

# National Trends on Youth in Crisis in the United States

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*An analysis of trends in crisis connections to the National Runaway Safeline's 1-800-RUNAWAY crisis hotline and 1800RUNAWAY.org online services for the period 2005-2015*

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# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

THE NATIONAL RUNAWAY SAFELINE (NRS) works to build and maintain an effective and coordinated response to youth in crisis across the United States. NRS is designated as the national communication system for runaway, homeless and at-risk youth in the United States. Each year, NRS makes more than 250,000 connections to help and hope through their hotline, online, and offline services. This report summarizes a wide range of characteristics of the individuals in crisis who contacted NRS for help in 2015. In addition, this report places those numbers in the context of past crisis connectors by comparing them to the same characteristics from the previous year (2014), three years ago (2012), and 10 years ago (2005). **These two perspectives – the current picture of individuals in crisis and the trends in characteristics of these connections – give a nuanced understanding of the youth that NRS assists.**

A number of important trends emerged through analysis of the past decade of crisis data from NRS. One of the most important trends that is apparent in a number of connector characteristics is **a shift toward runaway prevention by helping more youth before they leave home.** This trend can be seen in the large increases in crisis connections from two groups: a jump of 46 percent in connections from youth contemplating running away from home and a 15 percent increase from youth in crisis. This shift is also apparent in the fact that more youth are reaching out to NRS themselves for assistance (an increase of 28 percent). In addition, youth are 18 percent more likely to be reaching out to NRS from home than they did last year. **It is probable that the increase in digital connections as a method of reaching out to NRS is coming largely from this group of youth—they may feel more comfortable reaching out to NRS earlier through digital methods.**

**NRS is handling more connections from younger youth than in the past;** connections from each age category of youth up to age 18 have increased over the past year, with the **largest one-year jump of 44 percent for youth age 13.** It is likely that the increase in connections from younger youth is linked to the rise in digital connections that NRS experienced in the past 12 months. At the same time, connections from older youth have decreased over the past year with a drop of 18 percent for 19-year-olds, 24 percent for 20-year-olds, and 30 percent for 21-year-olds. This drop in connections from older youth may be tied to the drop in youth relying on shelter for survival and contacting NRS from shelter situations.

**The upward trend in crisis connections about abuse and neglect that was reported last year has continued to increase at an alarming rate.** There has been a 21 percent increase over the past year, 38 percent over the past three years, and 40 percent over the last decade in connections about abuse or neglect. Among the categories of abuse and neglect, the **largest increase was in emotional or verbal abuse** with a rise of 32 percent over the past year, 50 percent over the past three years, and 59 percent over the last decade.

**The economic situation of individuals in crisis has continued to improve over the past year.** Economic issues were commonly reported by youth in previous years, but reports of this have decreased over the past year by 31 percent. In addition, more youth are able to rely upon personal funds (55 percent increase) and employment (46 percent increase) as a means of survival over the past year.

This report provides insight into the characteristics of and issues faced by youth in crisis in 2015. NRS closely monitors the changes occurring among youth in crisis in order to provide the best possible services to these youth.

**Understanding both who these youth in crisis are, and how the connector group as a whole is changing, are key to designing programs to keep youth safe and off the streets across the country.**

## Research Methodology

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The National Runaway Safeline (NRS) has partnered with Benoit-Bryan Consulting, a research consulting firm specializing in youth issues, to analyze records of crisis connections to 1-800-RUNAWAY and 1800RUNAWAY.org for the last 11 years, 2005-2015, providing a 10-year trend horizon. The data for this report was compiled by Jennifer DiNicola, Crisis Services Manager, National Runaway Safeline.

Incoming connections can come from runaway, homeless and at-risk youth, their friends, family members, teachers, social service organizations, law enforcement officials, or any other individuals who care about helping today's youth. Outbound connections are made by NRS on behalf of an individual in crisis to a local shelter, Greyhound Lines, Inc. regarding NRS' Home Free program, or other local resources.

The individual numbers calculated in this report are those where NRS specifically provided crisis intervention services. In 2015, these crisis intervention services were mostly provided via the hotline (58 percent) but were also provided by digital services (42 percent). In 2015, NRS handled 12,120 hotline crisis connections and 8,624 crisis email, chat and forum connections for a total of 20,744 crisis connections. In this report, references to the hotline and digital crisis connections will be referred to as "crisis connections."

Absolute and percentage change across years were calculated for each trend period. 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 sample size of these categories varies 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 categories of "unknown" and "other" were excluded from analyses.

The Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention (OJJDP)<sup>1</sup> 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.

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<sup>1</sup> Second National Incidence Studies of Missing, Abducted, Runaway, and throwaway Children (NISMAART-2), Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention, Office of Justice Programs, U.S. Department of Justice, 2002; <http://ojjdp.ncjrs.org>.

## Status of Youth in Crisis

- In order to track trends in youth in crisis when they connect with NRS, connectors are categorized into one of six categories: contemplating running away, youth in crisis, runaway, throwaway, homeless, or suspected missing. The table below has descriptions that illustrate the distinction between these six types of connectors.

**Table 1: Description of Status for Youth in Crisis**

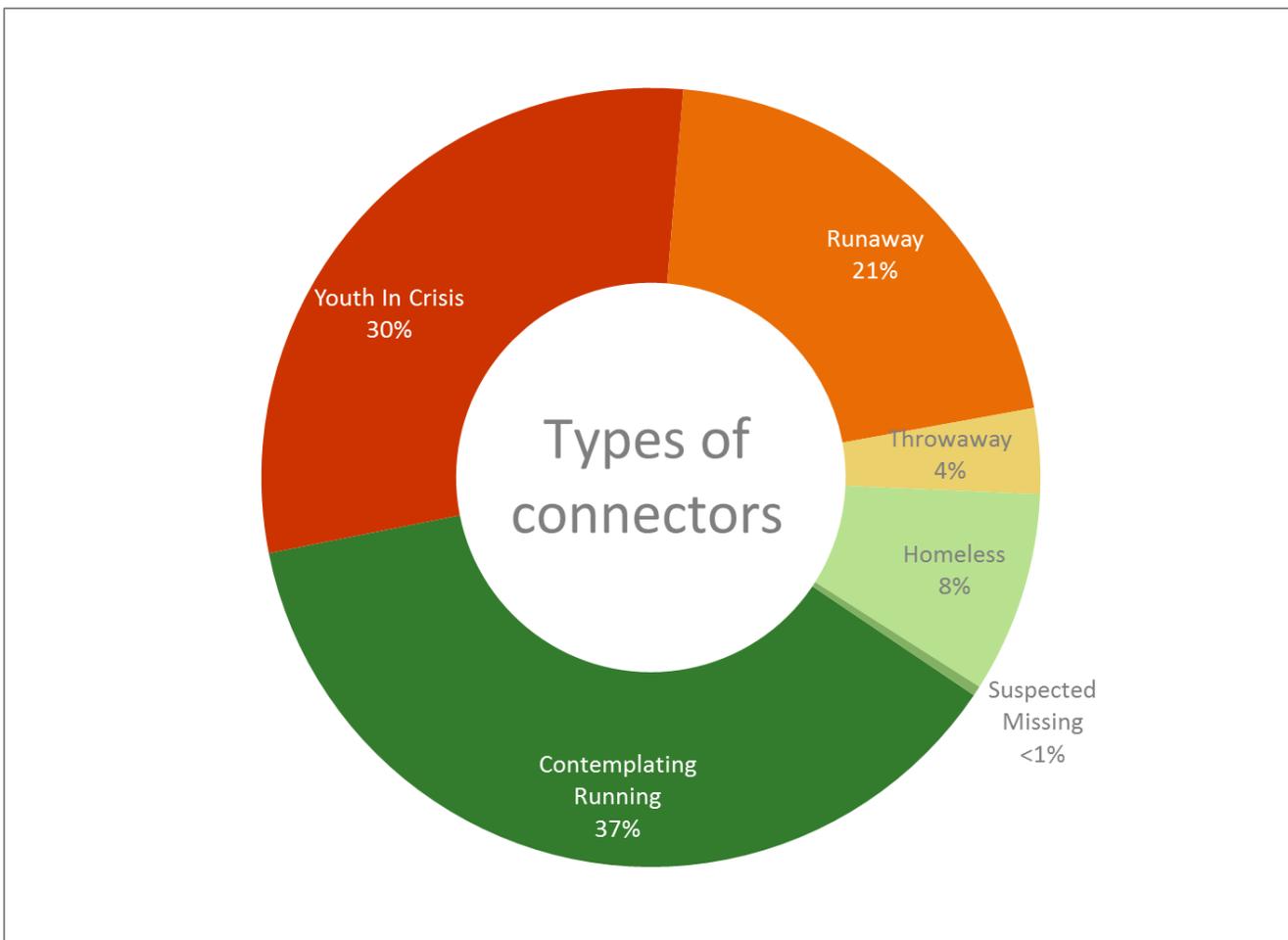
Type of Connector	Description of Status
Contemplating running away	Youth who mention thinking about running away from home during a crisis connection
Youth in crisis	Youth who is in a serious situation that is not necessarily related to running away or being away from home
<i>Runaway</i>	Youth up to age 18 who left home without permission
<i>Throwaway</i>	Youth who were forced to leave their home by their parent or guardian
<i>Homeless</i>	Youth who are homeless because their family is also homeless and youth who are ages 18-21 and are on the street
Suspected missing	Youth's location is unknown because they have not communicated it to their parent or guardian; the parent or guardian suspects that they are missing

- Youth who are contemplating running away from home (37 percent of crisis connections) have surpassed general youth in crisis (30 percent of crisis connections) and runaways (21 percent of crisis connections) as the largest group of individuals in crisis to contact the National Runaway Safeline (NRS).
- Last year there was a 20 percent increase in connections from youth who are contemplating running away, and that trend has continued to escalate over the past year with an additional increase of 46 percent. This is an indication that NRS is helping more youth before they run away from home.

