

Runaway Youth's Knowledge and Access of Services

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Table of Contents

Acknowledgements	i
Table of Contents	ii
Executive Summary	iv
Introduction	1
I. Background	6
a. Literature Review	6
b. Study Objectives	11
c. Methodology	19
d. Runaway Youth Sample	24
II. On Being a Runaway	28
a. Runaway, Throwaway, or What?	28
b. On the Word “Runaway”	34
c. Runaway/Throwaway History	37
d. Experience with Foster Care	39
III. Leaving Home	40
a. Who Were Youth Living With (and Running From)?	40
b. Preparation for Leaving Home	43
c. Pathways from Home – The First 48 Hours	44
d. How Long Have They Been Away?	47
e. Living Away from Home	47
f. Getting to the Shelter	50
IV. Staying Connected	52
a. Cell Phones	52
b. Email	53

c. Social Networking Websites	54
d. Attending School	55
e. Churches and Other Organizations	56
f. Family and Friends	56
V. Knowledge and Use of Services	59
a. Service Usage and Knowledge	59
b. Perceived Health Needs	65
c. Reasons for Not Using Services	66
VI. The National Runaway Switchboard / 1-800-RUNAWAY	71
a. Knowledge	71
b. Usage	73
c. Preferred Contact Method	76
d. Anonymity and Confidentiality	76
VII. Improvements – What Do Youth Suggest?	79
a. Improving Services	79
b. Getting Information to Youth	84
c. On Use of the Term “Runaway” in Advertising	87
References	90

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Executive Summary

Background

Between 1.6 and 2.8 million youth have a runaway/throwaway episode each year (Hammer, Finkelhor, and Sedlack 2002, Greene 1995). By some estimates, one in five youth runs away from home before turning 18 (Pergamit 2010). Despite these large numbers and the many needs of these youth, only a small percentage of runaway youth appear to access services that can help them. Some studies indicate that runaway and homeless youth do not take advantage of the services available and may not even know of their existence (Street Youth Task Force 2002, De Rosa, et al. 1999, Levin, et al. 2005).

This lack of connection between runaway youth and the services available to help them is cause for great concern. This study was designed to help identify: (a) the extent to which youth do not access services due to lack of knowledge about services including knowledge of the existence of services, what the services do for youth, and whether under-age youth can access services; (b) whether youth know about services but choose not to access them; in which case, why they choose not to access them; and (c) where in the service-provision process resources can best be targeted to get information to youth and/or convince youth that it is in their interest to access services.

We focus specifically on youth under 18 years old in order to distinguish between the needs of under-age youth and older homeless youth. The latter group can access adult services; do not need a parent or guardian's permission to access a service; and do not have concerns about being returned to their parents, turned over to the police, or put into foster care.

This report will provide findings from interviews conducted with youth in shelters and youth living "on the street." A later version of this report will include findings from interviews with youth who ran away from foster care and from surveys conducted in high schools in Chicago and Los Angeles. An important aspect of this study was giving the opportunity to youth to express themselves, to "give youth a voice." No service providers were interviewed for this report.

Methods

Interviewing took place in Chicago and Los Angeles from October 2008 through January 2010. The main survey was conducted one-on-one with youth in shelters or "on the street," defined as living anywhere other than a shelter or parents' (or guardians') home in an unstable living situation. Two people conducted all of the interviews with one person conducting all of the interviews in Los Angeles, the majority of shelter interviews in Chicago, and three of the street interviews in Chicago.

All interviews were audio-recorded with the youth's permission and transcribed for analysis. The protocol left all the questions open-ended, allowing the youth to tell their story. After the fact, a coding frame was developed that allowed the open-ended responses to be reduced to a set of responses.

The interviews took approximately 45-90 minutes and gathered information about the runaway event itself as well as the circumstances in the youth's life precipitating the runaway episode. Each youth was also asked to fill out a short self-administered questionnaire with basic demographic information and simpler versions of questions that would be asked in the full interview. Youth were paid \$30 for their participation.

Street interviews took place in a variety of locations including restaurants and coffee shops, the beach, drop-in centers, alleys, parks, cars, and literally on the street.

Street youth were found by approaching youth in various areas where homeless youth are known to congregate, by having the youth identified as appropriate at a drop-in center, by flyers put up around town with a 1-800 number for youth to call, and by going out with street outreach teams.

Runaway Youth Sample

The shelter and street samples combine to create our runaway youth sample and provide us with a group of youth who have sought service (shelter sample) and a group of youth who may or may not have ever sought a service (street sample). The combined sample includes 83 runaway youth, 40 in Chicago and 43 in Los Angeles. In each site, we interviewed 20 youth in shelters.

.A majority (60%) of the sample is seventeen years old, a quarter is sixteen, 10.8 percent is fifteen, and about 5 percent fourteen. Just over half of the sample (54%) is male and about 40 percent are female. Five youth identified themselves as transgender. Though a majority of the sample is heterosexual (60%), a large minority (40%) is not, constituting a mixture of gays, lesbians, bisexuals and “something else” (LGBT youth). This high percentage of LGBT youth reflects our heavy reliance on the Broadway Youth Center to identify street youth in Chicago. However, even if we dropped the Chicago street sample, the remaining sample is approximately 24 percent LGBT. This percentage is consistent with other studies gathering similar samples (National Alliance to End Homelessness 2008).

Nearly half of the sample (47%) is African-American, about one-quarter (23%) Hispanic and 16 percent white. The level of educational grade attainment is more even than the age distribution might suggest. Only 23 percent have gotten to twelfth grade and 18 percent to eleventh grade. A quarter is in ninth grade and another quarter is in tenth grade. Six percent have not gotten into high school grades yet.

Key Findings

- Many runaway youth did not run away from home. They were either thrown out or describe what happened as a combination of being thrown out and running away. Many do not think of themselves as “runaways” and dislike the term as one reflecting a judgment of them as a bad child.
- Runaway youth in this sample mimic national data from the National Longitudinal Survey of Youth--1997 in that they have histories of runaway and/or throwaway episodes dating back to earlier ages (Pergamit, forthcoming). They come from homes with high levels of family conflict, including abuse and neglect. Over one quarter of the sample youth had previously been in foster care and more had had child welfare involvement.
- A majority of sample youth spent at least some time staying with friends, but a significant amount of sample youth spent nights in unsafe environments such as parks, abandoned buildings, and on the beach.
- Sample youth found ways of staying connected. A majority have access to a cell phone, either their own or through friends. Three quarters of sample youth have a MySpace account and half of them access it at least once per week.

- Only 13 percent of sampled youth stated that nobody knows their whereabouts. One quarter said their parents know where they are. One quarter stay in touch with siblings.
- Over one third of sample youth had previously used a shelter. Other services with the highest usage include drop-in centers (58%), free meals (54%), street outreach (41%), and counseling (40%). Youth who had not used a service typically did not know where to find it. Half of the sample youth said that concerns about being turned over to the authorities some times kept them from seeking help.
- Over half of the youth interviewed in Chicago, but only one third of youth interviewed in L.A. had heard of 1-800-RUNAWAY. Two-thirds of interviewed youth either did not know what 1-800-RUNAWAY could do for them or had a wrong perception.
- Sample youth tended to be very satisfied with the services they receive. However, many youth felt that how service providers deal with them needs improvement. They want respect, honesty, sensitivity, and flexibility.
- Youth stressed the need for increased awareness of services. They felt that lack of knowledge about what services exist, what those services can do for them, how to find services, and where to find the, are the biggest barriers to youth getting help.
- Youth suggested there be a comprehensive list of service agencies with contact information that would be made widely available.
- Using the term “runaway” in advertising would work with some youth, but not others. Youth stressed that making it clear what the service has to offer is more important than the labels used.
- Youth felt that school is a good focal point for getting information to youth, particularly before they run away. Youth also felt that the internet provides a good focal point for information, though they noted it must be easy to find.
- Youth who had experience in shelters noted the need for more after-care services; shelters and other service providers should check up on youth after being returned home, finding out from the youth how things are going. Provide youth with the list of services when leaving the shelter.

Introduction

Between 1.6 and 2.8 million youth have a runaway/throwaway episode each year (Hammer, Finkelhor, and Sedlack 2002, Greene 1995). By some estimates, one in five youth runs away from home before turning 18 (Pergamit 2010). The Chicago Coalition for the Homeless (2001) estimated 26,000 youth in Illinois will be homeless over the course of a year. Of these, they estimate roughly 12,000 will endure chronic homelessness.

