



# National Trends on Youth in Crisis in the United States

*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 2004-2014.*

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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 the types of individuals in crisis and the key characteristics associated with why they contacted NRS for help through its hotline and online services in 2014. In addition, this report places those numbers in context by comparing them to individual types and characteristics from the previous year (2013), three years ago (2011), and ten years ago (2004). **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 through its programs.**

A number of important trends emerge through analysis of the past decade of crisis data from NRS. There has been a consistent increase in crisis connections from youth who are contemplating running away from home over the past year (20 percent), three years (54 percent), and decade (57 percent). This increase is mirrored in the fact that more youth are connecting from home than in the past (eight percent increase over last year). **These statistics point to the conclusion that youth are increasingly reaching out for help before the crisis point of running away from home.**

While connections from youth under the age of 13 made up a small proportion of all crisis connections in 2014 at three percent, connections from this very young age group are increasing consistently. At the same time, connections from older

youth have decreased over the past year with a drop of 8 percent for 18-year-olds, 13 percent for 19- and 20-year-olds, and 21 percent for 21-year-olds.

**NRS has had a fairly consistent increase in connections about abuse and neglect from individuals in crisis.** There has been a 6 percent increase over the past year, 19 percent over the past three years, and 21 percent over the last decade in connections about abuse or neglect.

**The economic situation of individuals in crisis has improved a bit 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 nine percent. In addition, more youth are able to rely upon employment as a means of survival, an increase of four percent over the past year.

NRS has been receiving more connections about youth from youth-serving agencies than in the past: there has been an increase of 4 percent over the past year and 44 percent over the past three years. This increase may be related to NRS' initiatives to cultivate stronger relationships with professionals working with youth through NRS' Runaway Prevention Curriculum and increased community engagement efforts. However, parent connections to NRS have been declining steadily, with a drop of 15 percent over the past year, 27 percent over the past three years and 96 percent over the past decade.

This report provides insight into the characteristics of and issues faced by youth in crisis in 2014. NRS closely monitors the changes occurring among youth in crisis in order to provide the best possible services. **Understanding both who these youth in crisis are, and how the 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, 2004-2014, providing a 10-year trend horizon.

Incoming connections 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 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 resource.

The individual numbers calculated in this report are those where NRS specifically provided crisis intervention services. In 2014, these crisis intervention services were mostly provided via the hotline (86 percent) but were also provided by online chat (14 percent). In 2014, NRS handled 15,319 hotline crisis connections and 2,434 crisis chat connections for a total of 17,753 crisis connections. In this report, references to the hotline and online crisis connections will be referred to as "crisis connections".

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 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 category "unknown" was excluded from analyses in the categories of youth in crisis means of survival, and youth in crisis whereabouts.

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 call
Youth in crisis	Youth who is in a serious situation that is not necessarily related to being away from home
Runaway	Youth up to age 18 who left home without permission
Throwaway	Youth who were forced to leave their home by their parent or guardian
Homeless	Youth who are homeless because their family is also homeless and youth who are ages 18-21 and are on the street
Suspected Missing	These are calls about a youth who is missing from home; they may have been abducted or may have run away

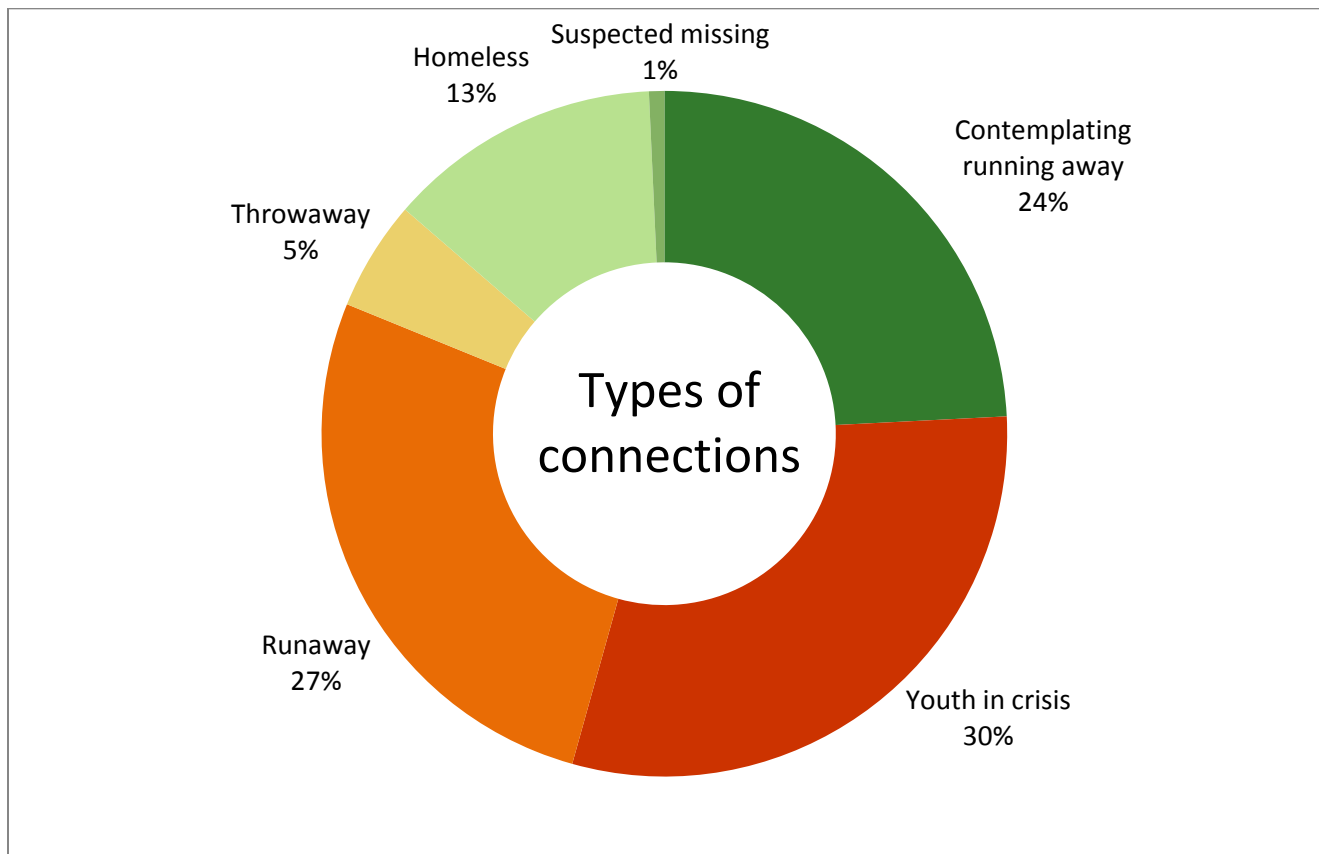
- Youth who are currently in crisis but have not yet run away from home (30 percent of crisis connections) have surpassed runaways (27 percent of crisis connections) as the largest group of individuals in crisis to contact the National Runaway Safeline (NRS).
- Many more youth who are contemplating running away are connecting to NRS now than in the past – a 20 percent increase over the past year and a 54 percent increase over the past three years. Another sign that NRS is helping more youth before they run is that it handles a similar amount of crisis connections year to year, but the number of youth who have run away and connected with NRS has decreased 12 percent over the past year, 23 percent over the past three years and 73 percent over the past decade.

- Connections from homeless youth were on an upward trend, with 16 percent over the last three years and 65 percent over the last decade. Although there has been a small decrease (12 percent) in connections from that group over the past year, this is still a large group of youth in crisis that NRS is focused on helping to stay safe and off the street.