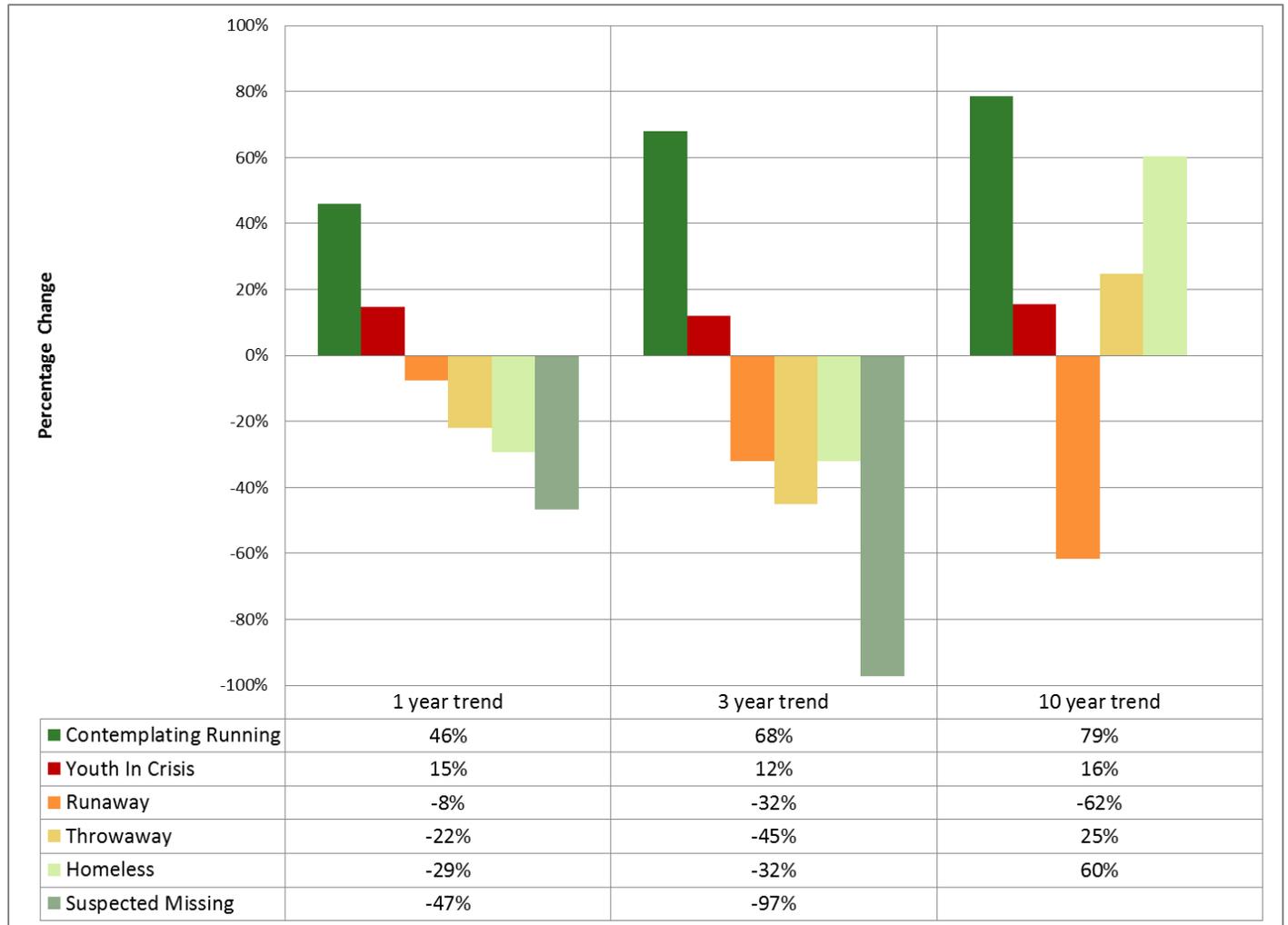
- Indeed, the proportion of connections that NRS handles from youth who are “on the street” is down across all categories (8 percent decline for runaways, 22 percent for throwaways, and 29 percent for homeless) over the past year. This decrease is a continuation of a downward trend in connections from individuals who have already left home, which is apparent in the three year decline across these categories.

*Note: NRS defines youth as young people up to 21 years old and it serves individuals up to 24 years of age.*

**Figure 1: Distribution of Youth by Crisis Status in 2015, n=17,741**



**Figure 2: Trend Analysis of Percentage Change in Youth by Crisis Status 2005-2015 (Based on a combined sample of 56,432 for all four years being compared)**



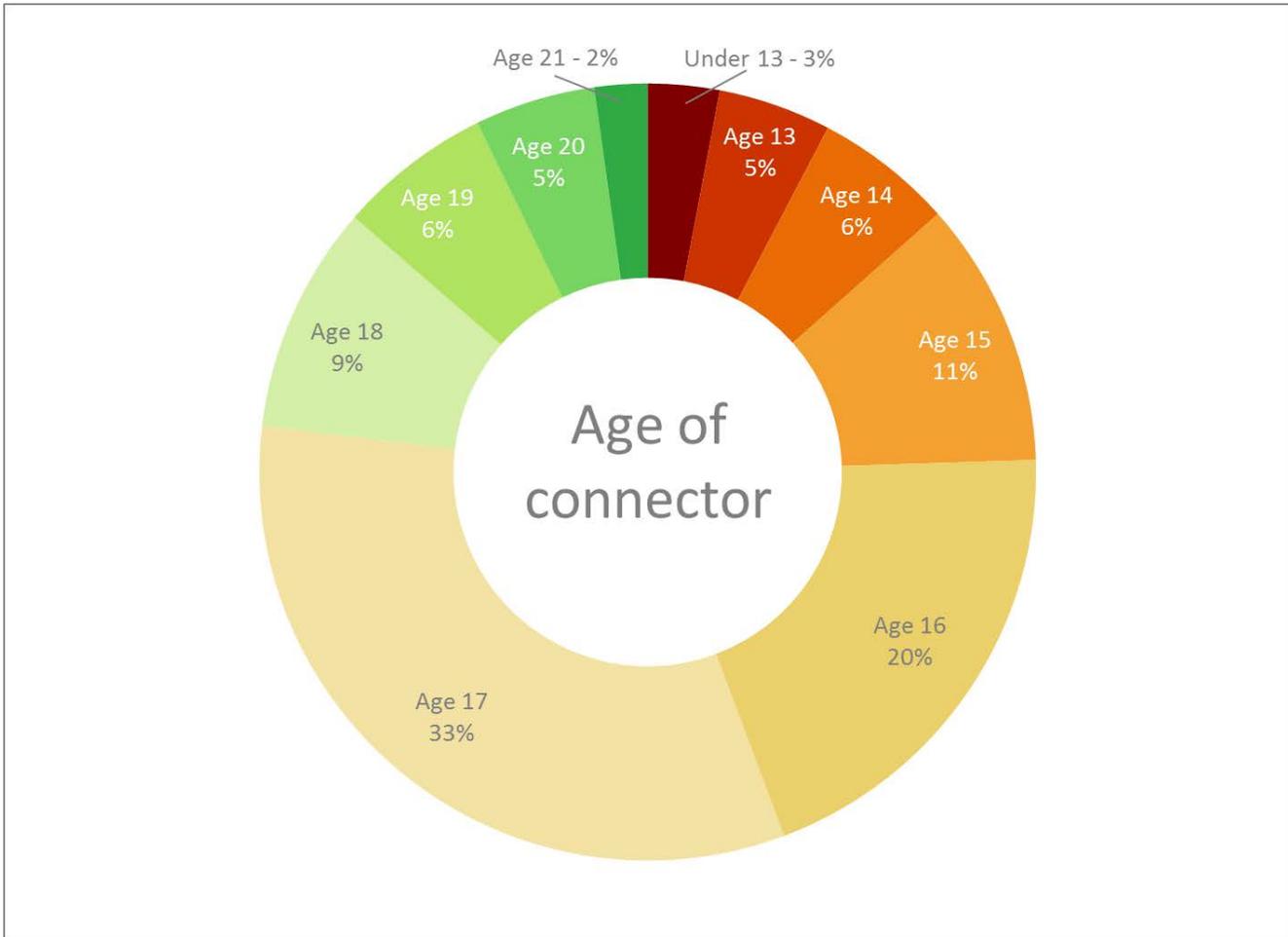
*Note: There is no data for the category "Suspected Missing" for the 10 year trend period because data in this category was not collected until 2006.*