Runaway youth are likely to come from high conflict home environments that may include a history of problems such as physical abuse, sexual abuse, and/or neglect (Kaufman and Widom, 1999; Yoder, Whitbeck, and Hoyt, 2001; Tyler, Cauce, and Whitbeck, 2004; Thompson, Kost, and Pollio, 2003; Tyler, Whitbeck, Hoyt, and Cauce, 2004). These youth are also likely to suffer from one or more mental health problems and to have problems with substance abuse (Cauce, 2000; Tyler, Cauce, and Whitbeck, 2004; Johnson, Whitbeck, and Hoyt, 2005; and Slesnick and Prestopnik, 2005). Some of these youth have run away from substitute care, perhaps due to problems with their placement or because they want to return to their families. Estimates vary, but as many as one third of all youth in foster care may run away from substitute care at some point (Courtney, et al. 2005).

Despite these large numbers and the many needs of these youth, only a small percentage of runaway youth appear to access services that can help them. Some studies indicate that runaway and homeless youth do not take advantage of the services available and may not even know of their existence. For example, a study by the Street Youth Task Force (2002) in King County, Washington, noted that "King County has approximately 286 shelter and transitional housing beds available for homeless youth, young adults and young mothers with babies. Many of these beds go unused each night....A number of sources in the research literature document the fact that many

homeless youth across the nation never come in contact with shelters and that many shelters operate far below capacity when averaged over the year.” Other services tend to be likewise underutilized. For example, the National Runaway Switchboard (NRS) reported handling about 17,000 crisis calls in 2009 (National Runaway Switchboard website: www.1800runaway.org).

One of the few studies to examine service utilization more broadly found in Los Angeles low rates of usage of medical services, substance abuse treatment, and mental health services (De Rosa, et al 1999). A study of homeless youth in Chicago found 40 percent of interviewed youth having accessed temporary housing and 37% having accessed free food (Levin, et al., 2005). No other services had been accessed by as many as one-quarter of the surveyed youth.

This lack of connection between runaway youth and the services available to help them is cause for great concern. This study was designed to help identify: (a) the extent to which youth do not access services due to lack of knowledge about services including knowledge of the existence of services, what the services do for youth, and whether under-age youth can access services; (b) whether youth know about services but choose not to access them; in which case, why they choose not to access them; and (c) where in the service-provision process resources can best be targeted to get information to youth and/or convince youth that it is in their interest to access services.

We focus specifically on youth under 18 years old in order to distinguish between the needs of under-age youth and older homeless youth. The latter group can access adult services; do not need a parent or guardian’s permission to access a service; and do not have concerns about being returned to their parents, turned over to the police, or put into foster care.

We will refer to “runaway” youth throughout the report, although not all youth away from home have run away. Many have been thrown out or pushed out of their

homes by their parents or other relatives or guardians. In fact, the classification of a youth as a “runaway” or “throwaway” is problematic. The family dynamics of the households from which these youth originate can be very complex making the distinction between a youth running away and being thrown out nebulous. Many youth have a series of runaway and throwaway episodes that make it nearly impossible to create an overall description of their situation.

This report will provide findings from interviews conducted with youth in shelters and youth living “on the street.” A later version of this report will include findings from interviews with youth who ran away from foster care and from surveys conducted in high schools in Chicago and Los Angeles. An important aspect of this study was giving the opportunity to youth to express themselves, to “give youth a voice.” No service providers were interviewed for this report.

In the next section we review the literature on runaway and homeless youth, lay out the study objectives, and describe the study methodology and resulting runaway youth sample. In Chapter 2 we discuss the description or characterization of being away from home as a “runaway” or “throwaway” episode, their history of running away or being thrown out, and any experience with foster care. In Chapter 3, we examine what the youths did their first 48 hours after leaving home and how they have survived since.

Many runaway youth stay connected in various ways to friends and family and this is explored in Chapter 4 in terms of their access to phones, e-mail, and use of social networking websites. We also examine the extent to which they continue to go to school and be involved in church or other organizations.

Chapter 5 explores the key issues about youth’s knowledge of services, which ones they access, and why they don’t access services. Youth identify barriers to access, real and perceived, and discuss their concerns about being turned over to parents or the authorities as well as their concerns about confidentiality and anonymity.

Chapter 6 continues this line with specific attention to youth's usage and perceptions of the National Runaway Switchboard (1-800-RUNAWAY). The report concludes with suggestions made by the interviewed youth about improvements for service provision and ways to get information about services to youths.

I just think that everybody has a chance to start over, and by giving them that chance, youth crisis and youth shelters can help them. They can bring them in, and they can show them how it's really supposed to be, how you should really do your life. You should have like good friends that are going to be there for you. You should just take a chance, you know, take a chance and make a mistake, but if you take a good chance, you have a feeling when you know something good is going to happen out of something positive that you're doing. Like me, I called. I knew I was going to get good help. I knew I was going to succeed. I knew I was going to be better back on my feet, going back to school, doing what I'm supposed to do, and now that I'm here, I know that I can get a job. I know that I can go back to school. I can finish my probation term, and I can just do whatever, you know. I can make my life happier now than what it was before. (17-year old female)

I. Background

a. Literature Review

Runaway and homeless youth are a vulnerable population with significant prevalence. They are at significant risk of violence, crime, drugs, prostitution, HIV and other STDs, and other health problems. Understanding the prevalence of the problem and the events precipitating a runaway/homeless episode is critical to being able to identify youth in jeopardy of becoming runaways. Similarly, it is important to understand the experiences youth encounter once they do run away in order to be able to provide appropriate services to them.

Estimates of the runaway population are difficult to obtain and the exact number of runaway youth is not known (Greene, et al., 2003). However, according to the Second National Incidence Studies of Missing, Abducted, Runaway, and Thrownaway Children (NISMAART-2), approximately 1.7 million youth experienced an episode of running away or being thrown away in 1999 (Hammer, Finkelhor, & Sedlack, 2002). This survey is the only nationally representative sample intended to measure the incidence of running away. Furthermore, runaway experiences among youth tend to be episodic rather than chronic (Robertson 1991). Using the National Longitudinal Survey of Youth—1997 Pergamit (2010) estimates that nearly one in five youth will run away before turning 18 and that half of these youth will run away two or more times.

Several consistent characteristics of runaway youth have been found in varying degrees across studies. Runaway youth are likely to come from high conflict home environments that may include a history of problems such as physical abuse, sexual abuse, and/or neglect (Kaufman & Widom, 1999; Yoder, Whitbeck, and Hoyt, 2001; Tyler, Cauce, and Whitbeck, 2004; Thompson, Maguin, and Pollio, 2003; Tyler, Whitbeck, Hoyt, and Cauce, 2004). These youth are also likely to suffer from one or more mental health problems and to have problems with substance abuse (Cauce,

2000; Tyler, Cauce, and Whitbeck, 2004; Johnson, Whitbeck, and Hoyt, 2005; and Slesnick and Prestopnik, 2005).

Youth who have experienced child abuse and neglect have a greater likelihood of running away from home than other youth (Kaufman and Widom, 1999). Among recent study samples, abuse rates are high but range depending upon the sample. Examining data on a non-random sample of 328 homeless youth from the Seattle Homeless Adolescent Research and Education (SHARE) Project, Tyler, Cauce, and Whitbeck (2004) estimate rates of physical abuse at 82 percent and sexual abuse at 26 percent. Neglect was also common, with a prevalence rate of 43 percent. Thompson, Maguin, and Pollio (2003) analyzed data from over 14,000 youth in shelters collected through the Runaway and Homeless Youth Management Information System (RHYMIS) and found the prevalence of physical abuse to be 30.9 percent and sexual abuse to be 7.6 percent.

As noted, runaway and homeless youth are also likely to suffer from one or more mental health problems and to have problems with substance abuse. Cauce (2000) examined data from the Diagnostic Interview Schedule for Children – Revised (DISC-R) (administered as part of the SHARE) and found that two-thirds of these youth met the criteria for at least one psychiatric diagnosis as specified by the DSM-III-R. Forty-five percent of these homeless youth also reported a past suicide attempt. This high rate of suicide attempts is consistent with Thompson et al.'s (2004) finding that 71.6% of runaway youth in a shelter indicated problems with depression and suicidal thoughts.