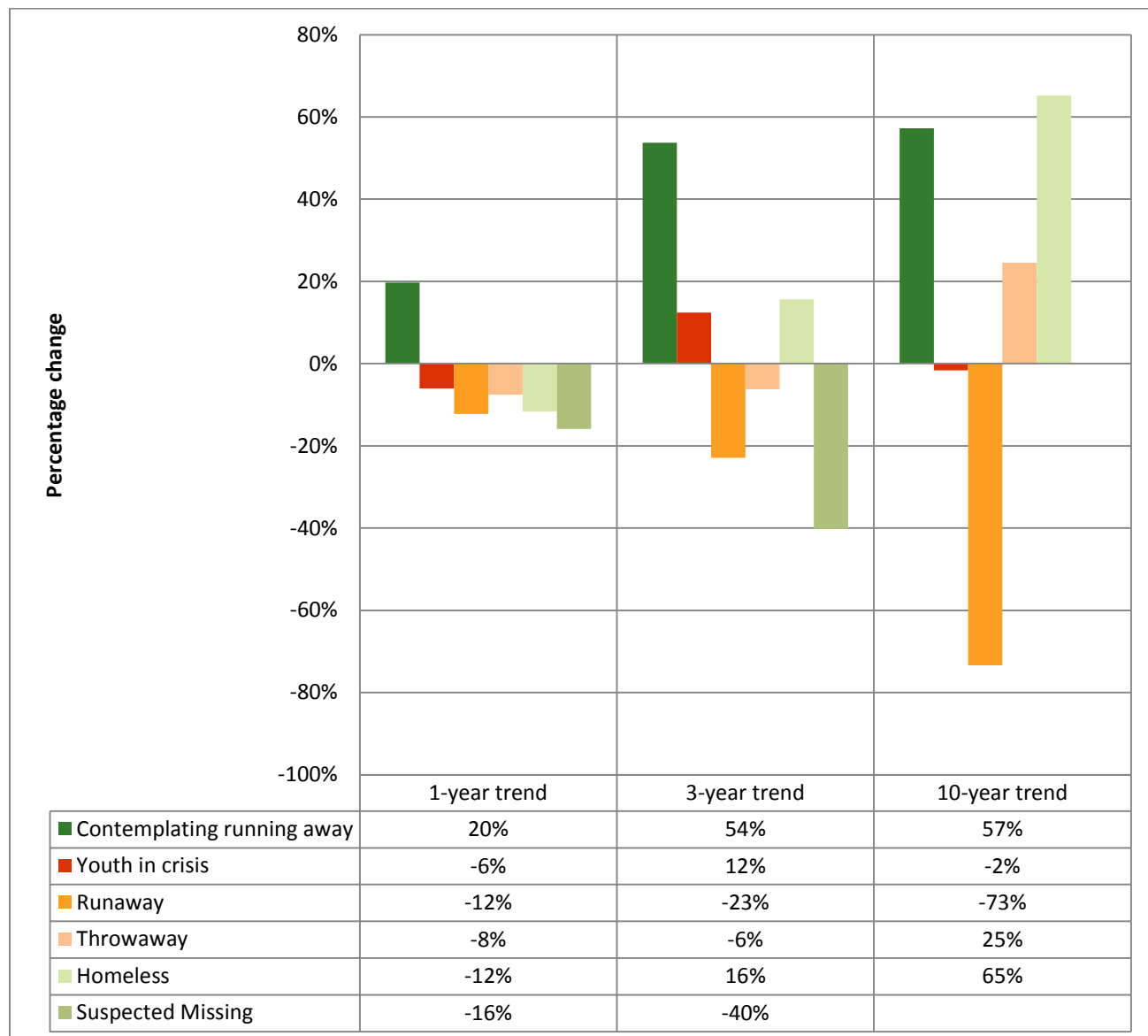
*Note: NRS defines youth as young people up to 21 years old and it serves individuals up to 24 years of age*



**Figure 1: Distribution of Youth by Crisis Status in 2014, n=11,220**



**Figure 2: Trend Analysis of Percentage Change in Youth by Crisis Status 2004-2014** (Based on a combined sample of 39,394 for all three years being compared)

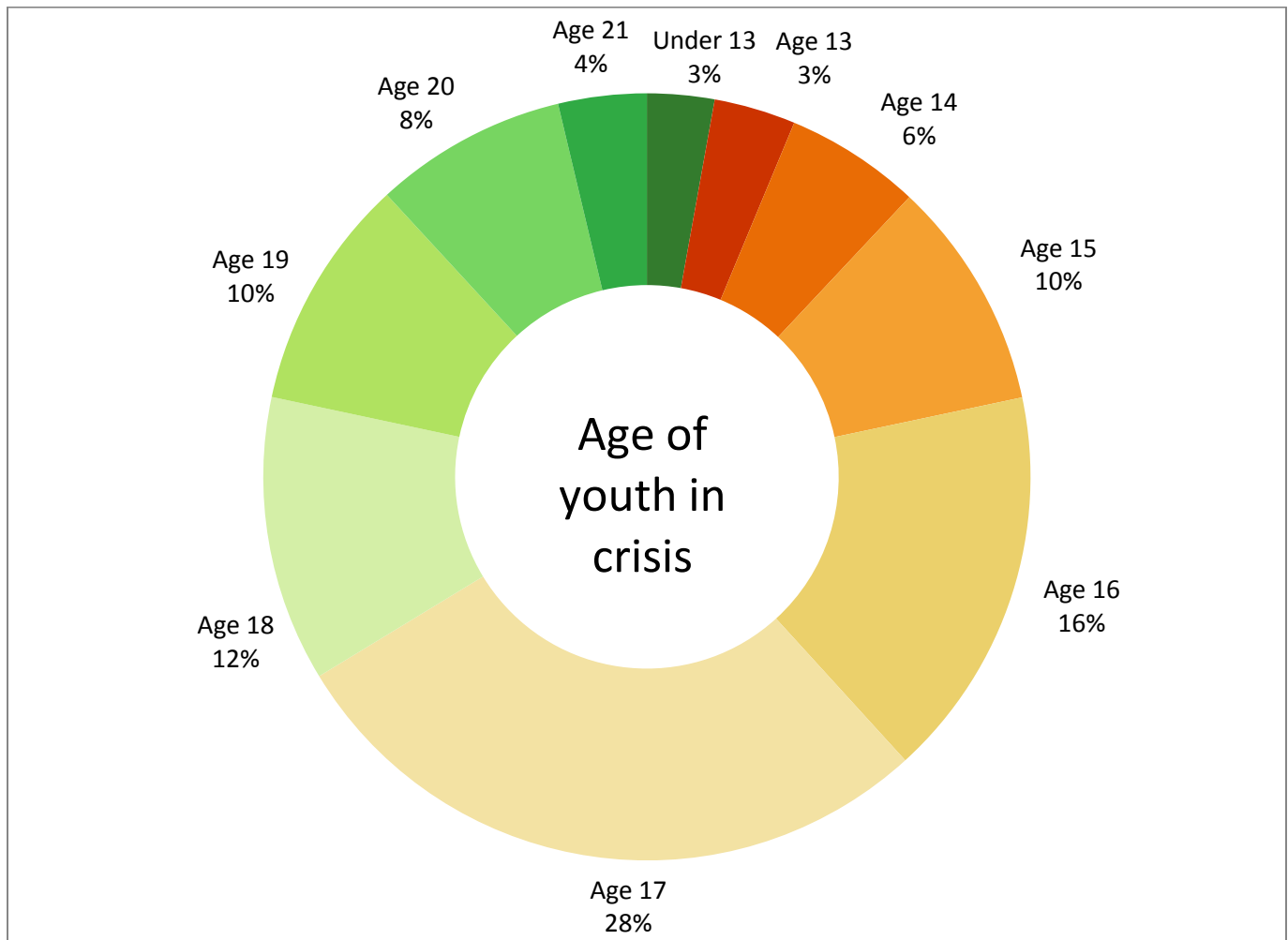


Note: There is no data for the category “Suspected Missing” for the trend period 2004-2014 because data in this category was not collected until 2006.

