

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)

Youth’s Knowledge of Services for Runaways: Findings from a Survey of High School Students

Background

This report covers one part of a larger project on Runaway Youth’s Knowledge and Access of Services. The full project involved interviews with youth in shelters and on the street, a survey of youth in schools, and interviews with youth currently in foster care who have previously run away from a foster care placement. An earlier report of findings from interviews with youth in shelters and on the street can be found at

http://www.1800runaway.org/media/documents/NORC_Final_Report_4_22_10.pdf.

The school survey

We conducted a survey in high schools in Chicago and Los Angeles to obtain general information about youths’ knowledge and access of services for runaway youth. We chose schools as a setting for two main reasons. First, schools provide access to almost all (high-school age) youth regardless of whether or not they have run away. We designed this survey to obtain information from four overlapping populations of interest:

- All high school aged youth without the selection criterion of being a current runaway.¹
- Youth contemplating running away.
- Previous runaways who are currently housed.
- Current runaways who are housed somewhere other than with their parents (couch-surfers).

Second, schools may be one of the best points of attack for getting information to runaways and potential runaways. In the interviews of shelter and street youth, few had obtained information from school;² however, many of these youth cited school as a good potential focal point for distributing information.³

Analysis of the school survey data will inform us about:

- The percentage of high school youth who have considered running away, whether or not they have done so.
- Some distinguishing characteristics of youth who have considered running away.
- High school youths’ knowledge of available services.
- Whether those who have run away at some time have more knowledge of services than students who have not.
- Whether those who have contemplated running away have more knowledge of services than students who have not.
- Whether youth are aware of information their school provides on help for runaway youth.
- Whether information provided by schools increases students’ knowledge of help available for runaway youth.
- Where youth turn for help if they feel they can’t talk to their parents.

¹ Although the population of interest is all high school aged youth, some youth will be missed due to absences, truancy, skipping class, or dropping out.

² Pergamit and Ernst (2010), p. 63.

³ *Ibid.*, p. 85.

Methods

Each school district was divided into sub-areas based on geography and race/ethnic composition. Within each sub-area, we identified schools which met the following criteria:

- The school must have open enrollment, generally based on neighborhood, and not be a specialty school.
- The school must meet a minimum size requirement to allow us to achieve our desired sample size.
- The race/ethnic composition of the school must be similar to the race/ethnic composition of its sub-area.

Schools in Chicago were recruited from May of 2009 through February of 2010 and in Los Angeles from September 2009 through April 2010. For some schools we were only able to gain access to a few classrooms or one or two grades.

A major obstacle arose in that Chicago Public Schools requires active parental permission. Practically speaking, this means that in order to complete a survey a child had to return a permission slip with a parent or guardian's signature. This created difficulties for recruitment in several ways.

First, it created more of a burden on the teachers because they had to hand out and collect permission forms as well as remind students to return their forms. Secondly, this necessitated a strategy for encouraging youth to return the forms, for which we had limited resources. Very few students returned the form, likely affecting the representativeness of our sample. Fortunately, the Los Angeles Unified School District did not require parental consent.

Sample

The sample from the school survey comprises 1,246 students who completed surveys in six schools in Chicago and two schools in Los Angeles County. The requirement for active parental consent in Chicago limited our response tremendously, with only 283 students participating across the six schools, ranging from 7 to 91 students in the six schools. In L.A., one school provided 448 students with the other school providing 515 students.

The non-random sampling of schools and students and the small number of schools, combined with a highly selective response in Chicago, limits our ability to generalize from these findings. Readers should be very cautious about interpreting the findings to represent all high school youth, even all high school youth in Chicago and Los Angeles. We attempt to limit our exposition to tabulations that should convey meaningful relationships.

The sample is fairly evenly distributed across grades 10, 11, and 12, but has fewer students in 9th grade. In Chicago, twelfth grade provided the fewest students. The age distribution looks as one would expect based on the grade distribution, with a lower percentage of 14- and 18-year olds than students ages 15 to 17.

Students split equally between male and female. Race/ethnicity distributions were reasonably similar to their actual distributions in each city; however, the larger proportion of the sample being from L.A. highly skewed the overall sample distribution. Eighty percent of the L.A. sample was Hispanic, yielding an overall rate of 71.5 percent. Twenty percent of the entire sample was African American; 46 percent in Chicago and 13 percent in L.A. Only 3 percent of the entire sample was white with 8 percent in Chicago and 2 percent in L.A.

Over half (55 percent) of the sample was living with both of their biological parents, 10 percent were in a step-family, 27 percent living with a single parent, and about 6 percent living with others (including grandparents, aunt/uncles, foster parents, siblings, and friends). The distribution of family types for L.A. is fairly similar to the national distribution (Kreider 2007) whereas the distribution for the Chicago students is considerably different. We do not have adequate data with which to compare to know how similar or different our sample is from all Chicago students.

Key Findings

Running Away: Contemplation and Experience

- Nearly two in five students had at sometime considered running away; nearly one quarter had considered it “somewhat” or “very” seriously.
- Girls were more likely than boys to have considered running away (48 percent compared with 39 percent). Girls were more likely than boys to have considered running away “somewhat” or “very” seriously (27 percent compared with 18 percent).
- Youth in step-families were the most likely to have considered running away “somewhat” or “very” seriously (33 percent), followed by youth in households without a biological parent (27 percent), youth in single-parent families (25 percent), and youth living with both biological parents (19 percent).
- Although 16 percent of responding students had run away at some time, not all said they had ever thought about running away. Consistent with the interviews of youth in shelters and on the street, a sizable portion of runaway episodes may be unplanned spur of the moment decisions.⁴
- Few youth with runaway experience or who have seriously considered running away have contacted a service intended to help runaways.
- There appears to be a social network in schools among youth who have run away or have seriously considered running away.

Knowledge of Services for Runaway Youth

- Youth have little knowledge of services available to help runaway youth, even if they have past runaway experience or have seriously thought about running away.
- However, youth with past runaway experience have more knowledge about available services than youth with no past runaway experience.
- Less than one quarter of responding students say their school provides information on services available to help youth who have run away.
- Students who say their school provides information are more informed about available services than other students.

How Youth Would Get Help

- Youth turn primarily to friends for help if they feel they can't talk to their parents.
- Youth do not know about hotlines and would not call one if they were to run away; only 13 percent of youth who have seriously considered running away say they would call a hotline.
- Youth wouldn't call hotlines because they don't have the number; don't want to tell others their business; wouldn't want to be found; have other help; don't trust hotlines; don't think they need help; or believe it would not do any good or that hotline staff would not understand their situation.

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 43