## Age of Youth in Crisis

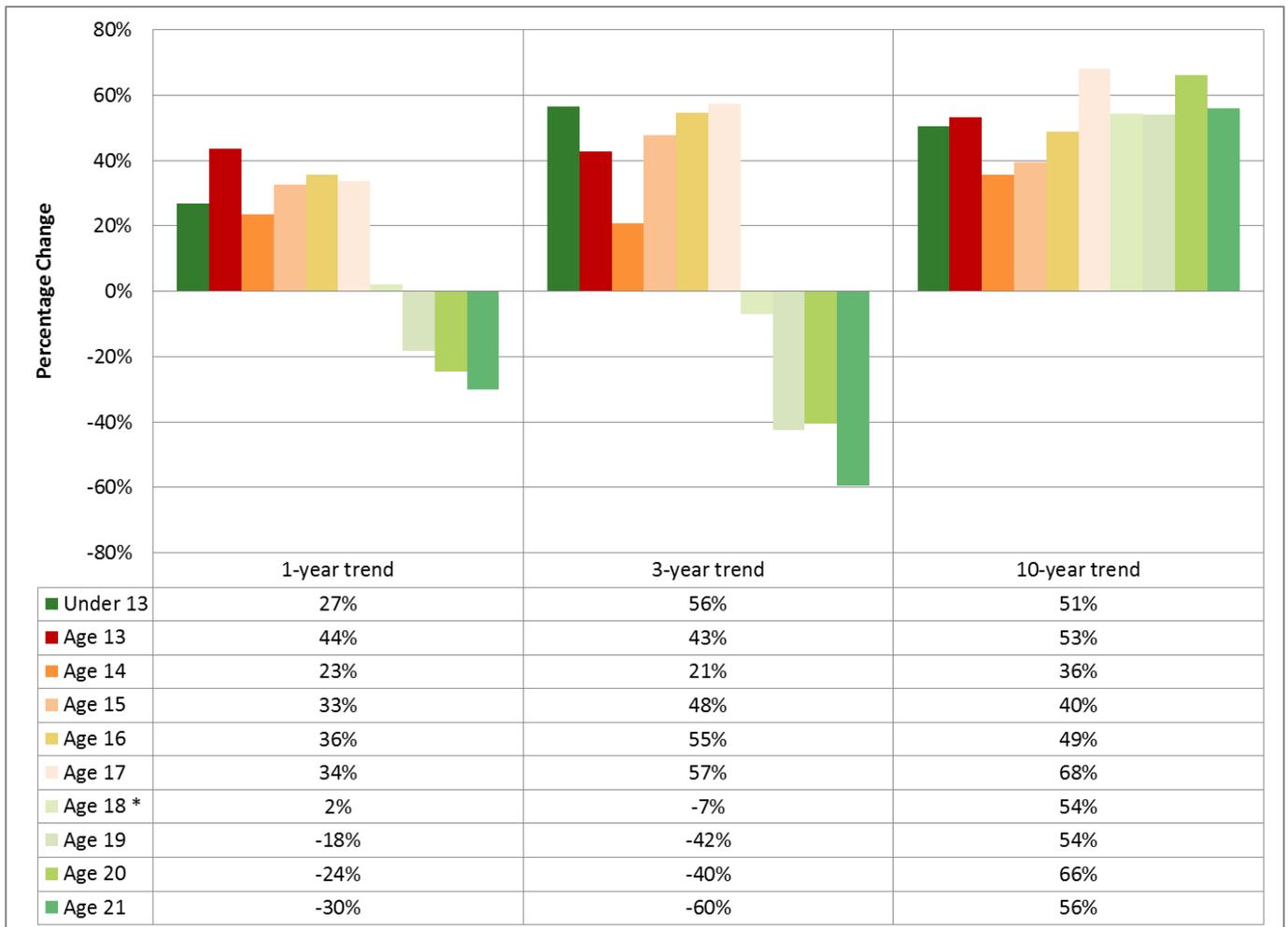
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- One third of crisis connections to NRS are from or about youth aged seventeen—this is the most common age of crisis connectors.
- Over the past year, NRS saw an increase in crisis connections from youth up to age 17 and a decrease in crisis connections from youth ages 18-21. This is a continuation of trends over the last three years towards a younger group of connectors. This increase in younger connections also closely matches the upward trajectory of the use of digital services.
- Youth aged 13 have had the largest single year gain in crisis connections with a 44 percent increase over the past year. Again, it is probable that this large increase in connections is associated with the increased awareness and utilization of digital methods of connecting to NRS.

**Figure 3: Distribution of Age of Youth in Crisis in 2015, n=13,024**



**Figure 4: Trend Analysis of Percentage Change in Age of Youth in Crisis 2005-2015 (Based on a combined sample of 37,679 for all four years being compared)**

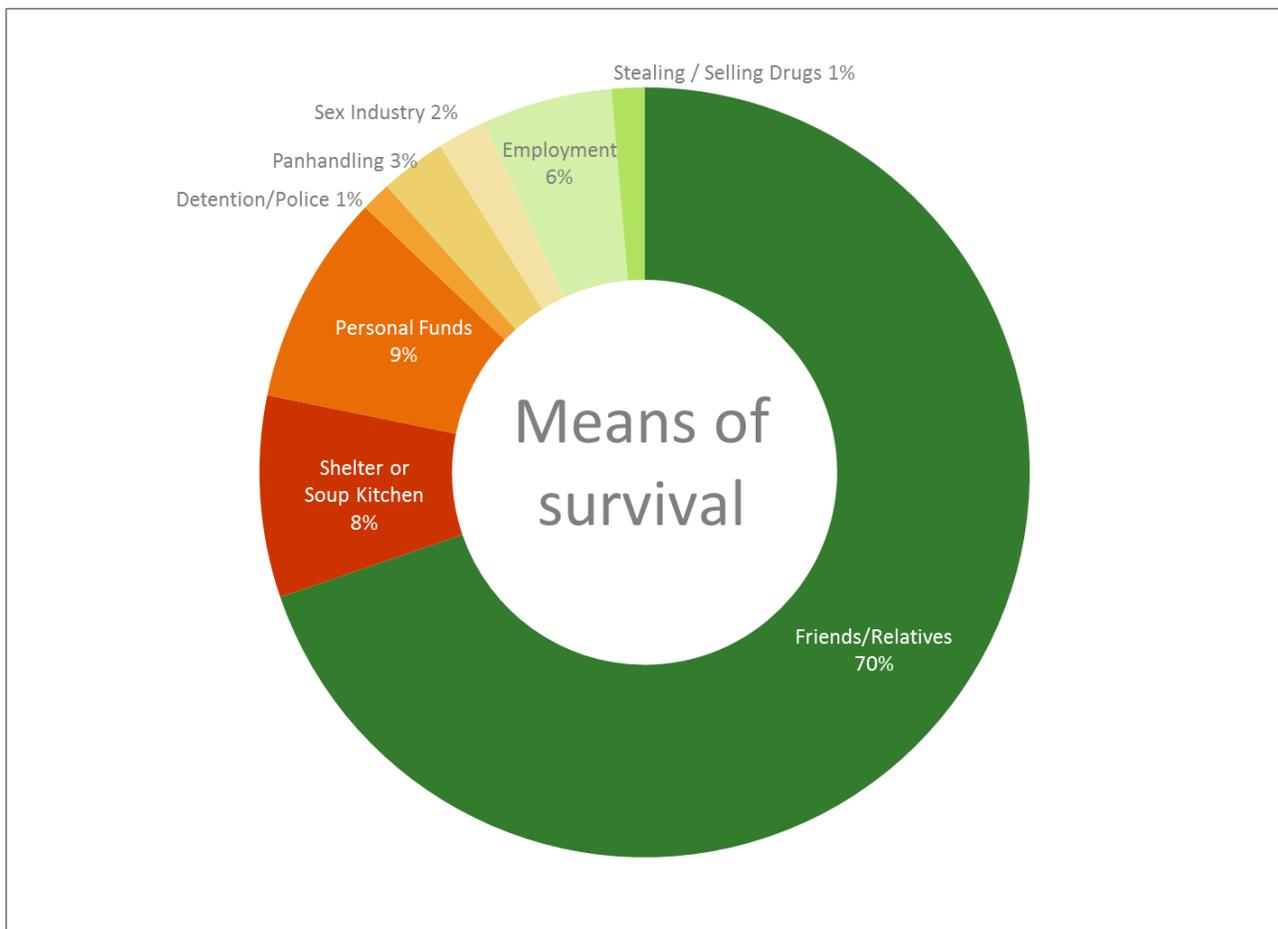


*Note: The categories "Age 19-21" in the 1 year trend and "Ages 18-21" in the 3 year trend are not shown in their entirety due to space constraints.*