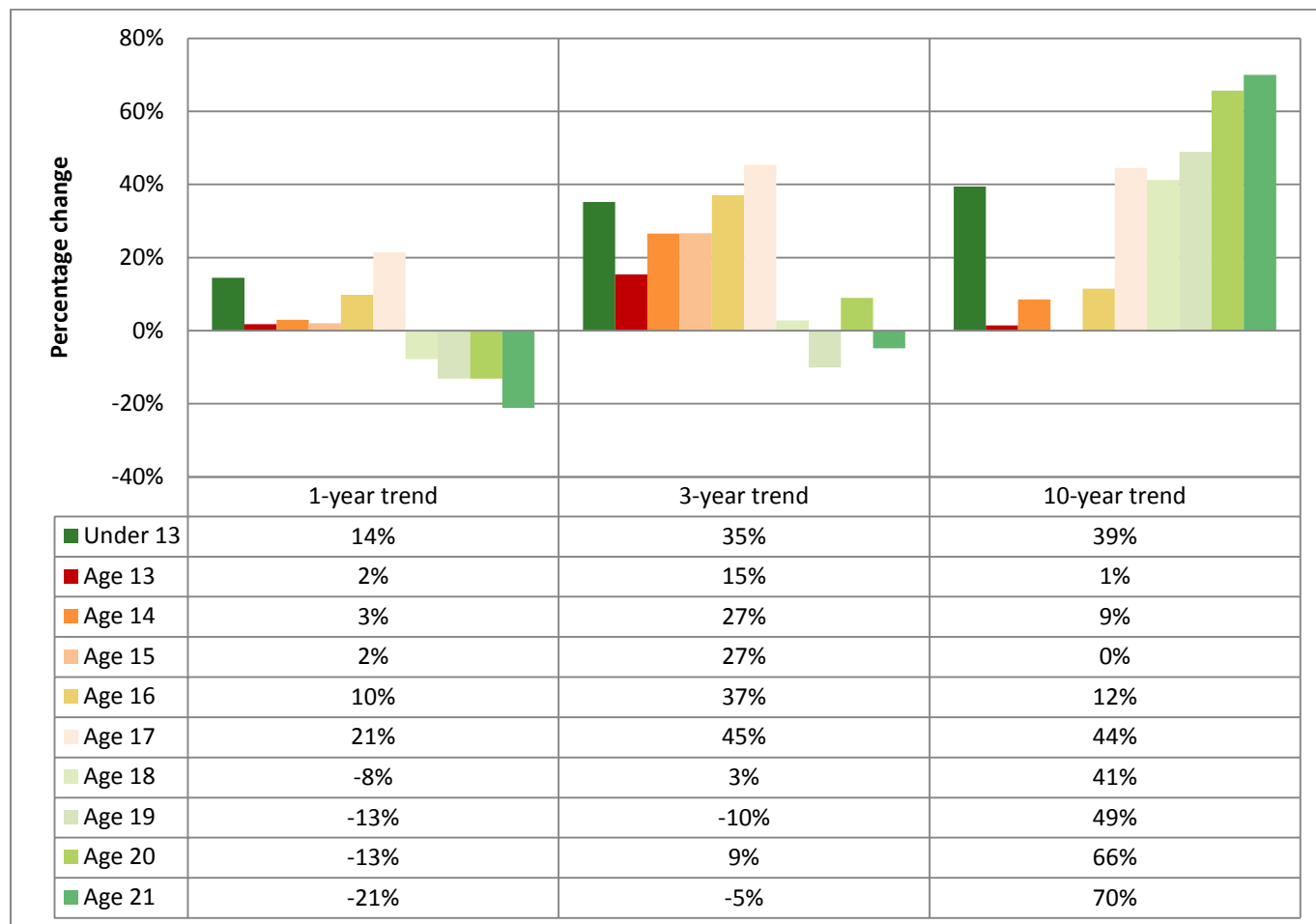
## Age of Youth in Crisis

- Seventeen year olds make up the biggest age group of individuals in crisis who connect with National Runaway Safeline (NRS) at 28 percent.
- 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...
- ... but, this year's trend in age counters the long-term shift which has been a significant increase in crisis connections from youth ages 17-21.

**Figure 3: Distribution of Age of Youth in Crisis in 2014, n=9,944**



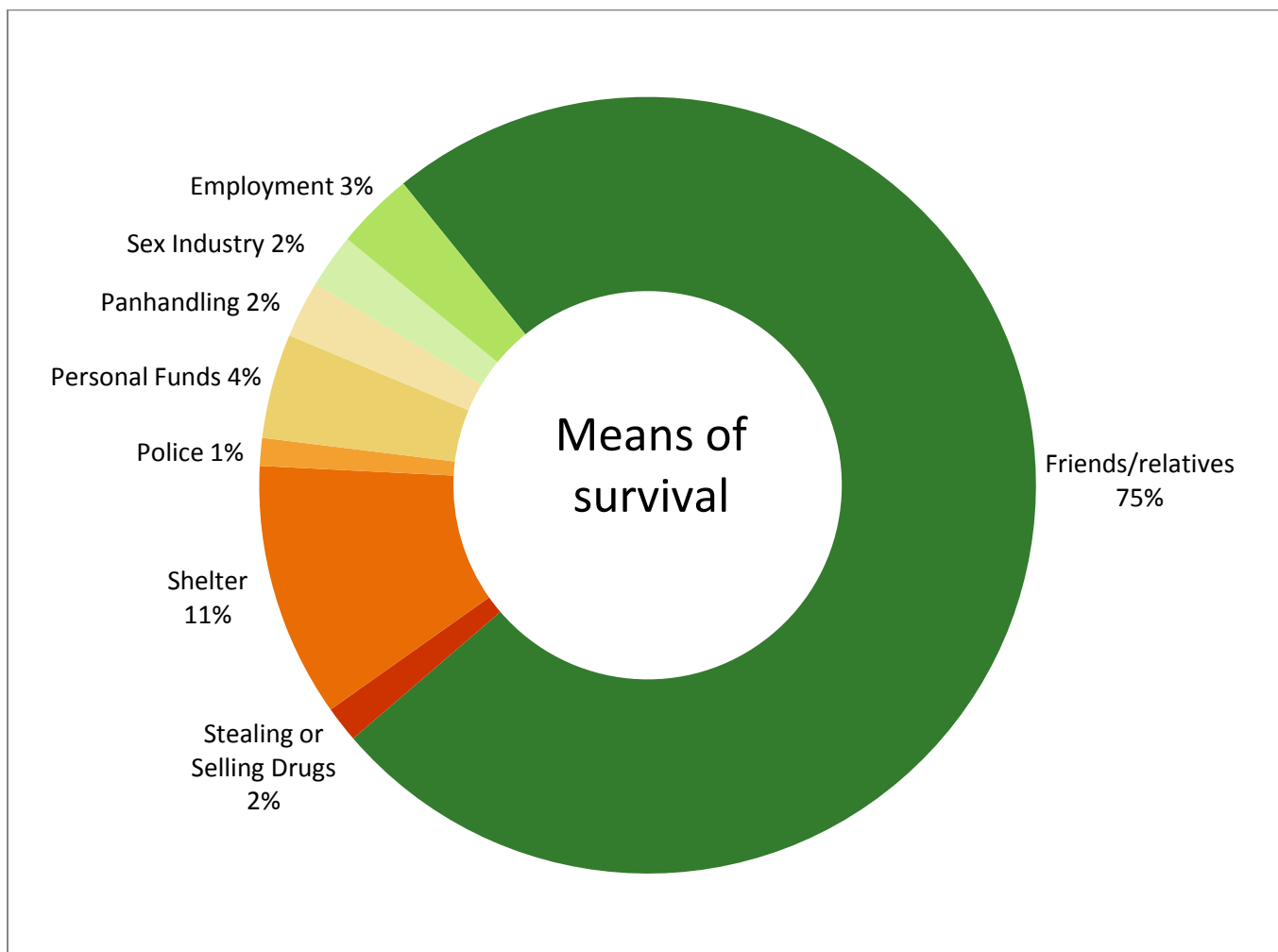
**Figure 4: Trend Analysis of Percentage Change in Age of Youth in Crisis 2004-2014** (Based on a combined sample of 27,095 for all three years being compared)