Using the same sample as Cauce (2000), Tyler, Cauce, and Whitbeck (2004) examined the Dissociative Experience Scale that had been administered to the 328 youth. They found uncommon levels of dissociative experiences among these youth. Family issues such as physical abuse, sexual abuse, neglect, mental health problems, and parental rejection were all found to be correlated with dissociative experiences.

In a study of homeless youth between the ages of 16 and 19 in eight cities in the Midwest, Johnson, Whitbeck, and Hoyt (2005) determined that 60.5% of these youth had one or more substance abuse disorders. Ninety-three percent of the youth who met the criteria for a substance abuse disorder also met criteria for an additional mental disorder. Of the complete sample of 428 youth, 53.5% met the criteria for conduct disorder, 20.8% met criteria for major depressive episode, and 24.1% met criteria for PTSD.

Slesnick and Prestopnik (2005) administered Shaffer's Computerized Diagnostic Interview Schedule for Children (CDISC) to 226 runaway youth in shelters in a city in the southwest. They found that 36% of the youth met criteria for conduct disorder or oppositional defiant disorder. Anxiety disorders were found in 32% of the youth and 20% of the youth met criteria for affective disorders. They also assessed youths' substance abuse. Forty percent of the sample had a substance abuse diagnosis with no additional mental health diagnosis. However, 34% of youth had both a substance abuse diagnosis and a mental health diagnosis and 26% had a substance abuse diagnosis and more than one additional mental health diagnosis.

Most of these studies utilized samples of youth from homeless shelters or crisis centers. Nearly all of these studies use non-random samples which can not be generalized beyond the youth in the sample. These samples may differ from the runaway population in general (Smollar, 1999). It is possible that abuse and mental disorder estimates are somewhat higher in this subsection of runaway youth than amongst all youth who experience a runaway or throwaway episode. Thompson, et al., (2003) compared youth in crisis centers across the United States to the entire United States population of adolescents. They found that 62% of the youth in their sample were female (compared to 48.7% of youth in the census). The NISMART-2, which used a nationally representative sample, found an approximately equal number of males and females. Estimates of ethnicity were closer between the two studies; however, the

sample in Thompson et al. (2003) was comprised of 21.7% African American youth, while the NISMART-2 indicated that 17% of their sample was African American. Thompson et al., (2003) are careful to specify that their demographics are only characteristics of runaway youth who have sought services and that these youth may not be typical of all runaway youth.

Furthermore, runaway youth are not a completely homogenous population. Children leave home at different times in their adolescence and children who leave home in early adolescence may be different in many respects from those who leave home later in adolescence. Cauce (2000) suggests that the pathway to the streets may be different for children who leave home at different ages. "Examinations of these paths in future research will serve to elucidate the important warning signs that predict a young person's move to the streets. This kind of research would provide valuable insight about what kind of interventions might help youth to maintain a stable residence while tackling the other problems they might face" (p. 8).

The heterogeneity of the runaway and homeless youth population has implications for service use as well. Service utilization may differ among homeless youth by their "stage" of homelessness. Carlson, Sugano, Millstein, and Auerswald (2006) found that different subgroups of homeless youth utilized services differently, for example, youth who were at the point of trying to leave street life were more likely to use medical services, while youth who were the most deeply entrenched in street life were the least likely to use drug-related services. The pattern of youths' service use may also differ by characteristics of the youth such as family factors, the time at which they first initiated services, and their experiences on the street (Berdahl, Hoyt, & Whitbeck, 2005).

In an attempt to identify youth who are at risk of a runaway or throwaway episode, Springer (1998) developed the Adolescent Concerns Evaluation (ACE), an instrument designed to predict runaway behavior. Two groups completed this

instrument. The study group came from a runaway shelter or from one of three juvenile assessment centers. The comparison group was comprised of students attending grades 6 through 12 only one of whom had ever run away. In the study sample, 69.1 percent had run away and 49.1 percent indicated they were throwaways. Splitting the group into original and cross-validation groups and, using a discriminant function analysis, he correctly classified 86.3 percent and 88.2 percent of each group (Springer, 1998).

De Man (2000) attempted to specify which behaviors that are found in runaway youth actually predict runaway behavior. He found that the most predictive variable was suicidal ideation, which explained 23.8% of the variance. Other variables that added predictive value were alcohol use, the youth's social support dissatisfaction, and truancy from school. De Man's sample was small, consisting of 246 high school students, 19 of whom indicated that they had run away at least once and 96 of whom indicated that they had thought about it (De Man, 2000).

Yoder, Whitbeck, and Hoyt (2001) found that neglect, sexual abuse, and age were all predictive of running away. Specifically, for each additional year of age, assuming everything else was equal, the odds that a youth would run away increased by 1.8. Furthermore, youth who had been neglected were "3.25 times more likely to run away than were non-neglected youth, and sexually abused youth were 3.12 times more likely to run away than non-sexually abused youth" (p.59).

Youth who have run away from their home demonstrate high rates of delinquent and problem behaviors including substance abuse (Johnson, Whitbeck, & Hoyt, 2005), truancy (De Man, 2000), gang involvement (Yoder, Whitbeck, & Hoyt, 2003) and criminal activity (Hammer, Finkelhor, & Sedlack, 2002). Subsequently, many of these youth will have experience with the juvenile justice system. Kaufman and Widom's (1999) study of 676 youth with histories of abuse or neglect at age 11 or younger and 520 matched

controls found that even when controlling for group (abuse/neglect vs. control), gender, race, and parents' welfare status, running away behaviors still significantly predicted juvenile arrest.

Runaway youth are not only likely to perpetrate crimes and engage in delinquent behaviors, they are also likely to have been victimized themselves (Tyler, Cauce, & Whitbeck, 2004; Thompson, Zittel-Palamara, & Maccio, 2004; Kurtz & Kurtz, 1991) and to experience additional victimization once they leave home, with some youth being more susceptible to victimization than others. Females are more likely to be sexually victimized than males. The use of hard drugs and the earlier they run away from home, the more likely they are to be victimized by a stranger (Tyler, Whitbeck, Hoyt, and Cauce, 2004). Other important determinants of victimization are the length of time homeless youth live on the street, internalization symptoms, and prior victimization (Hoyt, Ryan, and Cauce, 1999).

b. Study Objectives

The literature on runaway and homeless youth focuses primarily on their characteristics and their needs such as substance abuse and mental health problems and physical and sexual abuse. Some studies indicate that runaway and homeless youth do not take advantage of the services available and may not even know of their existence. For example, a study by the Street Youth Task Force (2002) in King County, Washington, noted that "King County has approximately 286 shelter and transitional housing beds available for homeless youth, young adults and young mothers with babies. Many of these beds go unused each night....A number of sources in the research literature document the fact that many homeless youth across the nation never come in contact with shelters and that many shelters operate far below capacity when averaged over the year." One of the few studies to examine service utilization more broadly found in Los

Angeles low rates of usage of medical services, substance abuse treatment, and mental health services (De Rosa, et al 1999).

Getting information to runaway and homeless youth about services available to them is a key element to service delivery. Although the literature may document what services runaway and homeless youth need, it provides little guidance about how to get the services to them, or get them to the services. This study is intended to help fill these gaps in the literature. Rather than focus on the problems of runaways, which are mostly known, the study focuses on how to get information to these youth and through that process get these youth connected to the services they need. Toward that end, the study was designed to examine the following issues:

- Determine youth's knowledge of available services and how youth access them.

Youth who run away from home have need of many services and numerous organizations exist that can provide these services. Yet the evidence indicates that runaways do not access many of the services available to them. The fundamental question is whether they know about these services, but choose not to access them, or whether they do not even know the services exist. If they do know about the services, then why do they not choose to access them? If they are choosing not to access the services, then how can service providers change what they do to encourage youth to seek help? If youth don't know about these services, how should information be disseminated?

First and foremost a runaway youth needs safe and secure shelter. Homeless youth shelters exist that allow a youth to stay for (usually) up to 21 days. These shelters provide other services or help link youth to other services, including longer term housing. The U.S. Family and Youth Services Bureau is the primary funder of temporary shelters

in the United States through the Basic Center Program, mandated under the Reconnecting Homeless Youth Act (formerly the Runaway and Homeless Youth Act).

