percent over the past year. Youth have also reported that they are less able to survive using personal funds than in the past, a 14 percent decrease over the past year and a 33 percent decrease over the past three years. There has been a decrease in reports of youth panhandling to survive over the past year (34 percent) and over the past three years (97 percent) (see Fig. 6).

Figure 5: Distribution of Means of Survival for Youth in Crisis who Contacted NRS in 2012
Figure 6: Trend Analysis of Percentage Change in Means of Survival for Youth in Crisis who Contacted NRS from 2002-2012 (Based on a combined sample of 72,234 for eight years of data)

Note: There is no data covering the trend period 2002-2012 because data in this category was not collected until 2005.
Length of Time on the Street for Youth in Crisis Before Contacting NRS

The largest percentage of crisis contacts to the National Runaway Safeline (NRS) in 2012 was from youth who had been on the street for one to three days at 45 percent (see Fig. 7). The largest percentage increase in crisis contacts over the past year was from youth who had been on the street for one to two months (8 percent). There was also a significant increase in contacts from youth who had been on the streets for one to four weeks (5 percent). Crisis connections to NRS from youth who had been on the street for less than one week and more than two months decreased over the past year. There was a particularly large decrease in connections from youth who had been on the street for more than six months, down 74 percent over the past year (see Fig. 8).

Figure 7: Distribution of Time on the Street for Youth in Crisis who Contacted NRS in 2012

- 1-3 days: 45%
- 1-4 weeks: 21%
- 1-2 months: 12%
- 2-6 months: 7%
- 1-4 weeks: 21%
- 1-2 months: 12%
- 2-6 months: 7%
- Over 6 months: 7%
Figure 8: Trend Analysis of Percentage Change in Time on the Street for Youth in Crisis who Contacted NRS from 2002-2012 (Based on a combined sample of 97,593 for all 11 years)

Note: In order to show the details of this entire graph, the category of 4-7 days was cut off for the trend period 2009-2012 (decrease of 216 percent) and 2002-2012 (decrease of 194 percent).
Whereabouts at Time of Contact for Youth in Crisis
The largest proportion of youth who contacted the National Runaway Safeline (NRS) in crisis in 2012 was contacting NRS from home at 36 percent. Youth contacting NRS from a friend (25 percent) or relative's (nine percent) house comprised an almost equal percentage of connections at 34 percent total. There was an increase of 20 percent in contacts from youth located in a shelter over the past year, a 7 percent increase over the past three years, and a 5 percent increase over the past decade. Connections to NRS also increased from youth who were at home over the past year by 16 percent and over the past decade by 18 percent. This increase in contacts from youth at home goes hand in hand with the increase noted in contacts from youth who are contemplating running away from home (see Fig. 10).

Figure 9: Distribution of Whereabouts of Youth in Crisis who Contacted NRS in 2012
Figure 10: Trend Analysis of Percentage Change in Whereabouts of Youth in Crisis who Contacted NRS from 2002-2012 (Based on a combined sample of 147,080 for all 11 years)

Note: The categories of Greyhound and recent acquaintance were added in 2007 and do not have data for the 2002-2012 trend horizon. In order to show the details of this entire graph, the category Pimp/Dealer was cut off for the trend period 2002-2012 (decrease of 173 percent).
Issues Raised by Youth in Crisis

The issue most often cited by individuals contacting the National Runaway Safeline (NRS) while in crisis in 2012 was family dynamics at 29 percent. The next significant group of issues was the combination of abuse variables, including neglect, physical, sexual, emotional and verbal abuse at 13 percent. Peer and social issues are indicated by 10 percent of youth in crisis (see Fig. 11).

The largest increase among issues raised over the past year was economics, with a 14 percent increase. This issue has steadily increased over the past one, three (15 percent), and 10 year periods (56 percent). Transportation is another issue that was discussed more frequently by youth in crisis in 2012 than in 2011 with an increase of 13 percent. Reporting rates for all four types of abuse increased over the past year with an increase of 10 percent for emotional or verbal abuse, 14 percent for neglect, 4 percent for physical abuse, and 3 percent for sexual abuse. Crisis connectors reported health problems more frequently in the past year with an increase of 6 percent (5 percent increase in mental health problems and an 8 percent increase in non-mental health problems). Peer and social issues were not raised as often by youth in crisis in 2012 compared to 2011, with a decrease of 5 percent (see Fig. 12).