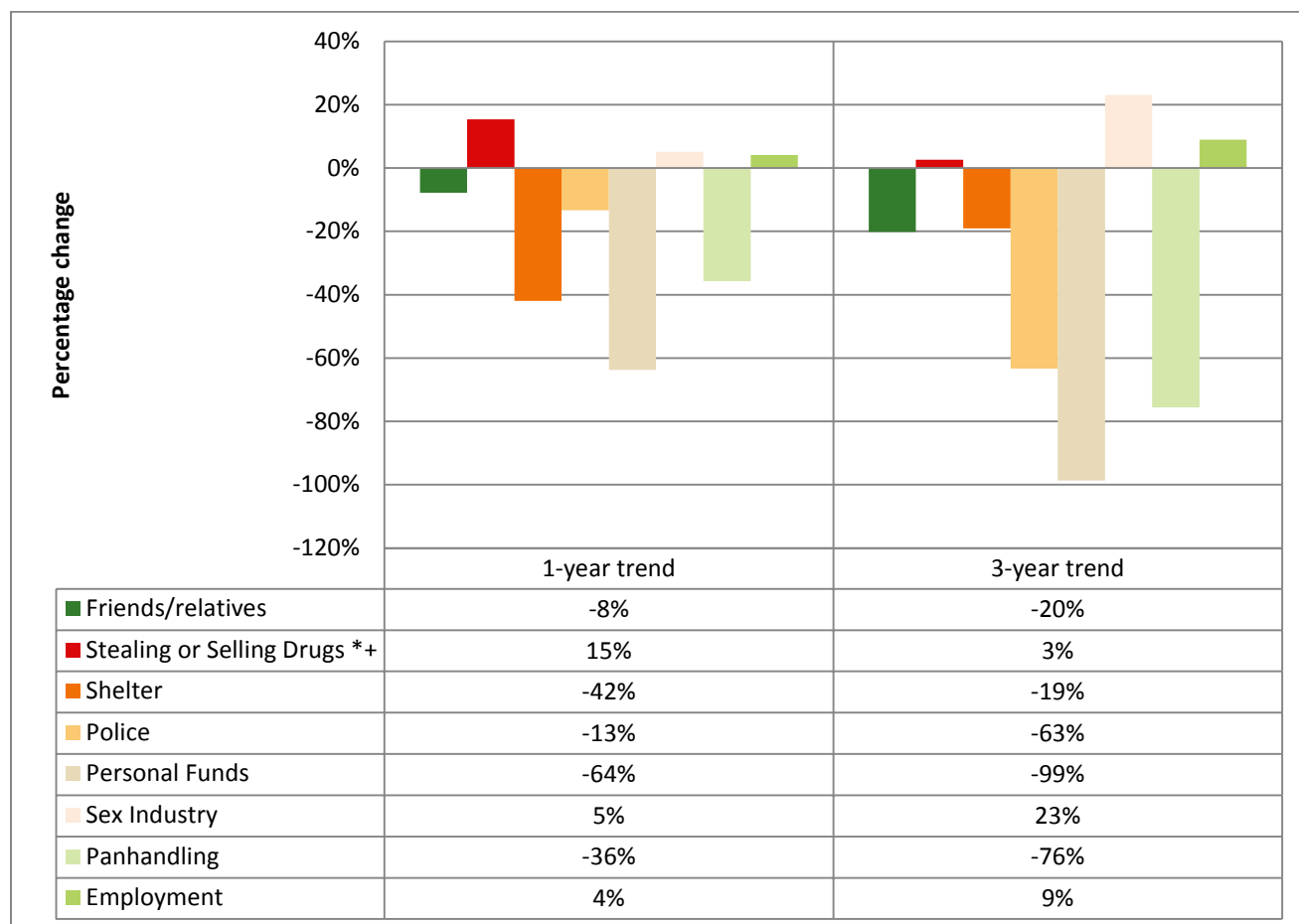
## Means of Survival for Youth in Crisis

- Three-quarters (75 percent) of youth in crisis connecting to the National Runaway Safeline (NRS) in 2014 relied on friends or relatives for survival resources including housing, food, and funds.
- More youth in crisis are using employment to support themselves than in the past, an increase of 4 percent over the past year and 9 percent over the past three years.
- However, there have also been small increases in the number of youth in crisis who are relying on the sex industry to survive.

**Figure 5: Distribution of Youth in Crisis Means of Survival in 2014, n=6,634**



**Figure 6: Trend Analysis of Percentage Change in Youth in Crisis Means of Survival 2004-2014**  
 (Based on a combined sample of 22,940 for both years being compared)

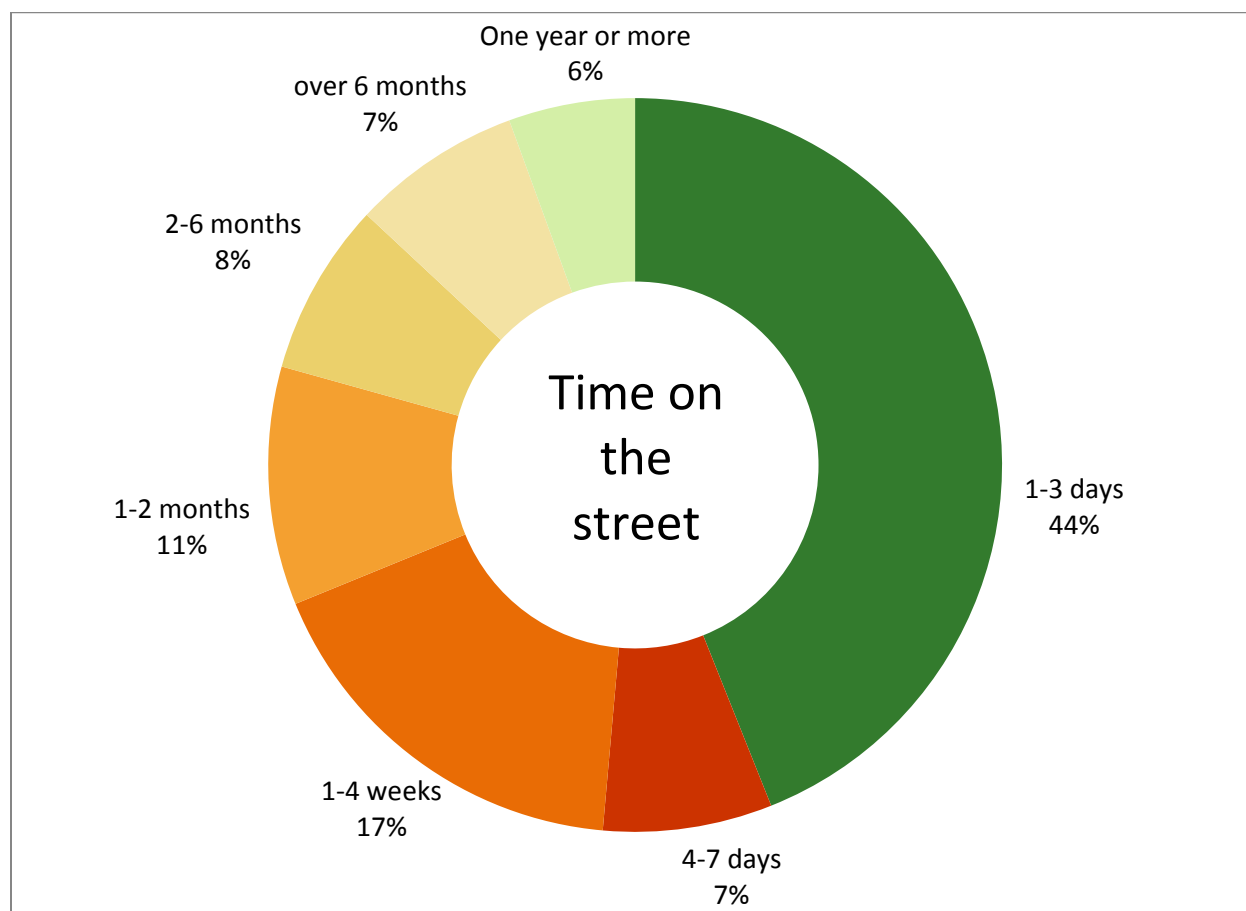


Note: There is no data covering the trend period 2004-2014 because data in this category was not collected until 2005.