Given that many youth run away due to family conflict, resolving this conflict through mediation and/or education can help lead to reunification between the youth and his/her family. Many shelters offer this service along with other support services such as peer counseling and support groups to help youth understand how to deal with conflict and manage within their families. Nationally nearly two-thirds of youth who enter basic centers return to their families (Pergamit and Ernst 2006). Youth who are couch surfing or do not access shelters may not know how to access this sort of help, or even know such help exists.

Runaway youth may be in need of specific services to help them deal with problems. They may need substance abuse treatment, psychological or psychiatric help, legal services, pregnancy or parenting help, or in need of other health care. Shelters can provide or link youth with these services, yet only a minority of youth in shelters who are identified as in need of these services typically receive them (Pergamit and Ernst 2006). Youth who do not access shelters are even less likely to get the help they need.

While living away from home, youth may face disruptions in their education and in securing employment. One study of several high schools in Vermont and Massachusetts estimated that 10-16% of the student population of these schools was in some way transient or homeless (New England Network for Child, Youth, and Family Services 2002). Of these youth, roughly half were not attending school consistently or at all. In addition to stable housing, connections to tutors, mentors, and other services can help stabilize the youth's schooling to reduce the long-term impact of the runaway episode.

Finally, crisis lines such as the National Runaway Switchboard (NRS) provide a focal point for obtaining information about available services and for getting linked up to services, including identifying the location of a shelter. Contacting these agencies does not require a youth to enter a shelter or in any way present himself or herself in order to seek help, yet youth may not be aware that such service connectors exist.

- Determine any barriers, real or perceived, for runaway and at-risk youth in accessing services.

Runaway youth may know about the existence of services, yet find barriers to accessing them. Most barriers to service access are likely based on youth's perceptions rather than reality. However, some real barriers may exist. Shelters may be far from their neighborhood, requiring transportation to get there. Lack of familiarity with different parts of the city may discourage going to the shelter.

Facilities without Spanish speaking staff may not be able to adequately service Spanish speaking youth. Even youth who are not completely monolingual Spanish may not be able to make use of services that rely on the ability to articulate specific problems (such as the presence of a specific health problem) or require a firm comprehension of English (such as for legal assistance).

In addition to real barriers, youth hold many perceptions that keep them from accessing services. In calling crisis lines such as NRS, they may feel that their call will not be anonymous due to caller-ID. Although NRS does not use caller-ID, youth may not know this or may not believe it. In dealing with any service, youth may not believe their location will be kept confidential and that they will either be sent back to their families or turned over to the police.

Minority youth may feel discouraged from accessing services. Negative impressions or bad experiences may cause minority youth to feel distrustful of social

services. Youth who are gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgender, or questioning (GLBTQ) in their sexual orientation are over-represented among runaway youth (National Alliance to End Homelessness 2008). They may believe that they will be looked down upon for their sexual orientation by service workers or by other youth with whom they may have to share facilities. Some of this perception is based on reality; in some cities shelters exist that cater explicitly to GLBTQ runaways.

Finally, not all shelters will accept pregnant or parenting teens, a real barrier. In addition, parenting girls may believe that if they enter a shelter, they will have their baby taken away and placed in foster care.

- Understand the decision to run away and gain insights to prevention.

The number of adolescents that run away from home is shockingly high. Yet, despite the fact that nearly all teens have some sort of conflict within their families, most do not take the step of running away from home. While many youth who run away will return home, the time they spend away from their home may put them in high risk situations. For those youth who run away and stay away, or run away repeatedly, they are likely to find themselves in even more precarious circumstances. Rather than focus exclusively on treatment services, policy should include prevention services. To prevent youth homelessness, society must understand what leads to the decision to run away.

It is important to distinguish between youth who run away from home in reaction to a specific, acute situation (a spur of the moment runaway) versus youth who run away from home due to chronic dysfunction within the family. How do the trajectories of these two types of youth differ once they are on the street? How do service needs differ between these two types of runaway youth? How are youth best helped given the circumstances surrounding their runaway episode?

In order to best help these youth, service providers have to understand the circumstances precipitating the runaway episode and the context immediately surrounding the runaway event itself. With this information, service providers will be able to target youth in need before they ever run away. The study is designed to understand the extent to which youth have plans before they run away and the extent to which they are prepared. Did the youth have a plan about where they were going? Did the youth tell anyone they were running away? Did the youth take cash? Did the youth have a cell phone?

If most runaway episodes are spur of the moment then recommendations may focus on having all teenagers made aware of one central way of getting help, perhaps by having schools emphasize the existence of 1-800-RUNAWAY. If running away tends to be more planned, then a more comprehensive approach would be warranted. In these cases, providing information about a variety of services available to youth might lead youth to access these services while living at home and allow the youth to deal with problems so that they don't feel the need to run away.

- Understand the pattern of living arrangements to guide when and how information is disseminated to runaways before they end up on the streets.

Most runaway youth probably never end up on the street (Yoder, Whitbeck, and Hoyt 2001). Many of those who do end up on the street likely do not go there immediately; they may first go to a friend's home or other immediately accessible location. However, the pathways from the home to the street have never been documented. An understanding of the pathways to the street taken by youth will help providers more efficiently advertise services to these youth. The results will also serve as an indicator to which services youth need and which services they are seeking.

If a youth can't be reached before leaving home, the study results target helping service providers connect with youth as early as possible after they run away from home. This means it is vital to detail the first few days of youth's runaway experiences so that service providers know where to target their efforts and which services should be the focus. Where did the youth go initially? How did the youth acquire his/her first meals? Where did the youth spend his/her first night? Where did he/she spend the second night? What did the youth do for money the first few days? How did the youth spend their time during the day? Where did they go? Who did they spend time with?

For youth who take the step of running away, the study is intended to aid service providers to minimize the potential for victimization and other dangers of the streets. Getting information to youth during a runaway episode will be facilitated by understanding what these patterns look like. One problem may be that youth who have left home may not think of themselves as runaways. If they are couch surfing, they may think "runaways" are youth living on the street. Youth on the street may not resonate with the term "runaway" if they were thrown out of their house by their parents (referred to as "throwaways"). If they were victims of physical or sexual abuse, they may think of themselves more in the realm of abused youth rather than in the realm of runaways. A youth who does not self-identify as a runaway will likely not respond to notices of services for runaways. Not only is the terminology important, but the methods and locations for getting information to them about available services will be affected by how runaway youth perceive themselves and how that intersects with their living arrangements.

- Assess the best methods to reduce the barriers to accessing services by runaway and at-risk youth.

By listening to the runaway youth themselves, this study was intended to gain a clearer picture of what youth consider to be barriers to accessing services. In the King County, Washington, study of shelter use, the top responses from youth on why they did not use shelters included eligibility requirements such as not allowing pregnant girls, youth with pets, youth with criminal charges, or a requirement that parents be notified; program rules such as curfews, wake-up times, and no alcohol or drug use; or they considered the shelters overcrowded or unsafe. Some of these rules are unlikely to change, but understanding how rules in shelters create barriers will allow agencies to consider how to work within the rules to help youth access services needed.

A significant barrier that has to be reduced is youth's beliefs that if they come to a service, they will be turned over to their family or to the police. The need for confidentiality and/or anonymity may be critical to persuade youth to engage service providers. The study attempted to determine if there is a perception that their status won't be kept confidential and to assess the best means to convince runaway youth that their confidentiality will be maintained.

- Assess marketing and outreach strategies to communicate to runaway and homeless youth.

This study explores methods for making runaway and homeless youth aware of services available to them as well as how to communicate to them the usefulness of these services. The study sought to uncover how runaway youth can best be reached. For example, do they make use of the internet at libraries? Do they use e-mail or social networking sites such as MySpace or Facebook? If they know about a service, will they call or would they prefer to text message, or perhaps they'd prefer only on-line

communication that they'd view as more anonymous. What terminology do youth resonate with so that they understand how a service can help them? What can be done to make them feel comfortable with regard to confidentiality and/or anonymity?

If service agencies can do a better job of getting their message out, having it noticed and understood, and have youth believe the service will be provided without surrendering the youth to their families or the police, then runaway youth are more likely to avail themselves of these services.

c. Methodology

Study Design

We began by distinguishing several subpopulations of runaways: those contemplating running away, those who run away and take refuge at a friend's or relative's home, those who access shelters, those who live on the street, and those who run away from foster care. These groups are not mutually exclusive, and may overlap considerably over time.