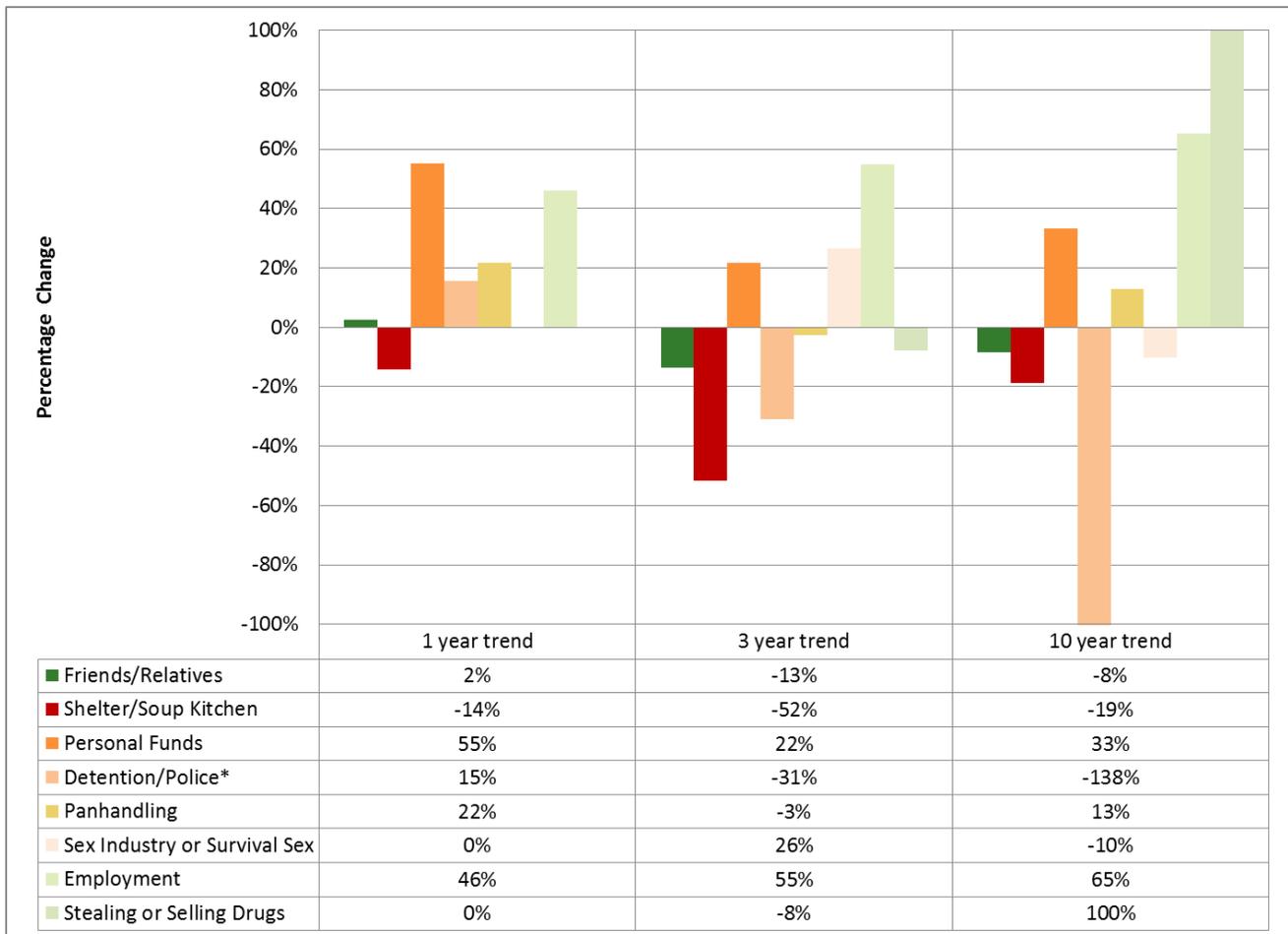
## Means of Survival for Youth in Crisis

- Seven in ten (70 percent) of youth in crisis connecting to the National Runaway Safeline (NRS) in 2015 relied on friends or relatives for survival resources including housing, food, and funds.
- More youth in crisis are using employment or personal funds to support themselves than in the past, with increases of 46 percent and 55 percent, respectively over the past year.
- There's a clear decrease in the extent to which youth use shelters or soup kitchens to assist with their survival with a drop of 14 percent in the past year and 52 percent over the past three years.

**Figure 5: Distribution of Youth in Crisis Means of Survival in 2015, n=7,703**



**Figure 6: Trend Analysis of Percentage Change in Youth in Crisis Means of Survival 2005-2015**  
 (Based on a combined sample of 31,617 for the four years being compared)

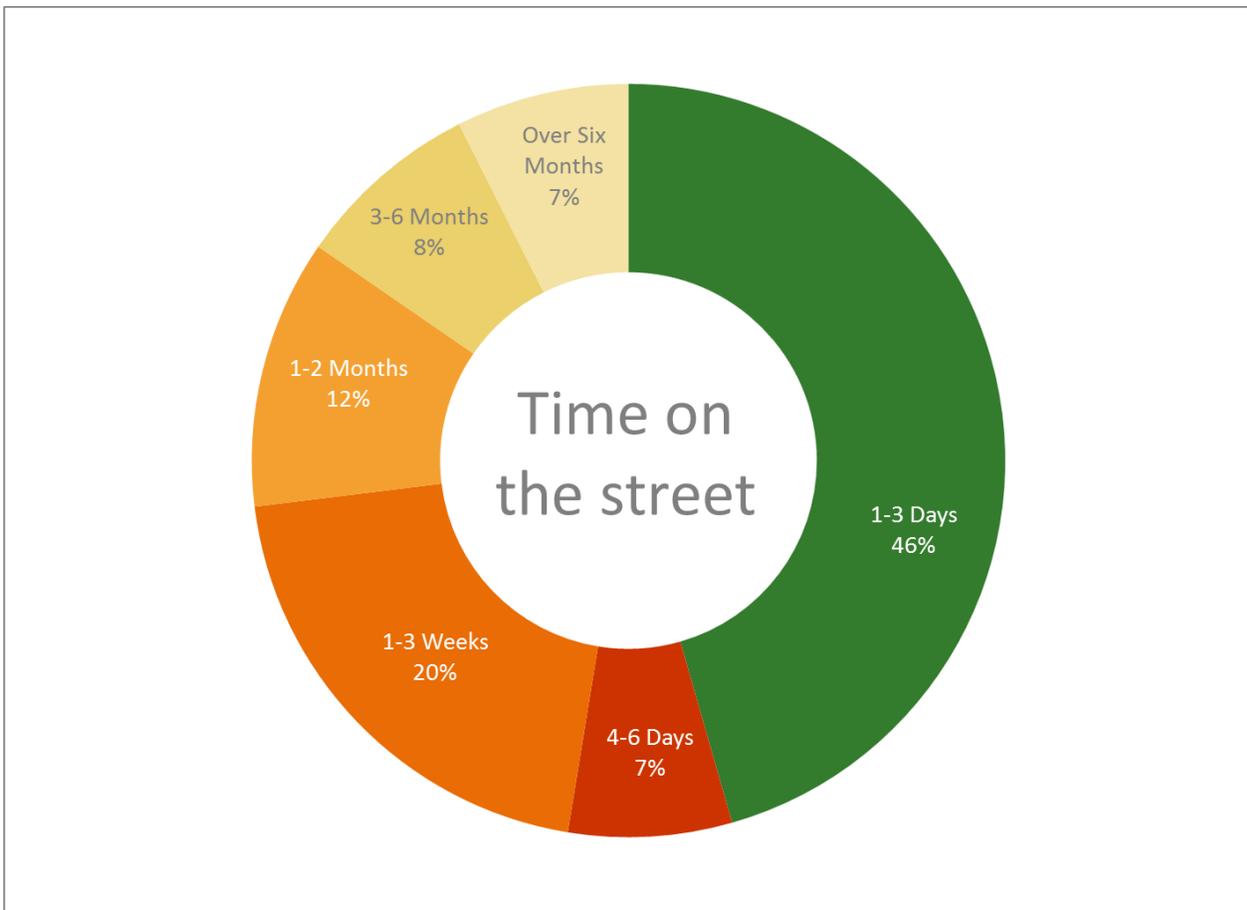


Note: The category "Detention/Polices" in the 10 year trend is not shown in its entirety due to space constraints.

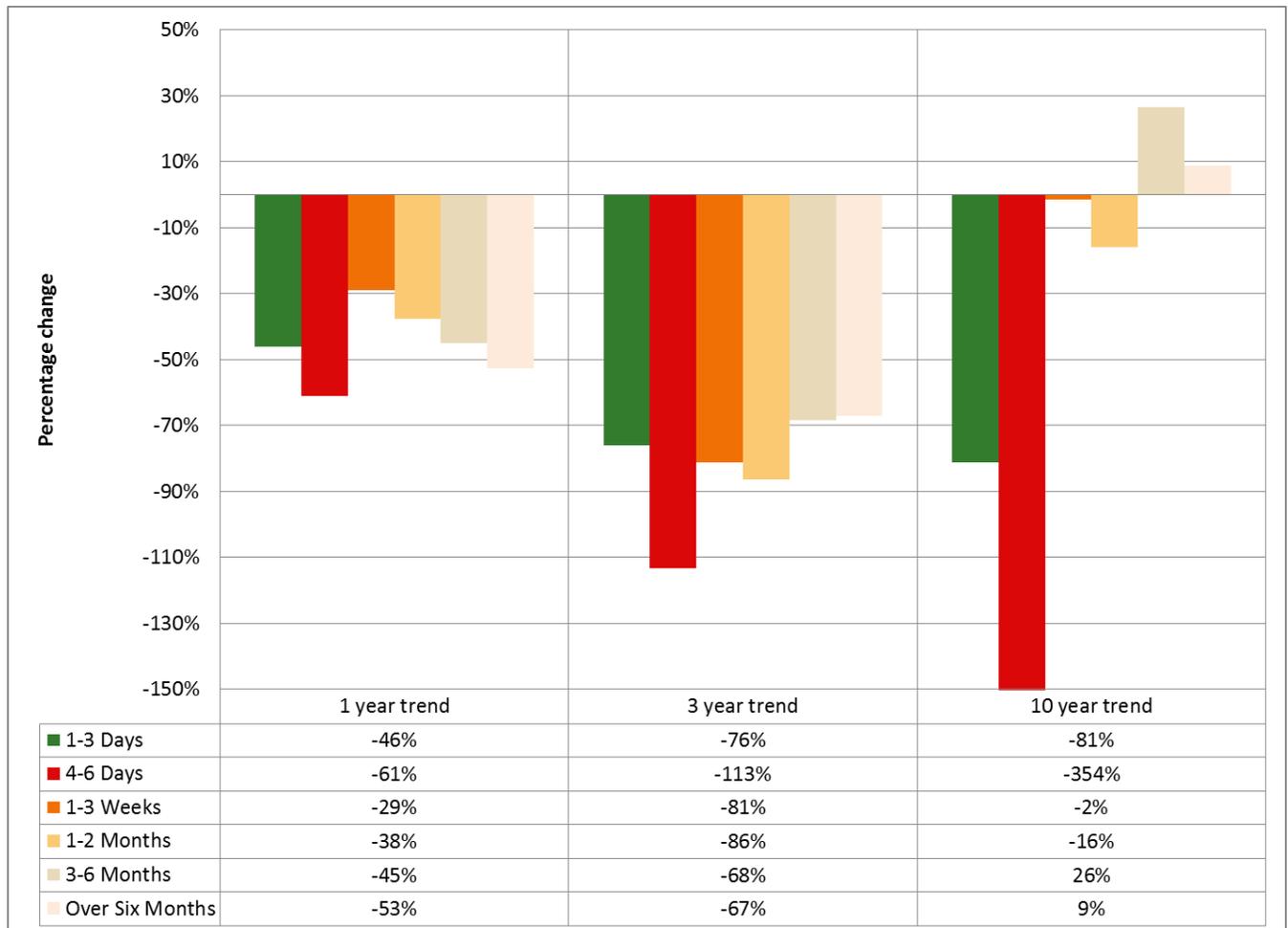
## Time on the Street Before Connecting to NRS for Youth in Crisis