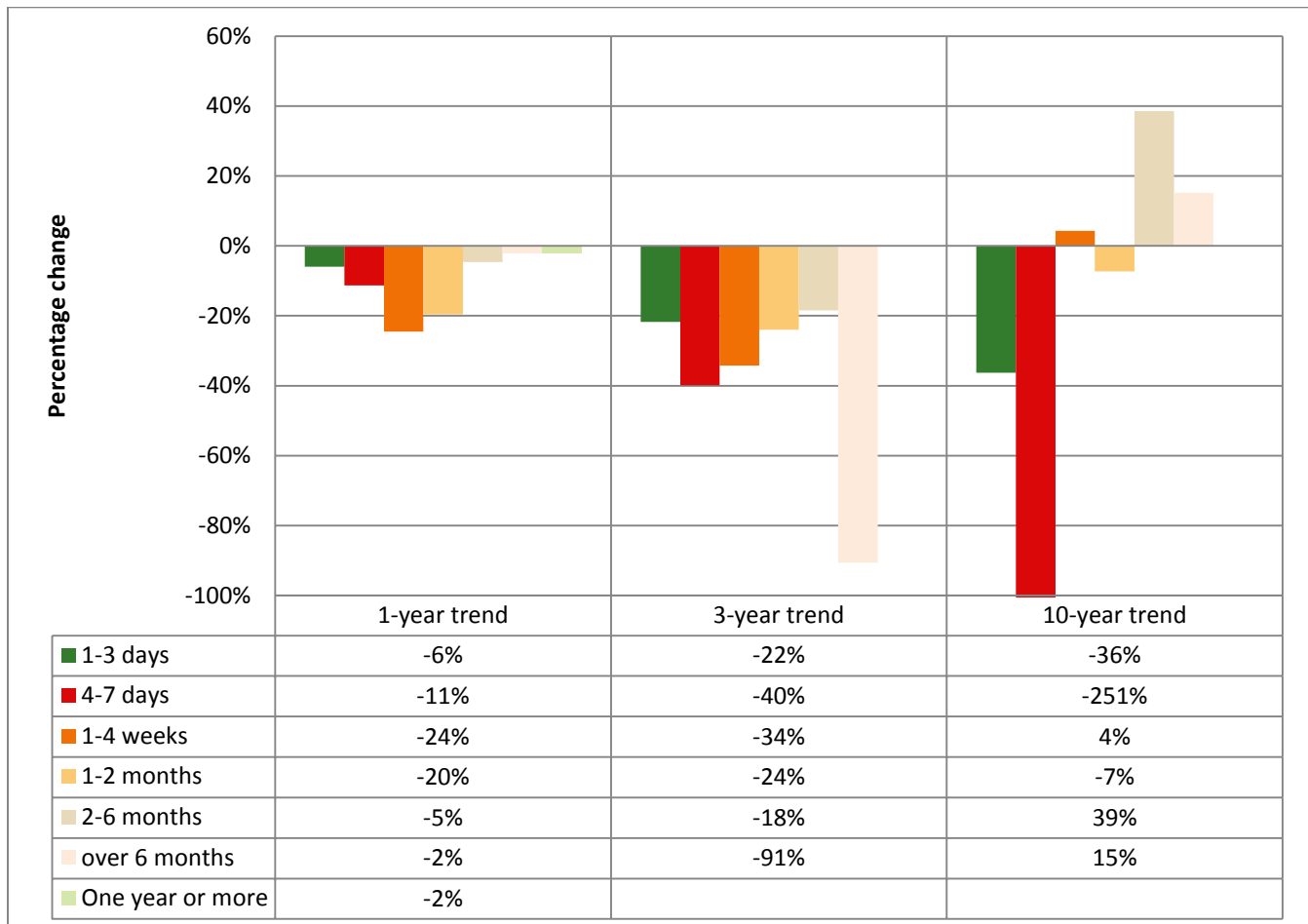
## Time on the Street Before Connecting to NRS for Youth in Crisis

- Just over half (51 percent) of youth in crisis connecting to the National Runaway Safeline (NRS) have been on the street for one week or less.
- In the past year, the biggest drop in connections, 24 percent, came from those on the street for one to four weeks.
- Over the past three years, those on the streets for six months or more had the largest decrease in connections to NRS at 91 percent.

**Figure 7: Distribution of Time on the Street for Youth in Crisis in 2014, n=5,915**



**Figure 8: Trend Analysis of Percentage Change in Youth in Crisis Time on the Street before Connecting to NRS 2004-2014** (Based on a combined sample of 20,219 for all 3 years being compared)



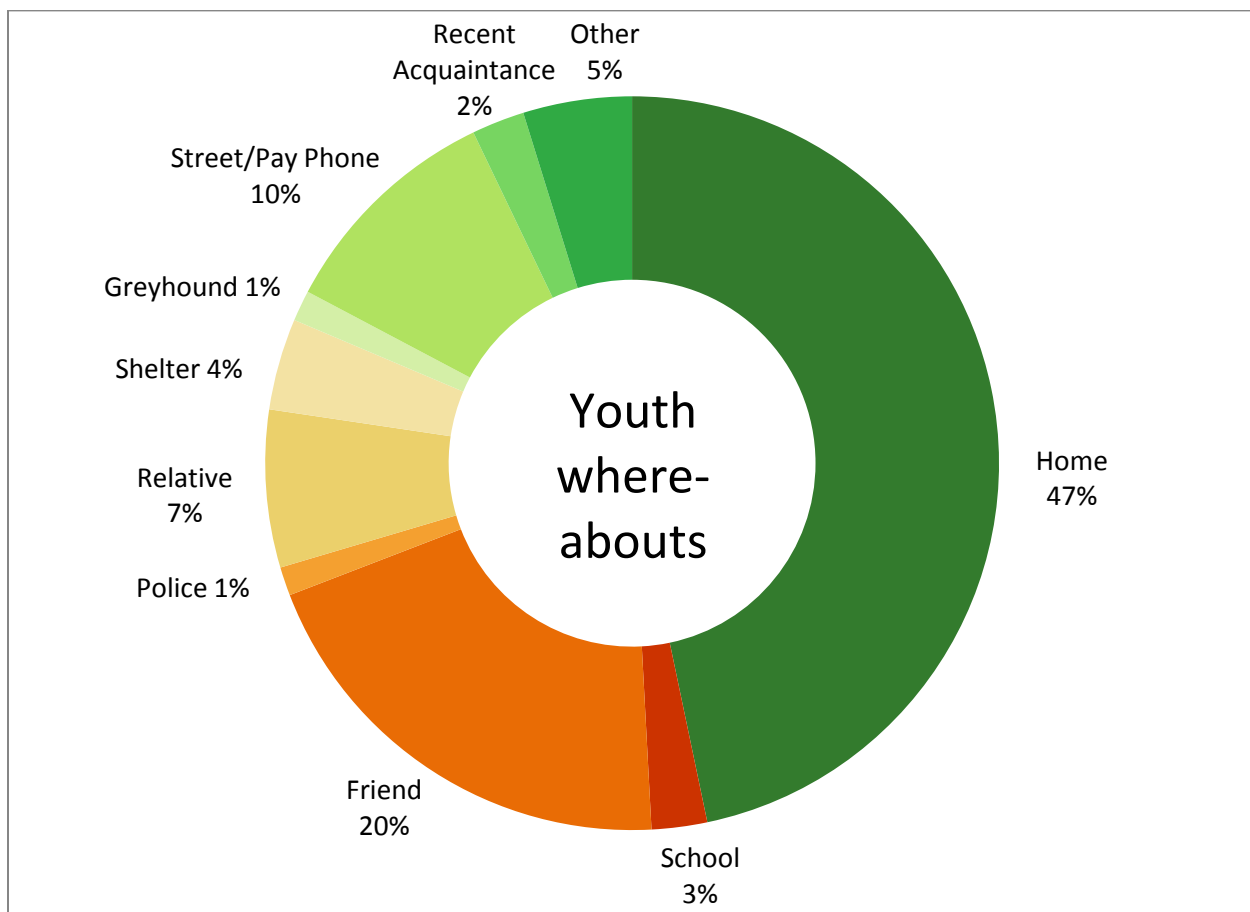
Note: There is no data covering the 3 or 10-year trend periods for the category "one year or more" because data in this category was not collected until 2014. In addition, the category "4-7" days in the 10 year trend is not shown in its entirety due to space constraints.