To gather information on each of the sub-groups, we pursued four complementary strategies. Each strategy is intended to gather information on one of the sub-groups. Information from those who go to a friend's or relative's home, or "couch surf," would be obtained from each strategy (though they may still be missed if they are not found with any of the sampling strategies).

- *School-based survey.* To get information on youth who are currently couch-surfing, we designed a questionnaire for youth in schools. Many couch-surfing youth continue to attend school, at least intermittently. In addition, many youth currently living with parents may have run away in the past and can provide additional information about their experiences. More importantly, we intended this strategy to reach youth who are contemplating running away. Furthermore, the school sample

provides us with data from a general population of youth who may or may not have ever run away. This gives us the opportunity to assess the visibility of services in this population by examining the typical teenager's familiarity with services aimed at helping youth on the street.

Schools may be the best point of attack for getting information to runaways and potential runaways. Thus, the school survey not only allows us to gather information from a large group of teenagers in an efficient manner, but we hope to be able to consider how best to use schools as a focal point for distributing information on services. Findings from this survey will be presented in a future report.

- *Interviews with youth in shelters.* Youth in shelters have chosen to access at least one service, the shelter. They represent an important component of runaway youth.
- *Interview youth who live on the street.* Youth who are not using shelters spend their nights in a variety of locations, many of which present various risks. Although they may periodically use shelters, they currently demonstrate their preference not to access a key service.
- *Interviews with youth in foster care.* Youth in foster care are at high risk of running away (Courtney et al. 2005). When these youth do run away, their runaway episode may not follow the pattern of a typical runaway youth. These youth may run from substitute care to their family or neighborhood of origin. Interviews with these youths will help us to understand better where these youth go when they run away and how these youth can be encouraged to access services during a runaway episode. These interviews will address most of the same concepts covered in the shelter/street

interviews as well as some issues unique to youth who are in the foster care system.

Findings from these interviews will be presented in a future report.

It is unknown how large the runaway population is in Chicago or Los Angeles. However, we can identify how many youth enter shelters under the Basic Center Program (BCP). Table I-1 below shows the number of youth that entered shelters in Chicago and Los Angeles by shelter and by age group during the federal fiscal year 2009 (October 2008 through September 2009), the period that coincides with most of our data collection. We also show the totals for the States of Illinois and California and for the nation as a whole.

As can be seen, 40,000 youth entered BCP shelters during the year with 1,617 youth in Illinois and 4,614 youth in California. Despite the population sizes of Chicago and Los Angeles, only 233 youth entered Chicago shelters and 430 entered Los Angeles shelters. Some youth may enter shelters and their stay is paid for out of a different funding stream, making these numbers an under-count. However, it is unlikely that many youth under age 18 entering one of these shelters would not be covered initially by BCP funding.

Table I-1 Youth Served in the Basic Center Program October 2008-September 2009

	Ages					Total
	<12	12 to 14	15 to 16	17 to 18	>18	
Boys'Town	1	10	27	5	0	43
Teen Living Programs	0	7	30	24	1	62
The Night Ministry Open Door Shelter	2	6	20	47	3	78
The Night Ministry Lakeview Shelter	0	0	6	40	4	50
<i>Chicago Total</i>	3	23	83	116	8	233
<i>Illinois</i>	79	513	667	349	9	1617
Angel's Flight	1	16	33	16	0	66
1736	5	33	26	17	0	81
Casa	5	50	80	32	0	167
LAYN	4	11	38	35	0	88
The Way In	0	4	12	11	1	28
<i>Los Angeles Total</i>	15	114	189	111	1	430
<i>California</i>	156	1405	1931	1019	103	4614
<i>National</i>	2451	12183	15873	8985	531	40023

Source: USDHHS, National Extranet Optimized Runaway and Homeless Youth Management Information System (NEO-RHYMIS)--extracted on Feb. 19, 2010

Data Collection

As noted earlier, this report will cover only those youth residing in shelters or “on the street.” These two sub-populations represent the most vulnerable runaways. While we have distinguished these two groups for sampling purposes, they are not entirely independent. Many shelter youth have experience living on the street and some street youth have used a shelter at some time.

Before beginning full-scale data collection, we pretested our protocol with nine youth in shelters and on the street. The pretest included additional questions to assess the youth’s understanding of terms and phrases and to assess their ability to recall events. The protocol was revised to reflect what we learned in the pretest.

The main interviewing took place in Chicago and Los Angeles from October 2008 to January 2010. The main survey was conducted one-on-one with youth in shelters or “on the street,” defined as living anywhere other than a shelter or parents’ (or guardians’) home in an unstable living situation. Two people conducted all of the interviews with one person conducting all of the interviews in Los Angeles, the majority of shelter interviews in Chicago, and three of the street interviews in Chicago.

All interviews were audio-recorded with the youth’s permission and transcribed for analysis. The protocol left all the questions open-ended, allowing the youth to tell their story. After the fact, a coding frame was developed that allowed the open-ended responses to be reduced to a set of responses. Since interviews can take all kinds of twists and youth may veer sharply from the intension of the question, not every response was codable into the code frame we created. However, the large number of interviews provides a solid picture of the lives and thoughts of these youth.

The interviews took approximately 45-90 minutes and gathered information about the runaway event itself as well as the circumstances in the youth’s life precipitating the runaway episode. Each youth was also asked to fill out a short self-administered questionnaire (derived from our school questionnaire) with basic demographic information and simpler versions of questions that would be asked in the full interview. This short questionnaire was filled out prior to the one-on-one interview to avoid contamination of responses so that our shelter and street samples can be compared with a more general sample of youth in schools. Youth were paid \$30 for their participation.

In each city three shelters originally agreed to participate and allow interviews of youth who enter the shelter. The shelters were all selected because they are federally funded by the U.S. Family and Youth Services Bureau (FYSB). Although there are other shelters, they tend to be small or specialized. FYSB funds shelters through its Basic

Center Program; they are the primary source of temporary and emergency shelter for runaway and homeless youth in the United States. In Chicago, The Night Ministry (which operates two shelters, one for pregnant and parenting youth), Teen Living Programs (the Bronzeville Youth Shelter), and Youth Outreach Services¹ all agreed to participate. When sample accrual was found to be moving very slowly, Boys' Town (Father Flanagan's Boy's Home) was recruited into the study. In Los Angeles, Catholic Charities' Angel's Flight, Los Angeles Youth Network, and Casa Youth Services (just outside Los Angeles County in Orange County) agreed to participate.

Street interviews took place in a variety of locations including restaurants and coffee shops, the beach, drop-in centers, alleys, parks, cars, and literally on the street. Street youth were found by approaching youth in various areas where homeless youth are known to congregate, by having the youth identified as appropriate at a drop-in center, by flyers put up around town with a 1-800 number for youth to call, and by going out with street outreach teams.

d. Runaway Youth Sample

The shelter and street samples combine to create our runaway youth sample and provide us with a group of youth who have sought service (shelter sample) and a group of youth who may or may not have ever sought a service (street sample). The combined sample includes 83 runaway youth, 40 in Chicago and 43 in Los Angeles. In each site, we interviewed 20 youth in shelters. In Chicago, 16 of those interviews were conducted at Teen Living Programs, three were conducted at the offices of Youth Outreach Services, and one was conducted at Boys' Town. In Los Angeles, 19 shelter interviews were conducted at L.A.Youth Network and one at Angel's Flight. In Chicago, we

¹ Youth Outreach Services provided host-home shelter when this project began, but no longer operates within the Basic Center Program.

interviewed 20 street youth, 17 of whom were interviewed at the Broadway Youth Center. In Los Angeles, we interviewed 23 street youth.

To be eligible for the sample, youth had to be between ages 14 to 17 years old. Although the runaway and homeless youth population includes young adults in their early twenties, we focus on youth under the age of 18 who have run away or been thrown out of their homes. We purposely avoid those aged 18 or over. As adults, they do not have the same concerns of under-age youth who might worry that service providers would return them to their parents or call the police. Under-age youth may also have different perceptions about what services are available to them as minors.

To qualify for the street sample, the youth was to have been away from home for at least 48 hours or two nights. For the shelter sample, we relaxed this requirement to allow for youth who decided to come immediately to a shelter instead of spending time on the street (or with friends). For the most part, though, the sample captures youth who have been away from home for a while and most have runaway histories. We did not create quotas for any age, race/ethnicity, or gender.