- Most (46 percent) youth in crisis reach out to NRS within the first few days of being on the street, and an additional seven percent reach out by the end of the first week.
- Because NRS is serving a much greater proportion of youth who have not yet run away from home, the trends for time on the street are down across all categories of time.
- However, NRS is still serving more long-time runaways (three months or more) than they did ten years ago.

**Figure 7: Distribution of Time on the Street for Youth in Crisis in 2015, n=4,133**



**Figure 8: Trend Analysis of Percentage Change in Youth in Crisis Time on the Street before Connecting to NRS 2005-2015 (Based on a combined sample of 24,137 for all four years being compared)**



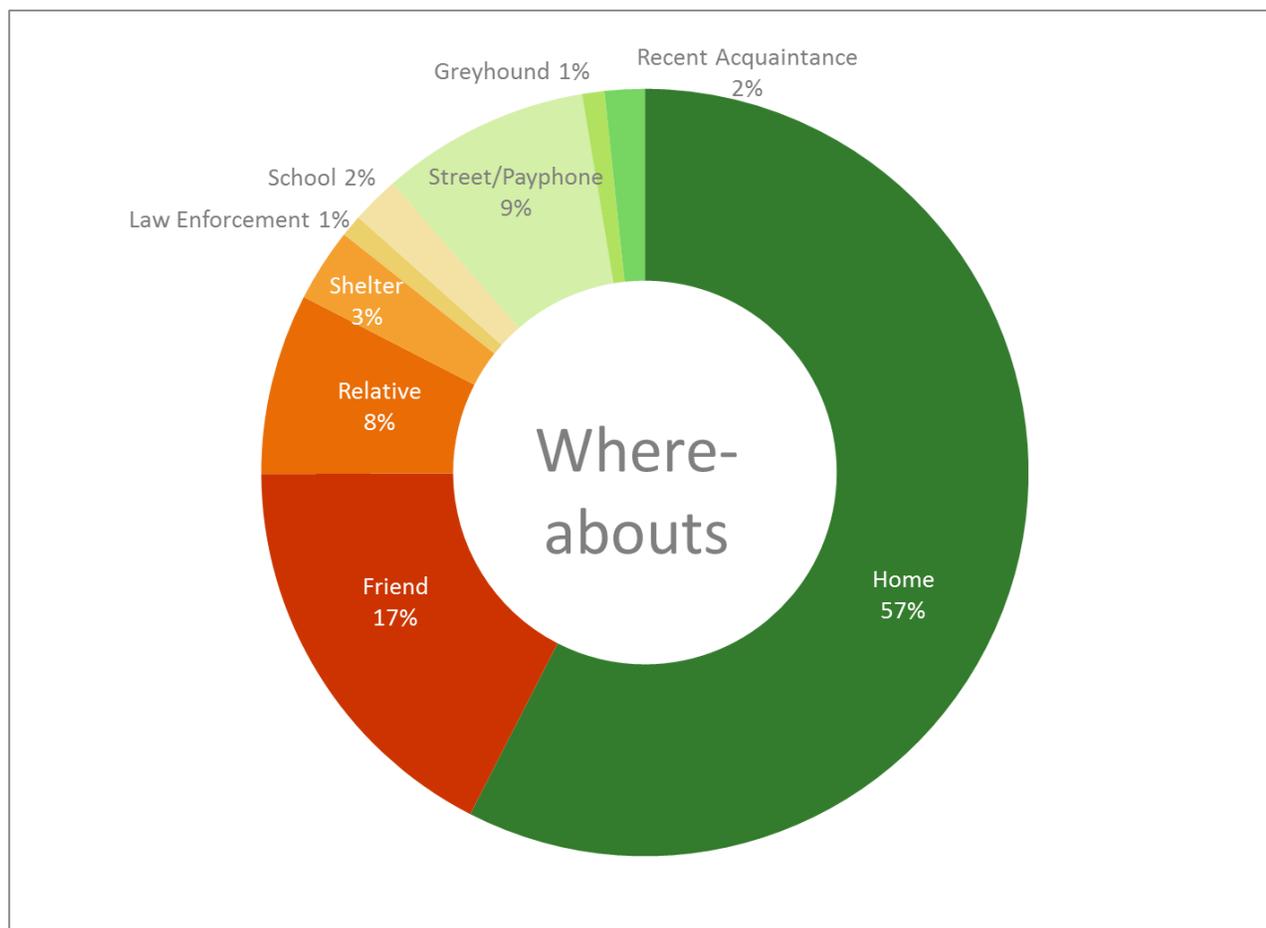
Note: The category "4-6 days" in the 10 year trend is not shown in its entirety due to space constraints.

## Whereabouts of Youth in Crisis at Time of Connection

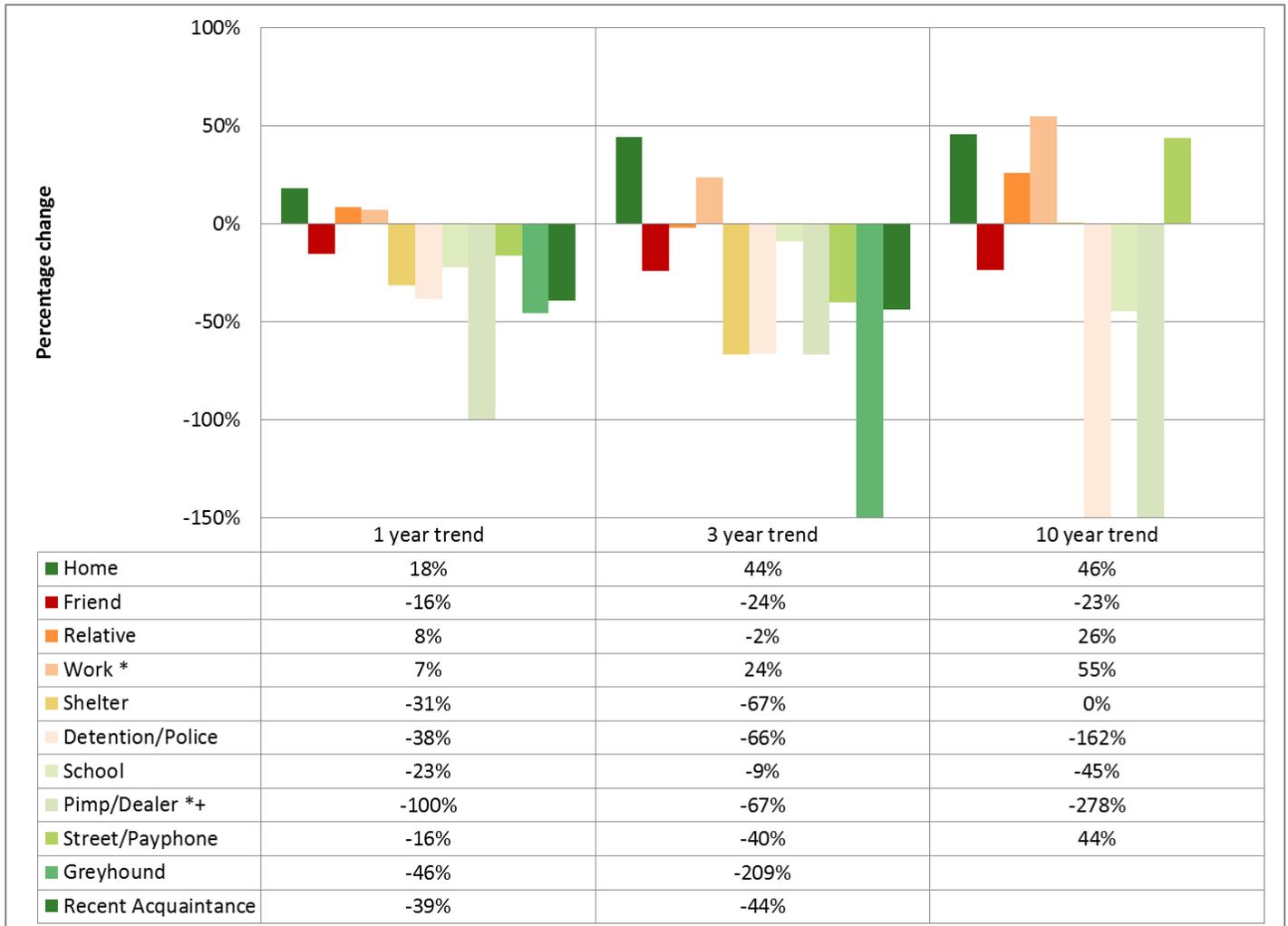
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- Most crisis connectors that NRS serves reach out from home (57 percent), and there's been a significant increase in connections from home over the past year (18 percent), three years (44 percent), and ten years (46 percent). The large proportion of connectors who are at home is another indication of the extent to which NRS is now serving youth before they run away from home.
- There has been a smaller, but consistent, increase in connections from youth at work, with an increase of 7 percent over the past year, 24 percent over the past three years, and 55 percent over the past decade.
- The decline in shelters or soup kitchens as a means of survival is also reflected in the whereabouts of youth connectors. There were 31 percent fewer connections from youth in shelters this year compared to last year, and a drop of 67 percent over the past three years.