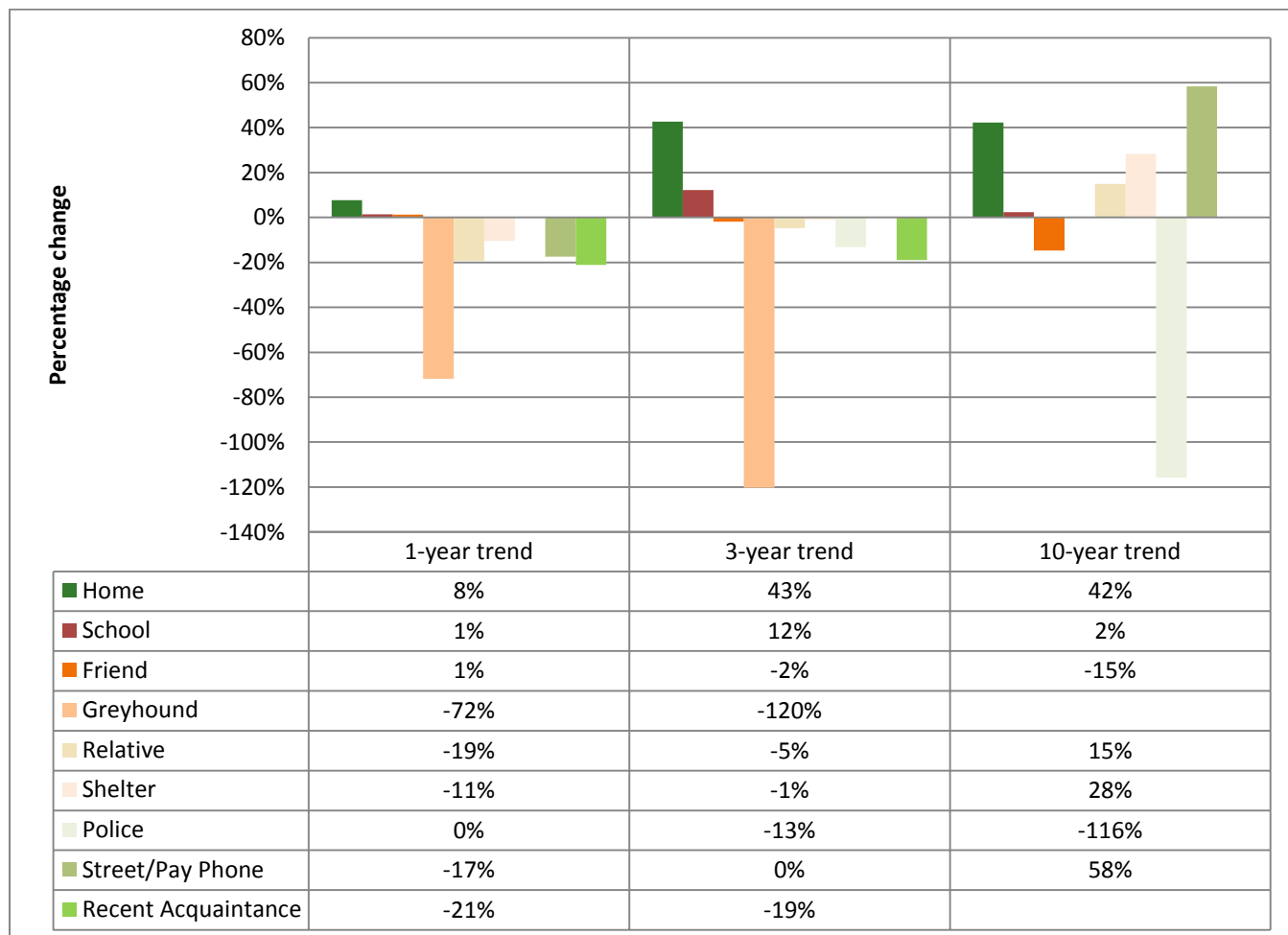
## Whereabouts of Youth in Crisis at Time of Connection

- At 47 percent, home is the most common location from which youth reach out to the National Runaway Safeline (NRS), but many (20 percent) also reach out when with a friend.
- There has been an increase in connections from youth at home, with a rise of 8 percent over the past year and 43 percent over the past three years.
- There have been smaller, but still significant, increases in connections from youth at school, with a 1 percent increase over the past year and 12 percent over the past three years.

**Figure 9: Distribution of Youth in Crisis Whereabouts in 2014, n=13,815**



**Figure 10: Trend Analysis of Percentage Change in Youth in Crisis Whereabouts 2004-2014**  
*(Based on a combined sample of 40,662 for all three years being compared)*



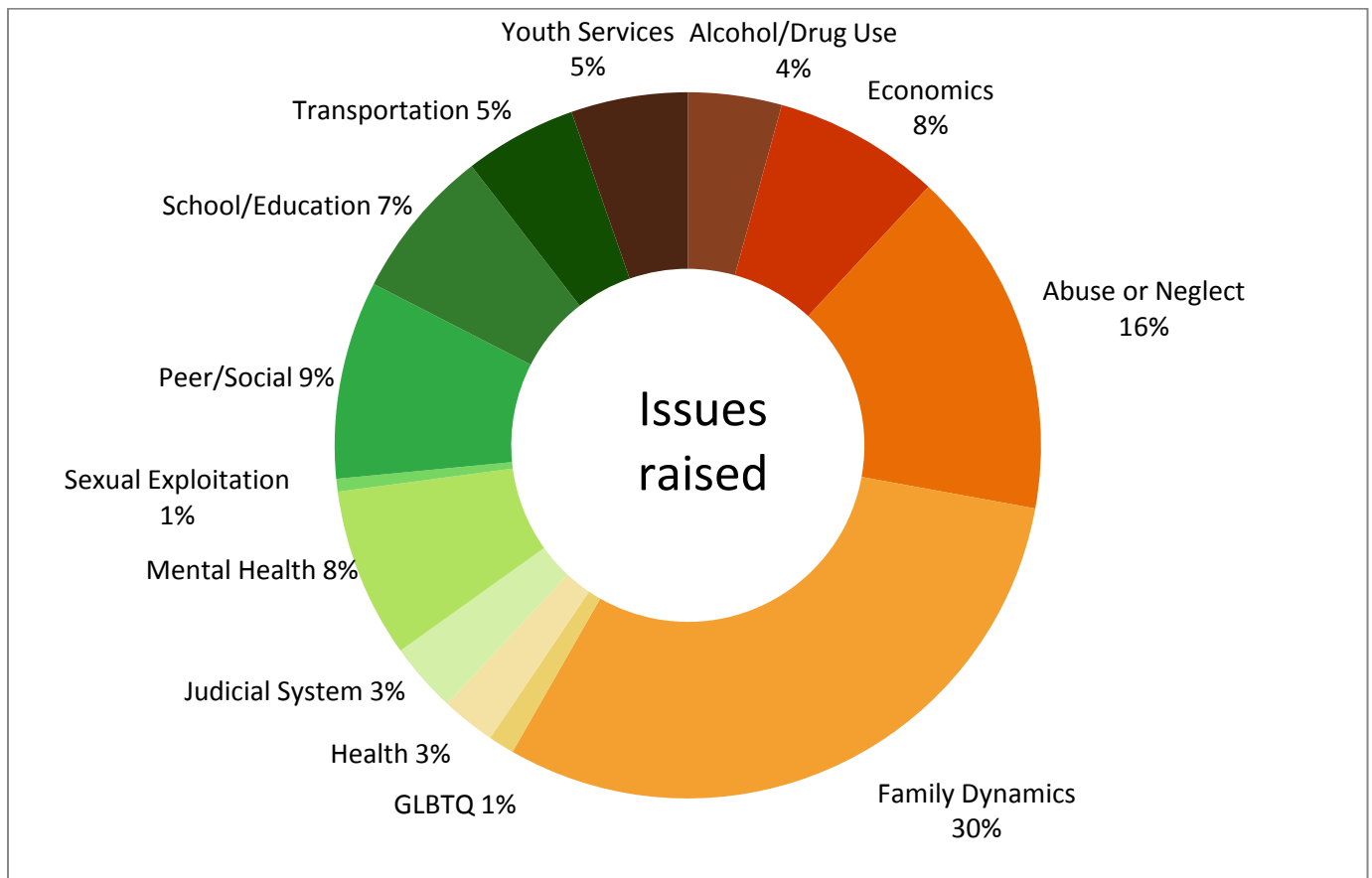
*Note: There is no data covering the 10-year trend periods for the categories "recent acquaintance" and "Greyhound" because this data was not collected until 2007.*