Table I-2 below shows the demographic distributions of the interviewed youth. A majority (60%) of the sample is seventeen years old, a quarter is sixteen, 10.8 percent is fifteen, and about 5 percent fourteen. Just over half of the sample (54%) is male and about 40 percent are female. Five youth identified themselves as transgender. Though a majority of the sample is heterosexual (60%), a large minority (40%) is not, constituting a mixture of gays, lesbians, bisexuals and “something else” (LGBT youth). This high percentage of LGBT youth reflects our heavy reliance on the Broadway Youth Center to identify street youth in Chicago. However, even if we dropped the Chicago street sample, the remaining sample is approximately 24 percent LGBT. This percentage is consistent with other studies gathering similar samples (National Alliance to End Homelessness 2008).

Race/ethnicity is shown as a set of mutually exclusive categories where any youth identifying him or herself as Hispanic is coded as such and only non-Hispanics are coded as white, black, or other/multiracial. Nearly half of the sample (47%) is African-American, about one-quarter (23%) Hispanic and 16 percent white. The level of educational grade attainment is more even than the age distribution might suggest. Only 23 percent have gotten to twelfth grade and 18 percent to eleventh grade. A quarter is in ninth grade and another quarter is in tenth grade. Six percent have not gotten into high school grades yet.

All items examined in this report will be reported for the sample as a whole. In some cases we will examine measures for subgroups when it provides additional insight. However, some subgroups are highly correlated, e.g. the street sample in Chicago is heavily LGBT in sexual orientation due to our reliance on the Broadway Youth Center (BYC) for identifying eligible youth.² Also, the cities have different race-ethnicity distributions and any statement about Hispanics would primarily reflect Hispanics in Los Angeles. These types of sample “overlap” make it difficult to distinguish some types of findings across these types of subgroups. We show percentages for sub-groups when they appear to reveal an interesting and important pattern. However, we try to avoid doing so wherever the disaggregation may lead to a deceptive conclusion. Even for the sample as a whole, its non-random nature means the findings only apply to this particular group of runaway youth and do not necessarily generalize to the population of all runaway youth.

² BYC is a drop-in center that caters to the LGBT community.

Table I-2 Runaway Youth Sample Description

	n	%
<i>Sample location</i>		
Street	43	51.8%
Shelter	40	48.2%
<i>City</i>		
Chicago	40	48.2%
L.A.	43	51.8%
<i>Age</i>		
14	4	4.8%
15	9	10.8%
16	20	24.1%
17	50	60.2%
<i>Gender</i>		
Male	45	54.2%
Female	33	39.8%
Transgender	5	6.0%
<i>Sexual orientation</i>		
Heterosexual	50	60.2%
LGBT	33	39.8%
<i>Race/ethnicity</i>		
White	16	19.3%
Black	39	47.0%
Hispanic	23	27.7%
Other/Multi	5	6.0%
<i>Current or most recent grade</i>		
5 to 8	5	6.0%
9	21	25.3%
10	22	26.5%
11	15	18.1%
12	19	22.9%
Missing	1	1.2%

II. On Being a Runaway

Key Findings

- Less than one third of sample youth describe their situation as having run away. About one half say they were thrown out and one fifth say it was some of each.
- Youth in the sample had a history of leaving home; only 16 percent were on their first runaway/throwaway episode. Forty percent first ran away before they turned 14 years old.
- After past runaway/throwaway episodes, most youth returned voluntarily.
- Over one quarter of sample youth had previously been in foster care.

a. Runaway, Throwaway, or What?

Well at that period in my life I was like either running away or getting kicked out of the house like once a week. (17-year old male)

To understand how to provide services to a runaway youth, one must understand the circumstances that led to the youth's homelessness. Runaway youth are a heterogeneous group with a diverse set of circumstances and needs. Several attempts have been made to create taxonomies of runaway and homeless youth. A commonly cited taxonomy by Zide and Cherry (1992) (and Cherry 1993) identifies four groups: those "running from" (youth running away from a bad home situation involving high family conflict and probably abuse), "running to" (youth seeking adventure and independence), "thrown out" (youth whose parents threw them out of the house), and "forsaken" (youth whose families are too large and/or too poor to adequately support them). Cauce (2000) suggests that the pathway to the streets may be different for children who leave home at different ages and that interventions that might help potential runaway youth might differ by age. Milburn, et al. (2009) suggest that time since leaving home should be considered an important distinction, with newly homeless youth having different characteristics and needs than experienced homeless youth.

In this study, we did not attempt to use any existing taxonomy, nor did we attempt to create our own. For our purposes, it was important to understand how the youth views him/herself, not how researchers would classify the youth. In this respect, we specifically wanted to discern between youths who said explicitly that they had run away from home and those who were thrown out of their homes.

The Zide and Cherry taxonomy would imply that distinctions at this gross level should be easy to identify; however the stories and descriptions provided by many youth portrayed a set of circumstances that did not always allow for a clear classification into one of these groups. Youth describe home situations where it is very unclear to what extent the youth has decided to leave without the parents' permission, has been explicitly told to leave, or some combination. Even when youths run away, parents some times know where they've gone and may choose to do nothing about it. The NISMART-2 indicated only 37 percent of all runaway/throwaway episodes were what they labeled as "caretaker missing," meaning the caretaker did not know where the youth had gone and tried to locate the child (Hammer, Finkelhor, and Sedlak 2002).

In Figure II-1, we show the youth's own explicit categorization of whether they ran away or were thrown out on their current time away from home. As can be seen only about 30 percent of the youth explicitly describe what happened as running away. Nearly half say they were thrown out while the other 22 percent describe the situation as both, some combination of running away and being thrown out. When we asked our coders to provide their own assessment based on the youth's narrative, the distribution shifted somewhat into the "ran away" category and the "both" category and away from the "throw away" category (see Table II-1).

Figure II-1 Youth's Categorization of Current Episode

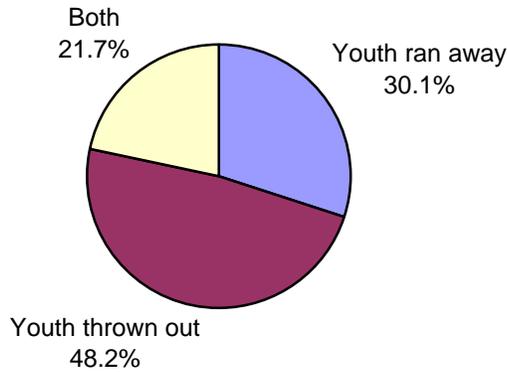


Table II-1 Categorization of Youth as Runaways or Throwaways, Current Episode (n=83)

	Youth's Assessment	Coder's Assessment
Youth ran away	30.1%	33.3%
Youth was thrown out	48.2%	39.5%
Both	21.7%	23.5%
Uncodable	0.0%	3.7%

Youth in our street sample identified themselves as having run away on their current episode more often and were thrown out less often than did youth in our shelter sample. Age did not make a difference in the percentage that claimed to have run away; however older youth classified what happened as both running away and being thrown out and less likely that they were “only” thrown out than did younger teens. Compared with males, females said they ran away less, were thrown out more, or both. LGBT youth said they ran away more often and were thrown out less often than heterosexual youth.

Table II-2 Youth's Categorization as Runaways or Throwaways by Subgroup

	Ran away	Thrown out	Both
<i>Sample</i>			
Shelter	20.0%	57.5%	22.5%
Street	39.5%	39.5%	20.9%
<i>Age</i>			
14-15 yrs	30.8%	53.8%	15.4%
16 yrs	30.0%	50.0%	20.0%
17 yrs	30.0%	46.0%	24.0%
<i>Gender</i>			
male	37.8%	44.4%	17.8%
female	21.2%	54.5%	24.2%
<i>Sexual Orientation</i>			
heterosexual	26.0%	54.0%	20.0%
LGBT	36.4%	39.4%	24.2%

Youth commonly describe a situation that involves significant family conflict that led to the youth's departure. Some situations clearly indicate the parent has insisted the youth leave.