**Figure 9: Distribution of Youth in Crisis Whereabouts in 2015, n=13,740**



**Figure 10: Trend Analysis of Percentage Change in Youth in Crisis Whereabouts 2005-2015**  
 (Based on a combined sample of 53,764 for all four years being compared)



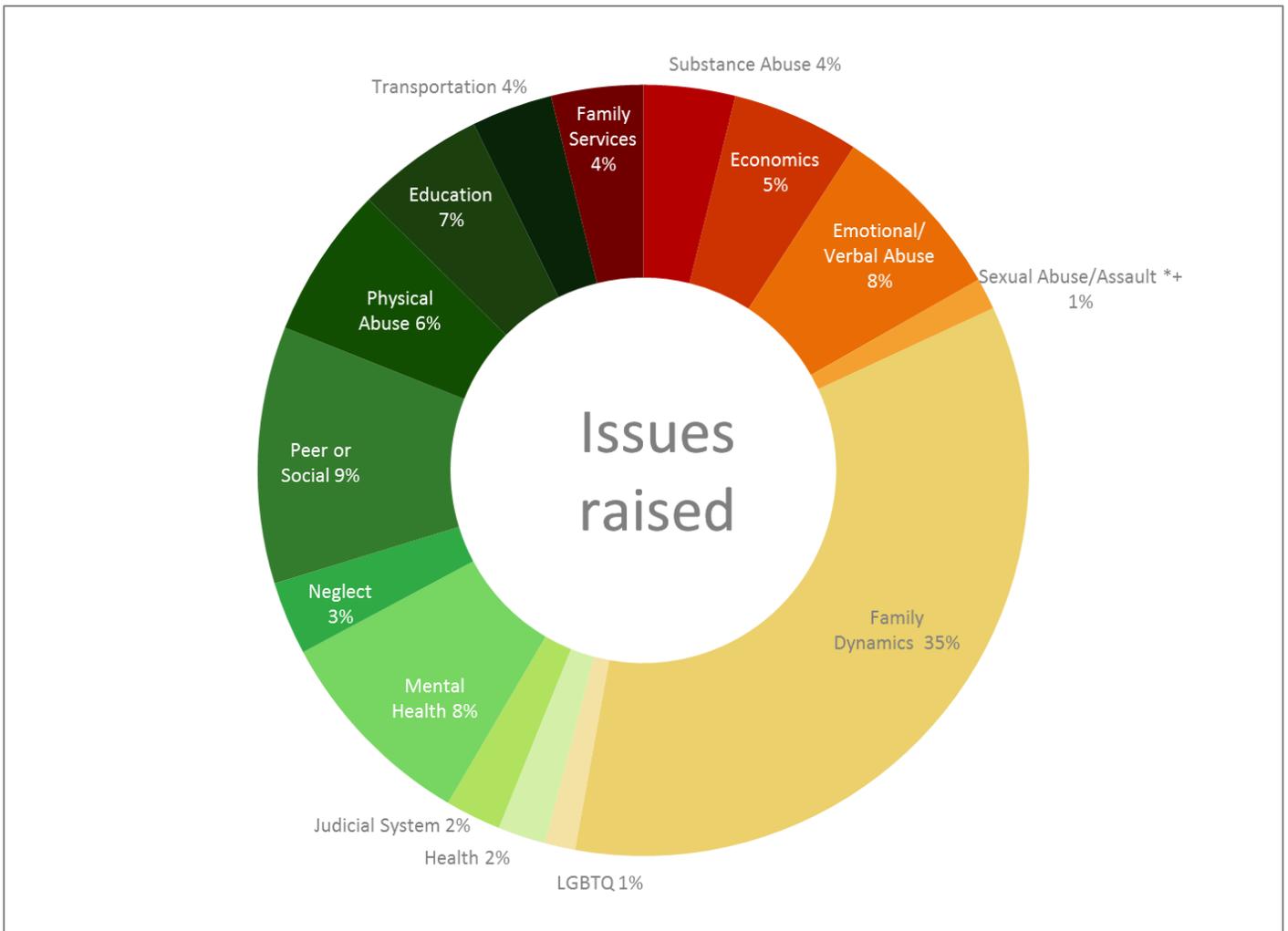
*Note: There is no data covering the 10-year trend periods for the categories "Recent Acquaintance" and "Greyhound" because this data was not collected until 2007. In addition, the category "Greyhound" in the 3 year trend, and "Detention/Police" and "Pimp/Dealer" for the 10 year trend, are not shown in their entirety due to space constraints.*

## Issues Raised by Youth in Crisis

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- On average, three issues are raised during each crisis connection.
- Family dynamics remains the most commonly raised issue for youth in crisis connecting to the National Runaway Safeline (NRS), with 35 percent connecting to talk about this issue in 2015.
- Abuse (physical, sexual, emotional, and verbal) and neglect is the second most common issue raised by youth in crisis in 2015 at 18 percent. These issues are broken down individually in the charts below.
- Connections about emotional or verbal abuse rose the most over the past year at 32 percent. This rise continues an upward trend of 50 percent over the past three years and 59 percent over the past decade.
- Economics was a rising issue for crisis connectors in 2008-2012, but it began to decrease in 2014 and continued its downward trajectory over the past year with a drop of 31 percent.
- LGBTQ issues have been a focus of more crisis connections than in the past with a consistent rise of 16 percent over the past year, 35 percent over the past three years, and 55 percent over the past decade. NRS has provided outreach efforts for the LGBTQ community with targeted informational materials which may be contributing to the growth in connections around these issues.

**Figure 11: Distribution of Youth in Crisis Issues Raised in 2015, n=43,459**

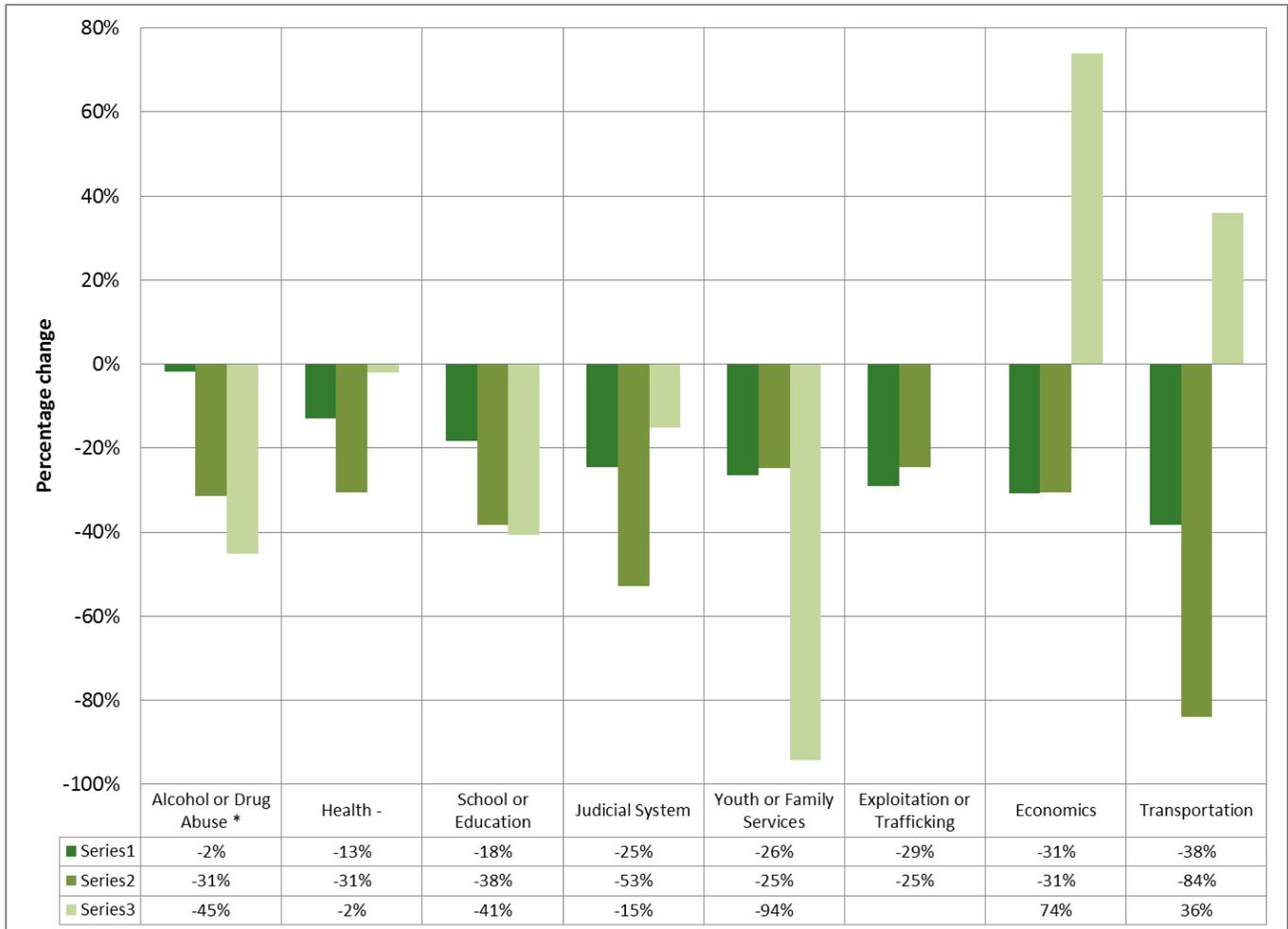


*Note: This chart does not sum to 100% due to rounding*

**Figure 12a: Part One of Trend Analysis of Percentage Change in Youth in Crisis Issues Raised 2005-2015 (Based on a combined sample of 160,369 for all four years being compared)**