## Issues Raised by Youth in Crisis

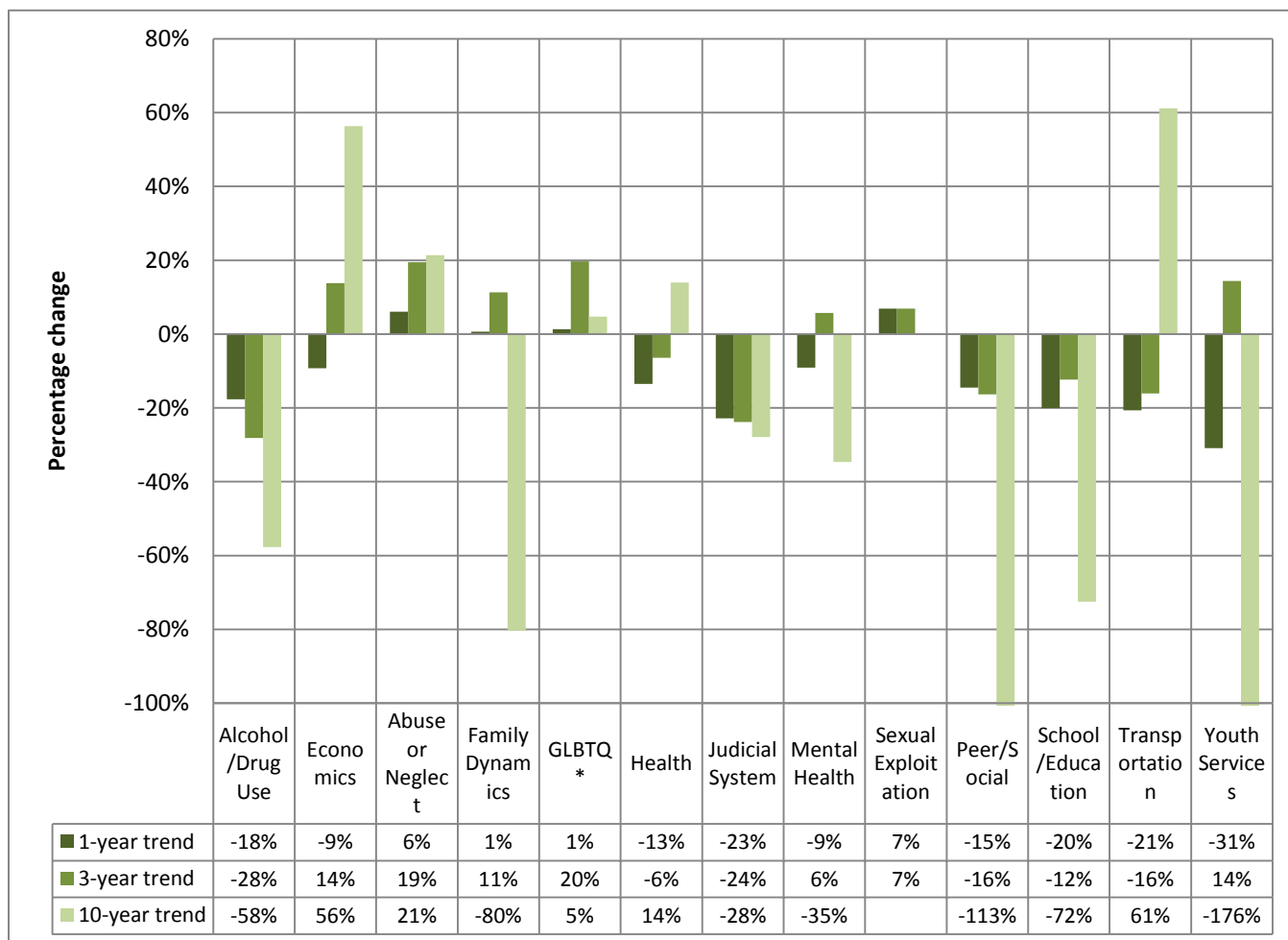
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- On average, three issues are raised during each crisis connection.
- Family dynamics remains the most commonly raised issue for youth in crisis connecting to the National Runaway Safeline (NRS), with 30 percent connecting to talk about this issue in 2014.
- Physical, sexual, emotional and verbal abuse and neglect (16 percent) is the second most common issue raised by youth in crisis in 2014.
- Connections about abuse and neglect are also increasing, with a rise of 6 percent over the past year, 19 percent over the past three years, and 21 percent over the past ten years.
- The number of youth wanting to discuss economic issues was on the upswing over the past three years (14 percent) and ten years (56 percent) but this issue was not raised as frequently in the past year (down 9 percent).
- GLBTQ issues have been a focus of more crisis connections than in the past with a rise of 20 percent over the past three years. NRS has focused outreach efforts to GLBTQ youth with targeted informational materials.

**Figure 11: Distribution of Youth in Crisis Issues Raised in 2014, n=39,465**



**Figure 12: Trend Analysis of Percentage Change in Youth in Crisis Issues Raised 2004-2014**  
*(Based on a combined sample of 119,839 for all three years being compared)*

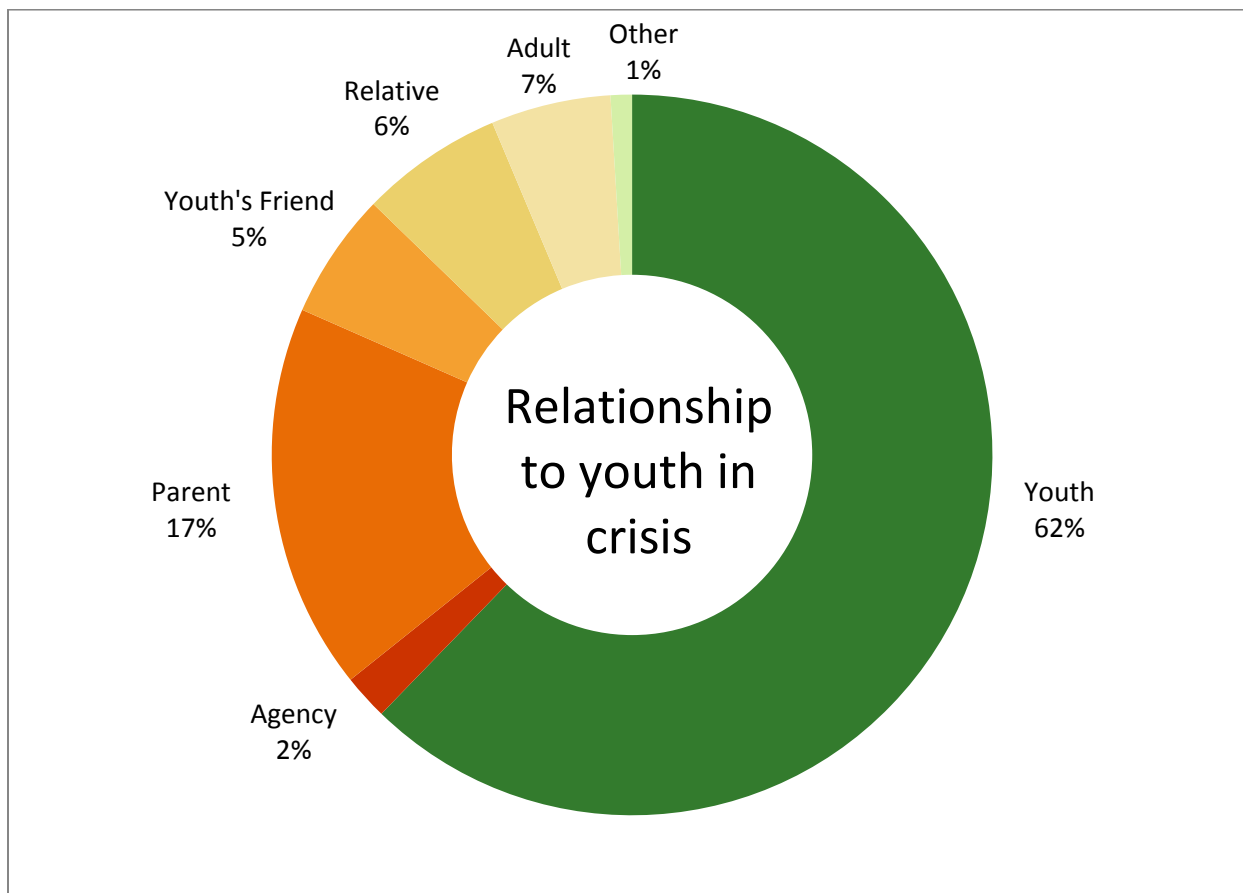


*Note: The category “sexual exploitation” does not have data for the 10-year trend horizon because this category was created in 2009. In addition, the categories “peer/social” and “youth services” for the 10 year trend are not shown in their entirety due to space constraints.*