Then me and her just kept arguing back and forth, and she told me to get out, opened the screened door and the door, and told me to get out, and I left. (15-year old female)

So she told me to get my stuff and leave, you know I just take my stuff and I left. And she told me never to come back. (17-year old female)

I went to the police station and told them that my parents kicked me out. Then, they called my mom, and my mom told them that they didn't want me there anymore. (17-year old male)

I came into the house and said, "Hey mama," and she said, well, we basically started arguing and she said that all of my stuff is packed, it's in my car already, and start thinking about your other options. So I was thrown away and sent out of the house. (17-year old male)

...while my mother was still alive I was never thrown out but when my mother passed away and my family members took on the responsibility for me, I was, as I said before I was really rebellious and my depression became really hard to deal with. So that's why they thrown me out. (17-year old female)

About two to three weeks ago, me and my mother got into an argument, and she called her male friend around to the house to jump me. So, we

were fighting, and I injured my shoulder, and then she told me to get out. So, I ended up going to the hospital to get my shoulder treated, and since I wasn't comfortable going home, I ended up being transported here for my safety...I had no intentions of running away. I was thrown out, so I wasn't intending on being a runaway. (15-year old male)

(After leaving the mental hospital) They didn't want me to find them. My mom, she be on MySpace and told me that she moved, she got a new place. But when I asked her the address she told me it wasn't no sense in her giving it to me 'cause she didn't want me to come stay with her anyway. (17-year old female)

(After telling her mom she is pregnant) I thought it was going to be like one of those movies, she'd get mad and then she would get over it and be like I'm going to help you out and then we are going to make it, you know? I ain't never think it was would come to the part she was get the hell out of my house. And that was like if anything, I think your mama would be the first person that would say its okay. (17-year old female)

Many times the parent makes it clear to the youth that he or she should leave and the youth feels he or she has no choice, though it is not always obvious from the youth's description of the situation that the parent insisted that the youth leave.

It was kind of like both because my mom was like, oh, you need to get out, like telling me that I need to leave and pack my stuff up. So, that day when she told me that, that same night I just packed all my stuff up and left...I was just mad or upset that my mom really wanted me to leave and stuff. So, I just gave her what she wanted. (17-year old female)

Youth and parent interactions play out in different family dynamics. Each party can contribute to a conflict resulting in the youth's departure.

But you know, sometimes it's her fault, sometimes it's my fault. We just don't you know, click like we used to because I've gotten older and now I want to do a lot of stuff by myself, and I just want to be on my own. (17-year old male)

It's like I was thrown out, but I also left too because it wasn't a good situation to be in...It's just, my ma, she does drugs a lot. (16-year old female)

Both, in a sense. I wasn't welcome there anymore and my sister told me that I could stay but that I wasn't welcome and I couldn't stay for more than a few nights. But find a place to live, basically. And so what ended up happening is we got in a really big fight and I ran out with all, with just the clothes that was on my back. (14-year old female)

I thought that, you know, I thought that me and my mom was getting, I thought we was getting along real good. I thought we were healed now. But just me speaking up it blew it, and I didn't know that she was going to put me out. And when she put me out it really hurt me because I was like, wow. I'm thinking we're getting along now, I'm thinking we're better now and it's not working out. But now that we're, like now that I'm a distance from her it's better. We talk more, she talks to me and you know, we both forgave each other for everything that happened. (17-year old female)

...it's like I had to go because it was just too much going on. And those bills weren't going to get paid from me, I couldn't do it. And my dad was real frustrated and he was tired. So he didn't want me staying with him no more...He wasn't going to let me get my stuff together. I wouldn't say that I was the brightest person or the best person, you know, to stay out of trouble all the time. I had my few you know, ups and downs. And I guess towards that point, and when my mom passed, he said "I'm not gonna take your bull." So he did what he thought was best and he put me out. (17-year old male)

In many situations, family conflict can have existed for quite some time, resulting in a series of episodes, some where the youth explicitly ran away, others where the parent clearly threw the youth out of the house. Some times one becomes a response to the other, e.g. a parent gets fed up with a child who continually runs away so throws the child out of the house. After a time, the distinction becomes fuzzy, even in the mind of the youth.

It was basically kind of both 'cause my mom kept saying she didn't want me and she threw me out. And I picked up all of my clothes and everything and then so I left. 'Cause I had ran away first, then I was thrown out...It's like a lot of times I ran away so it's kind of confusing in the question. (17-year old female)

I was thrown out, no first I was run, I ran away...And second I was thrown out...I had went back and stayed there for a couple times, for a couple nights. Then I ran back up, the episode when I ran away, I had got thrown out because I was in the house fighting everybody...Actually I got kicked out after I ran away, and I wouldn't have left so I got kicked out. And so I've been living on my own. (17-year old transgender)

LGBT youth have particular issues that arise when they “come out” to the families. Some parents can't accept their child's sexual orientation and throw them out

of the house. Other youth remain in the home, but face difficulties due to lack of acceptance within their families.

I didn't like the way I was being treated at home so that kind of made me run away. And then by my father, 'cause I used to live with my mother and my father, then my father, my father didn't like my sexuality so he kicked me out. My mom didn't want him to but his name was on the lease thing, so yeah. (17-year old male)

But then when I turned 13 they found out about me being bisexual, 'cause I was bisexual back then. And they found out and my dad got really mad and he kicked me out. Well, the first time I ran away because I was scared of what he was going to do, but when I came back home he told me to get out, so that was okay. (16-year old female)

When the bus left off that's when I was crying or whatever and stuff like that because I just felt that my mom, she was wrong because she didn't accept the fact that I became gay or whatever. And I expected that if you was my mom then yeah, I expected that you will say "Yeah I accept it." But I know you're going to be sad emotionally at the moment. But she was like "Oh, you're going to hell," and stuff like that. (16-year old male)

b. On the Word "Runaway"

The term "runaway" has connotations to youth that exceed the description of whether or not they "ran away." When asked if they consider themselves a "runaway," about one-third felt the term described them (see Table II-3). There was no difference between youth in shelters and youth on the street. Older youth and females were less likely to consider themselves runaways. LGBT youth were much less likely than heterosexual youth to label themselves runaways.

Not surprisingly, most youth who described their episode as having been thrown out did not consider themselves a runaway. Interestingly, only half of those who report they ran away consider themselves a runaway. Similarly, half of those who describe the episode as a combination consider themselves a runaway.

Table II-3 Youths' Consideration of Themselves as a Runaway

	"Runaway" applies
<i>All</i>	33.7%
<i>Sample</i>	
Shelter	35.0%
Street	32.6%
<i>Age</i>	
14-15 yrs	46.2%
16 yrs	40.0%
17 yrs	28.0%
<i>Gender</i>	
male	40.0%
female	27.3%
<i>Sexual orientation</i>	
heterosexual	44.0%
LGBT	18.2%

When asked to describe themselves, youth offered up numerous words or phrases:

I don't know what word because it's like you're searching for something. You know, you're searching for an answer. You're searching for what's going to be my next move? Because my home isn't where I want to be, you know? So I don't know, I don't know what word I would put to that.
(16-year old male)

Runaway Youths' Self-Descriptions

*A runaway with permission.
I was an excused individual.
A lost child in need of help.
Just a lost child who feels no one loves her. Like she's lost in the dark.
I would describe myself as looking for a better chance.
Just an independent person.
A rebellious teenager
Neglected.
Someone who just left their home,
Living on my own
I don't think it's running away; I just think it's leaving...AWOL
A person who just lives on the streets
Basically I feel like I wasn't accepted
I was disowned.
A person who is just on their own, who don't have nobody to count on.
Just walking out basically
Being put out
Lock out
Squatter
Vagabond.
A street walker.
Gypsies.
Drifter
Floater
Traveler
Street kid
A person that needs space
A lady without a house.
homeless*

The term runaway does more than describe the act of running away, it labels an individual and many youth feel it reflects a judgment of them as a bad person who was not appreciative of having a home and family.

So, we're kind of, we're running away, but we're not runaways, if that makes sense.

Cause no one wants to hear you're a runaway, you're homeless. No, no one wants to hear that cause no one wants to admit it. Cause nowadays it's like you're homeless? You're a runaway? They see you as lower. Now it's about they judge you a lot.

Well, people give runaway like a bad name, you know? Like runaway can mean two different things; either you were just being a bad kid and you're running away or you run away to just escape the problem or whatever is going on in your life.

'Cause people don't know, people don't know what be going on in the households. Like my grandmamma [NAME] was like, doing too much drinking.