**Figure 12b: Part Two of Trend Analysis of Percentage Change in Youth in Crisis Issues Raised 2005-2015** (Based on a combined sample of 160,369 for all four years being compared)



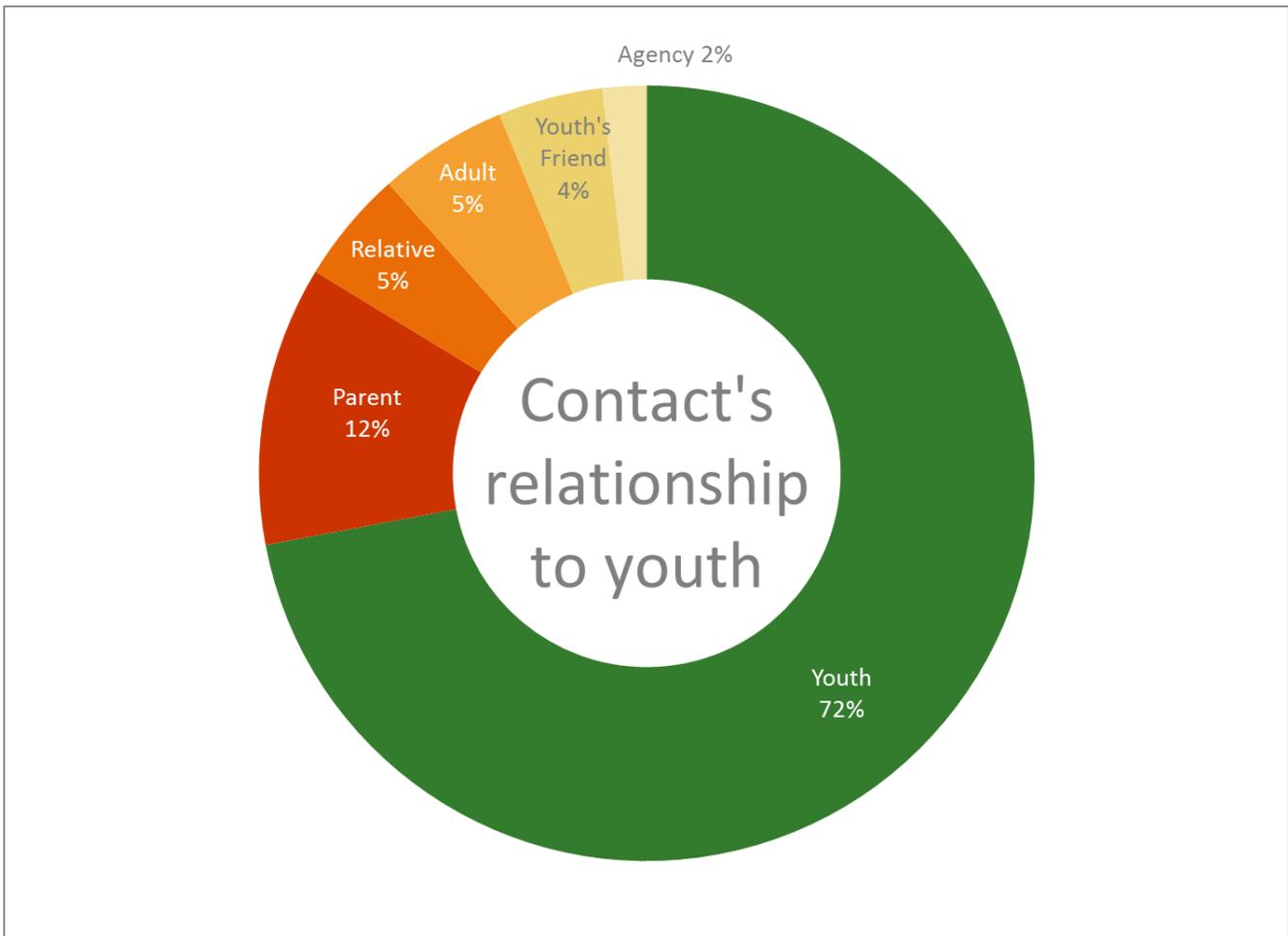
Note: The category “Exploitation or Trafficking” does not have data for the 10-year trend horizon because this category was created in 2009.

## Connector's Relationship to Youth in Crisis

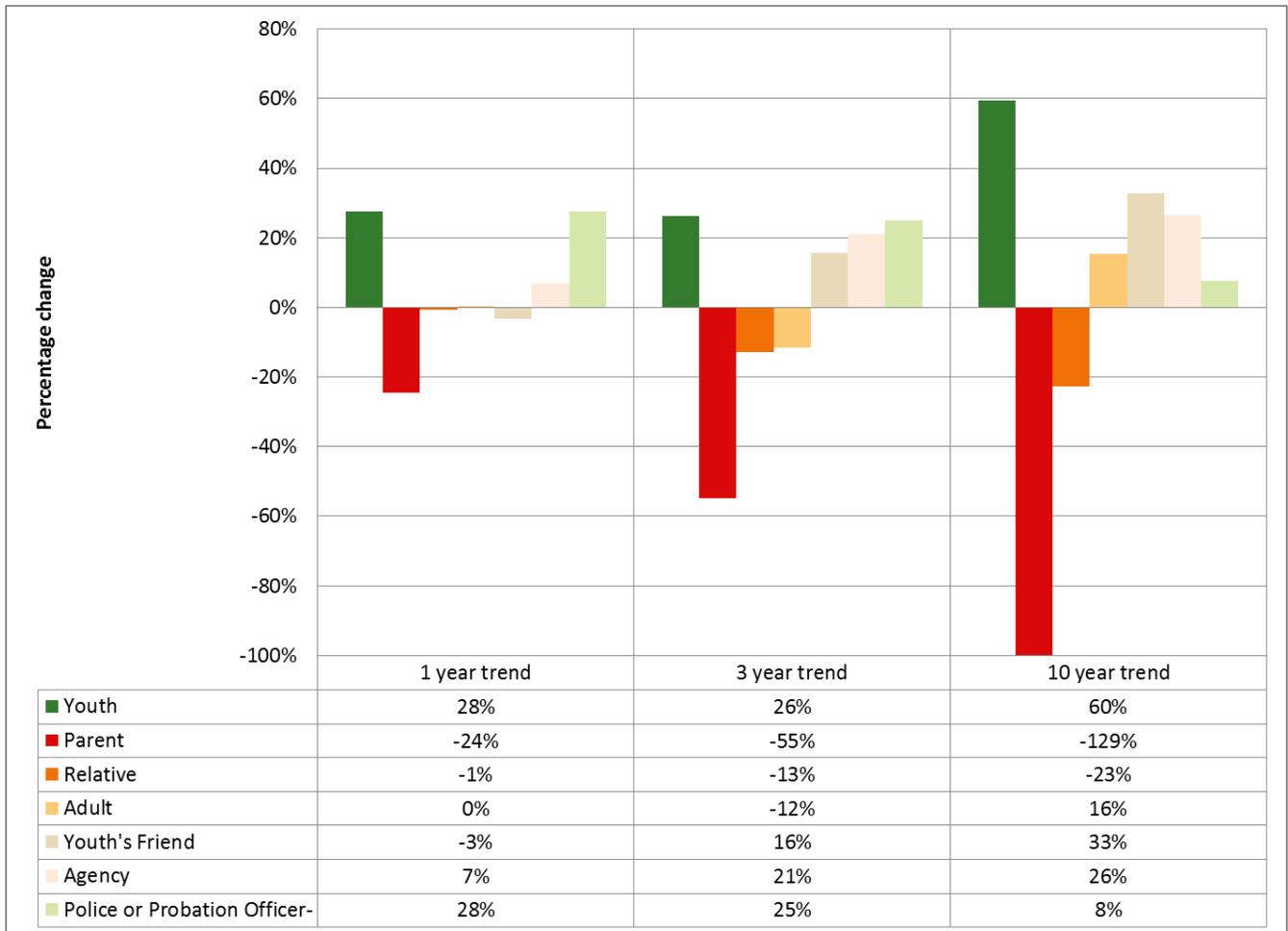
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- Almost three-quarters of crisis connections to the National Runaway Safeline (NRS) in 2015 came from the youth who is in crisis (72 percent).
- Other people who care about a youth in crisis also connect to NRS, including parents (17 percent), other adults (5 percent), relatives (5 percent), friends (4 percent) and agencies (2 percent).
- Youth are much more likely to reach out to NRS themselves than in the past. We've seen an increase of 28 percent over the past year, 26 percent over the past three years, and 60 percent over the past decade in connections directly from youth.
- In contrast, connections from parents have decreased consistently over the past one, three, and ten years (24 percent, 55 percent, and 129 percent, respectively).