Figure 11: Distribution of Issues Raised by Youth in Crisis who Contacted NRS in 2012
Figure 12: Trend Analysis of Percentage Change in Issues Raised by Youth in Crisis who Contacted NRS from 2002-2012 (Based on a combined sample of 495,393 for all 11 years)
Relationship of Individual who Contacted NRS to Youth in Crisis

Over half of youth in crisis who contacted the National Runaway Safeline (NRS) in 2012 were youth who were themselves in crisis at 60 percent. Parents made up the second largest group of connections to NRS in 2012 at 21 percent (see Fig. 13). The largest increase in contacts in this category was from youth agencies, a 34 percent increase over the past year and a 10 percent increase over the past three years. Connections from parents were down by 2 percent over the past year, but contacts from other relatives increased 11 percent. There has also been an increase in contacts from a youth’s friend, 18 percent over the past year and 4 percent over the past three years (see Fig. 14).

Figure 13: Distribution of Relationship to Youth of Individuals Contacting NRS in Crisis in 2012
**Figure 14: Trend Analysis of Percentage Change in Relationship to Youth of the Individual who Contacted NRS in Crisis from 2002-2012 (Based on a combined sample of 164,771 for all 11 years)**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Youth</td>
<td>-120%</td>
<td>-100%</td>
<td>-80%</td>
<td>-60%</td>
<td>-40%</td>
<td>-20%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Parent</td>
<td>-60%</td>
<td>-40%</td>
<td>-20%</td>
<td>-10%</td>
<td>0%</td>
<td>10%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Relative</td>
<td>-80%</td>
<td>-60%</td>
<td>-40%</td>
<td>-20%</td>
<td>0%</td>
<td>10%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Adult</td>
<td>-100%</td>
<td>-80%</td>
<td>-60%</td>
<td>-40%</td>
<td>-20%</td>
<td>0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Youth's Friend</td>
<td>-100%</td>
<td>-80%</td>
<td>-60%</td>
<td>-40%</td>
<td>-20%</td>
<td>0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Agency</td>
<td>-100%</td>
<td>-80%</td>
<td>-60%</td>
<td>-40%</td>
<td>-20%</td>
<td>0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Police or Probation Officer</td>
<td>0%</td>
<td>10%</td>
<td>10%</td>
<td>20%</td>
<td>40%</td>
<td>60%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Based on a combined sample of 164,771 for all 11 years*
Gender of Youth in Crisis

The majority of youth in crisis who contacted the National Runaway Safeline (NRS) in 2012 were female at 72 percent (see Fig. 15). Over the past year, contacts from females have increased by almost 10 percent. The number of contacts from males in 2012 increased 7 percent compared to the number of contacts from males in 2011. When looking at the longer trend horizon of 10 years, we see a drop of 8 percent in contacts from females and an increase of 12 percent in contacts from males (see Fig. 16).

Every year in the past three years of trend reports, we have seen that while females are more likely to call or online chat with NRS than males, connections from males with NRS have been increasing more rapidly than connections from females. If this trend had continued, males would eventually have had the same level of contacts as females, or even higher levels of contact with NRS than females. This year that trend has reversed where females are more likely to contact NRS than males and the rise in connections from females has been larger than the rise in connections from males.

Figure 15: Distribution of Gender of Youth in Crisis who Contacted NRS in 2012

Figure 16: Gender of Youth in Crisis who Contacted NRS from 2002-2012 (Based on a combined sample of 165,235 for all 11 years)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Percent Change 2011-2012</th>
<th>Percent Change 2002-2012</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Female</td>
<td>10%</td>
<td>-8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Male</td>
<td>7%</td>
<td>12%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Transgender</td>
<td>2.3%</td>
<td>100.0%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Contact Information

For questions or comments on this research please contact Katy Walsh, Director of Development and Communication at the National Runaway Safeline at kwalsh@1800RUNAWAY.org, or (773) 289-1727.

Media interested in additional information or to schedule an interview with an NRS spokesperson, please contact Apryl Ash at apryl@kesselcommunications.com, or (614) 439-7596.