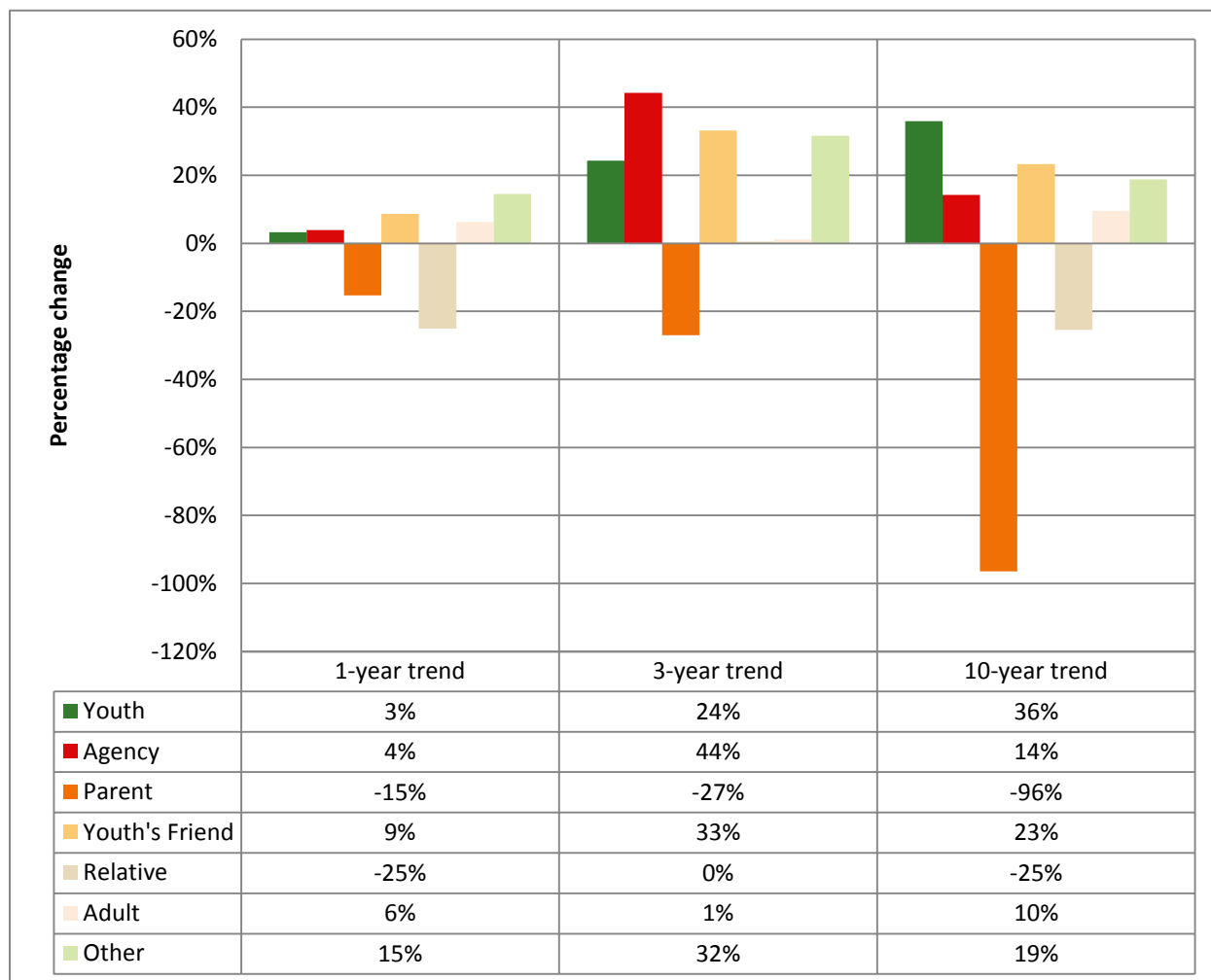
## Connector's Relationship to Youth in Crisis

- Most crisis connections to the National Runaway Safeline (NRS) come from the youth who is in crisis at 62 percent.
- Other people who care about a youth in crisis also connect to NRS, including parents (17 percent), other adults (7 percent), relatives (6 percent), friends (5 percent) and agencies (2 percent).
- NRS has had a decrease in connections from parents about their youth, with a drop of 15 percent in the past year, 27 percent over the past three years, and 96 percent over the last decade.
- In contrast, connections from friends and agencies have both increased consistently over the past decade.

**Figure 13: Distribution of the Connector's Relationship to Youth in Crisis in 2014, n=15,256**



**Figure 14: Trend Analysis of Percentage Change in Connector's Relationship to Youth in Crisis 2004-2014** (Based on a combined sample of 43,879 for all three years being compared)

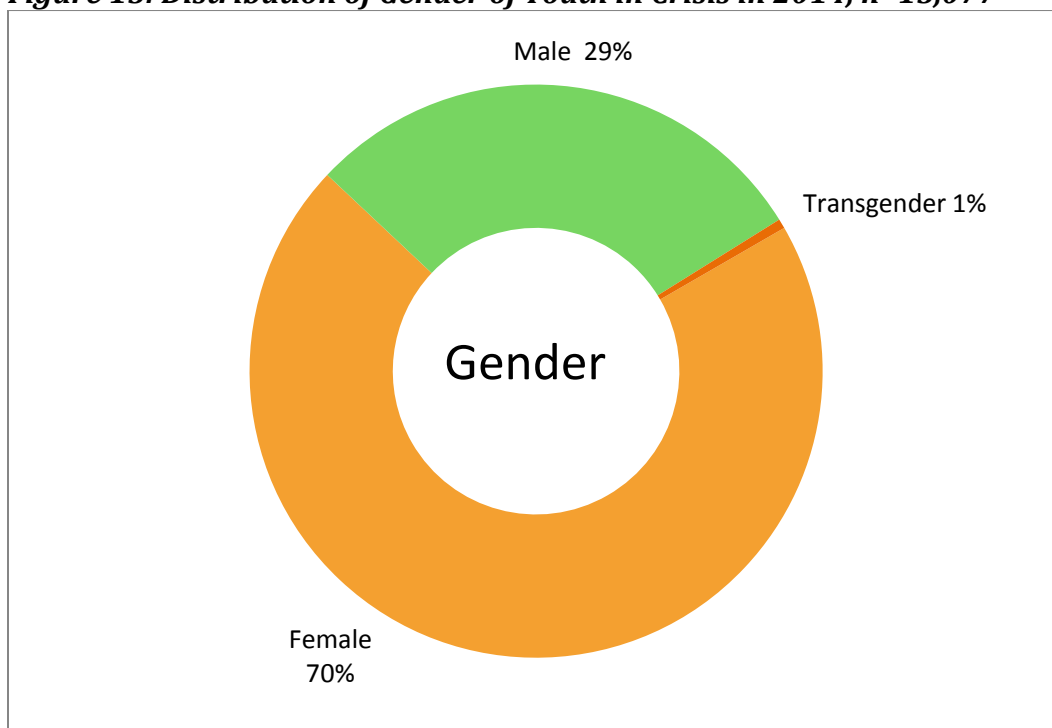


## Gender of Youth in Crisis

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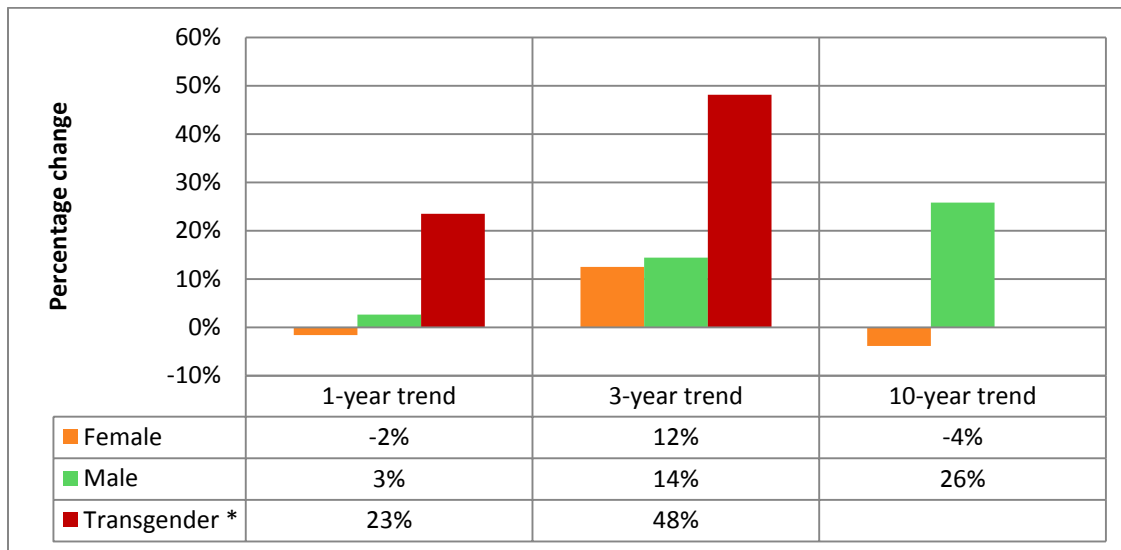
- Females still make up the majority of individuals in crisis connecting with the National Runaway Safeline (NRS) at 70 percent.
- But, connections from males have been increasing faster than connections from females. Connections from males have increased 3 percent over the past year, 14 percent over the past three years, and 26 percent over the past decade.

**Figure 15: Distribution of Gender of Youth in Crisis in 2014, n=15,077**





**Figure 16: Trends in Gender of Youth in Crisis** (Based on a combined sample of 43,272 for all three years being compared)



*Note: There is no data on transgender connections for the 10-year trend because this category was not added until 2006*

## Contact Information

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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.

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