**Figure 13: Distribution of the Connector's Relationship to Youth in Crisis in 2015, n=18,323**



**Figure 14: Trend Analysis of Percentage Change in Connector's Relationship to Youth in Crisis 2005-2015 (Based on a combined sample of 62,649 for all four years being compared)**

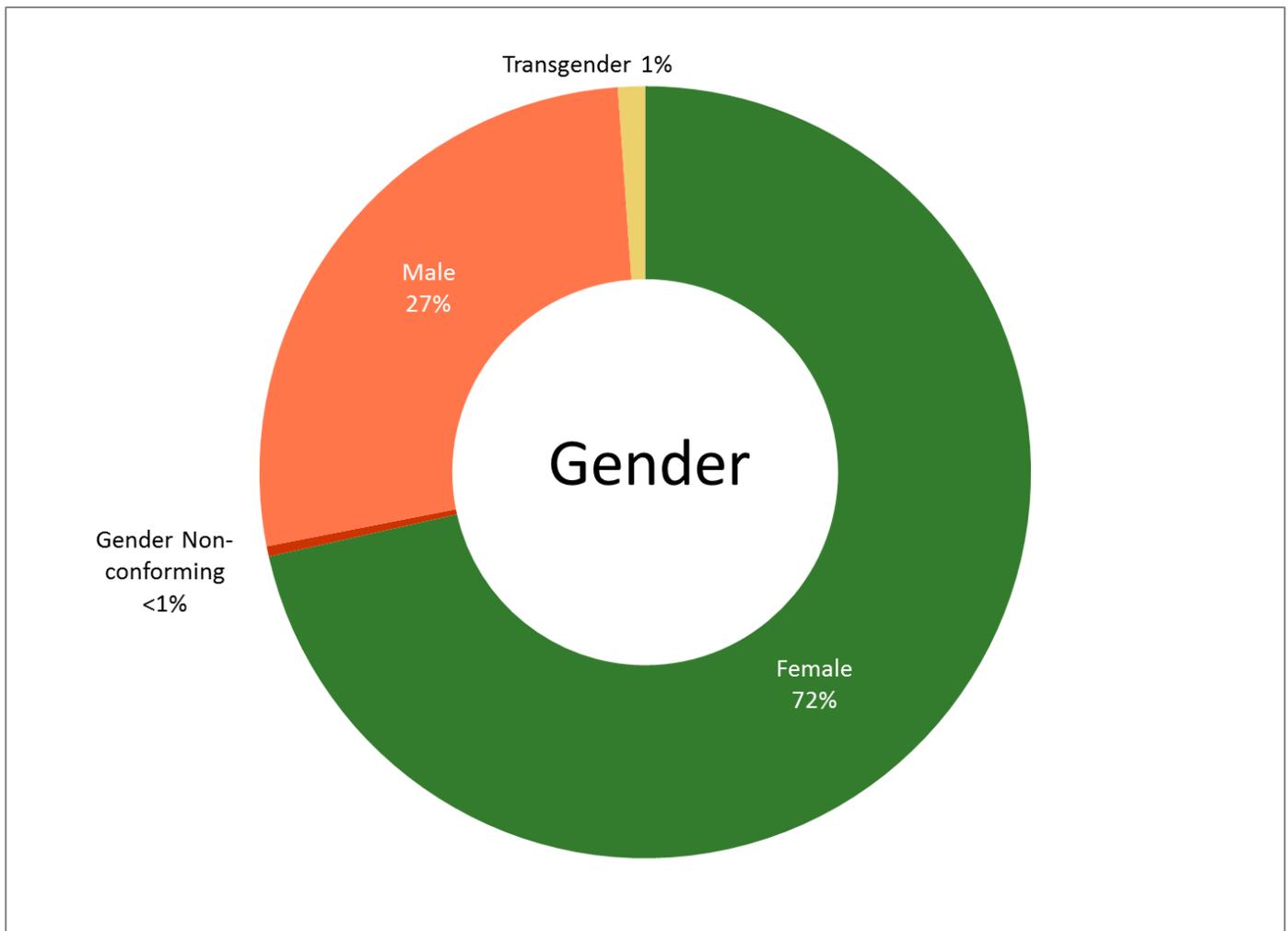


Note: The category "Parent" in the 10 year trend is not shown in its entirety due to space constraints.

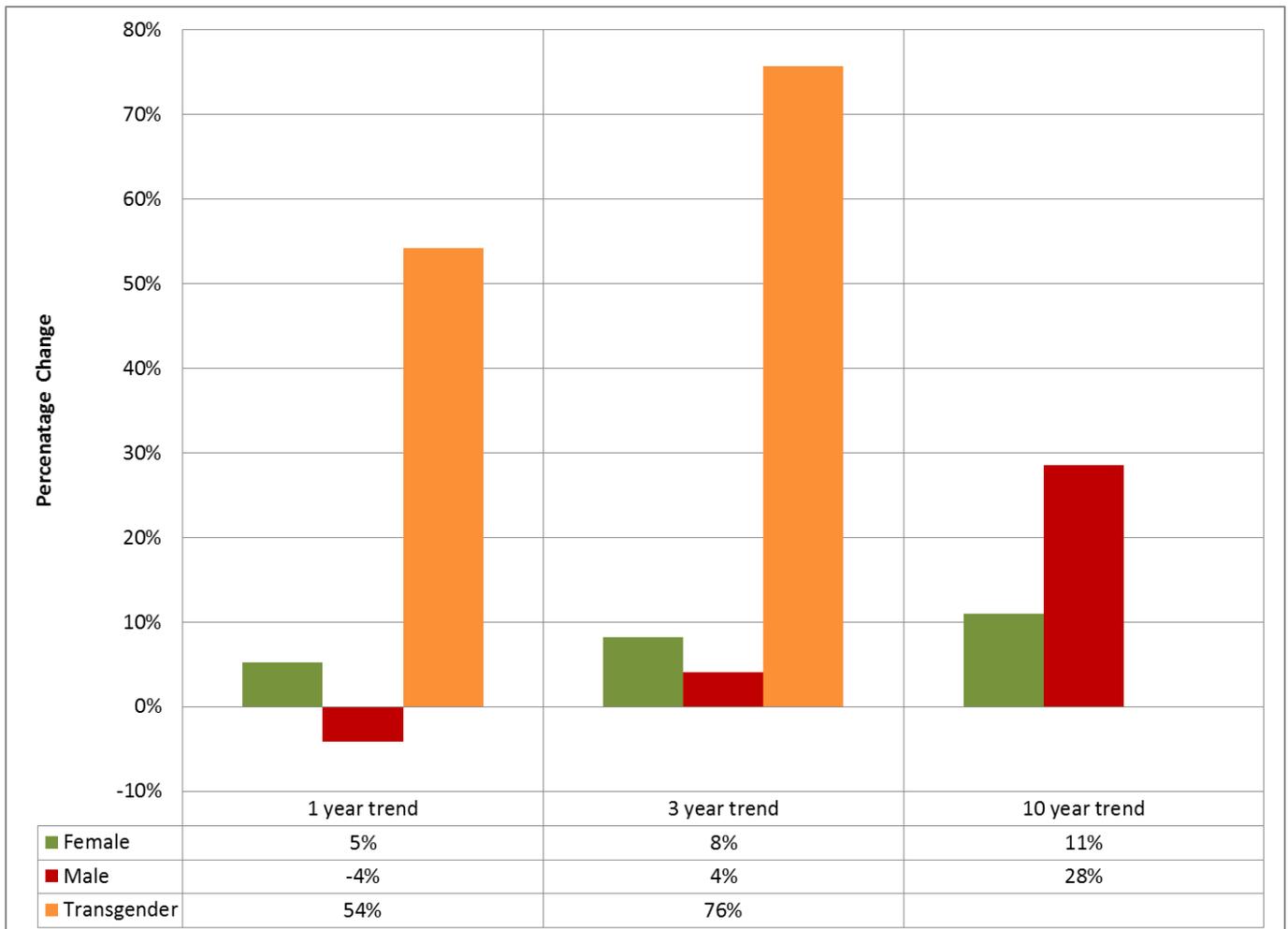
## Gender of Youth in Crisis

- Females are still more likely to reach out to NRS for assistance than males at 72 percent compared to 27 percent in 2015.
- Connections from transgender youth have more than doubled (54 percent increase) in the past year. Connections from or about transgender youth now make up just over one percent of all NRS crisis connections.

**Figure 15: Distribution of Gender of Youth in Crisis in 2015, n=15,576**



**Figure 16: Trends in Gender of Youth in Crisis in 2005-2015** (Based on a combined sample of 57,972 for all four years being compared)



*Note: There is no data on transgender connections for the 10-year trend because this category was not added until 2006. In addition, there is no trend data for the category "Gender Non-conforming" because that category was not added until 2015.*

## Contact Information

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Media interested in additional information or to schedule an interview with an NRS spokesperson or for questions or comments on this research, please contact Katy Walsh, Director of Development and Communication at the National Runaway Safeline at [kwash@1800RUNAWAY.org](mailto:kwash@1800RUNAWAY.org), or (773) 289-1727.