When I hear the word runaway I don't think very highly of it, but in my situation, I understand the word runaway. But in other situations, it just makes the child seem like they're a bad child.

Does it have to be worded like that?...Like that's so black and white, you know what I mean, it's like, either or, there's no in between.

It should be noted that although some youth may not consider themselves runaways, it does not mean that they would ignore anything that said it was for runaways—they appear to be aware of how the term relates generally to their situation.

c. Runaway/Throwaway History

The youth's current situations are frequently part of a long-term process of conflict that may have included several episodes of youth departure from home; some that clearly were runaway episodes, some clearly throwaway episodes, and some unclear. The whole series of episodes make classifying a particular episode or current situation for a youth less meaningful, even if the current episode may be clearly categorized. In Table

II-4 we see that about 60 percent of youth have run away more than once and half have been thrown out more than once. Combining runaway and throwaway episodes shows that only 44 percent of interviewed youth have run away or been thrown out exclusively and only 15.9 percent are currently on their first episode away from home.

Table II-4 Number of Lifetime Runaway and Throwaway Episodes

	Times ran away	Times thrown out	Total times away
None	20.7%	23.2%	0.0%
1 time	19.5%	26.8%	15.9%
2-3 times	26.8%	22.0%	24.4%
4-6 times	14.6%	9.8%	23.2%
7-10 times	4.9%	7.3%	15.9%
11-15 times	4.9%	7.3%	8.5%
16-20 times	1.2%	0.0%	0.0%
More than 20 times	2.4%	1.2%	4.9%
Youth says "more times than I can count"	4.9%	2.4%	7.3%

The age of a youth at a current episode masks their history of running away. Despite the highly bunched distribution of current age at seventeen, only six percent of our sample ran away for the first time at age 17 (see Table II-5). The median age of their first runaway episode was age 14 and 10.8% first ran away before age 12. So while most runaways in this sample are “older” teens, most of them began running away at much younger ages.

Table II-5 Age at First Episode

Age at first episode	
under 12	10.8%
12	10.8%
13	18.1%
14	20.5%
15	16.9%
16	14.5%
17	6.0%
missing	2.4%

Most youth return home voluntarily, though as we've seen they are likely to leave again. In describing their runaway/throwaway histories, nearly all youth (89.7%) report that some times they have returned voluntarily (Table II-6). About 40 percent have been returned home involuntarily some times, nearly always by the police. Over one quarter (29.4%) describe their histories of some times returning voluntarily and other times involuntarily.

Table II-6 Voluntary and Involuntary Returning Home**
(N=68)

Returned home voluntarily or involuntarily	
Voluntarily	60.3%
Involuntarily	10.3%
Both	29.4%

**Youth on their first runaway/throwaway episode have never returned and are excluded.

d. Experience with foster care

Many youth in our sample experienced unstable living arrangements (examined further in Section III.a). It is thus not surprising to find that a significant percentage of our sample had previous experience in foster care. In fact, over one-quarter (27.5%) of the youth had previous experience in foster care (Table II-7). Furthermore, half of these youth had at some time run away from a foster care placement. Although we did not ask about other child welfare involvement, several youth mentioned contact with the child welfare system or sibling who had been in foster care, although they had not been in foster care.

Table II-7 Experience in Foster Care

Ever been in foster care	27.5%
If yes: Ever ran away from foster or group home	50.0%

III. Leaving Home

Key Findings

- Most youth had not been living in their most recent household their entire life; one third had lived there one year or less.
- When previously returning home, few youth felt things got better.
- Only 28 percent of sample youth said they planned ahead to leave home. Most of them had packed a bag, but over half of those who left on the spur of the moment took the time to pack a bag.
- A majority of sample youth stayed in their city or metropolitan area, though only one quarter stayed in their neighborhood.
- A majority of sample youth spent the first night at the home of a friend or relative.
- Only one third of sample youth had money with them when they left home; sixty percent of whom had less than \$50.
- Two thirds of sample youth had been away from home more than one month; youth in shelters had not been away as long as youth interviewed on the street.
- Two thirds of sample youth had spent at least one night at a friend's house since being away from home; one fifth had spent at least one night at a relative's house. Nearly one quarter had spent a night in a park.
- Youth spent much of their days "hanging out" at friends' homes, in a park, at the beach, or at other locations.
- Two thirds of sample youth were getting money in some way while they were away from home; about one third panhandled.

a. Who were youth living with (and running from)?

Table III-1 shows the distribution of household structures youth lived in at the time they left home on their current episode. Nearly three-quarters of the youth were living with one or more parents at the time they left home, with one-quarter living with both biological parents. About one in seven was living with their mother and a stepfather or boyfriend of their mother. About one third were living with a single parent, mostly their mother. The quarter of the youth not living with either parent were living with grandparents, aunts, uncles, older siblings, and other situations including foster care.

While roughly the same percentage of males and females live with at least one parent, girls in our sample were more often than boys to be living with their mother and not their biological father (i.e., with a step-father, mother's boyfriend, or no male parent figure) and boys were more often living with both parents or with only their father. One third of LGBT youth were living with only their mom while only one-fifth of heterosexual youth were in such a household. LGBT youth were also less likely in a household with their mother and a man who isn't their father.

Table III-1 Youth's Household Structure Before Leaving Home

Household structure before leaving home	All youth	Male	Female	Heterosexual	LGBT
Mother & father	25.6%	28.9%	21.9%	24.5%	27.3%
Mother & stepdad	9.8%	6.7%	12.5%	12.2%	6.1%
Mother & mother's boyfriend	4.9%	2.2%	9.4%	6.1%	3.0%
Mother, no male parent figure	25.6%	22.2%	28.1%	20.4%	33.3%
Father, no female parent figure	7.3%	13.3%	0.0%	8.2%	6.1%
Grandparent, no parental figure	6.1%	6.7%	6.3%	6.1%	6.1%
Aunt or uncle, no parent figure or grandparent	7.3%	6.7%	6.3%	6.1%	9.1%
Siblings, but none of the adult figures above	7.3%	6.7%	9.4%	8.2%	6.1%
Other (including foster care)	6.1%	6.7%	6.3%	8.2%	3.0%

Table III-2 shows the distribution of how long the youth had been living in their most recent living situation. Only about one-fifth of the youth had lived in that household their entire life. Another fifth had lived there for a long time (more than ten years).³ Thus the majority of youth had lived in that household less than ten years. In fact, nearly one in three youth had lived in their most recent household less than one year; 18 percent had been living there less than three months.

Because some youth go back and forth between various relative's households, or move serially from one relative to another due to family conflicts that follow the youth, the current household may in fact have been a very short-term living arrangement for the youth. For example, a youth that was thrown out by his parents may have gone to live

³ Some youth in the 10-17 year category may have lived in that household their entire life, but did not indicate it explicitly.

with his aunt. The aunt may have later thrown the youth out and it would be the aunt's household that we are reporting here.⁴

Table III-2 Length of Time Youth Lived in Most Recent Household

How long youth spent living with those people before left	
0 - 3 months	18.3%
More than 3 months to 6 months	5.6%
More than 6 months to 1 year	8.5%
More than 1 year to 5 years	19.7%
More than 5 years to 10 years	5.6%
More than 10 years to 17 years	21.1%
Youth responded "all my life"	21.1%

As shown earlier, most youth return home multiple times as part of a string of runaway and throwaway episodes. As seen below in Table III-3, in general youth felt that things had remained the same (i.e., bad) or had gotten worse. About 20 percent felt that things were initially better; however over half of those who thought it was better when they returned felt that the better atmosphere didn't last. Since this is a sample of youth who are all currently on a runaway/throwaway episode, they are not as likely to report that things got better. Youth whose home life improved are less likely to have left home again.

Table III-3 Whether Things Changed After Returning Home**

Changes when youth returned home	
Things were worse	22.1%
Things did not change	48.5%
Things were better	8.8%
Sometimes better and sometimes worse	2.9%
Things were better at first but then were worse	10.3%
Things were worse at first but got better	1.5%
unknown	5.9%

**Youth on their first runaway/throwaway episode have never returned and are excluded.

⁴ It was difficult to identify the living arrangements for some youth due to the multiple households they may have been in over short periods of time, including going back and forth between households.

b. Preparation for Leaving Home

A minority of youth stated they had planned to leave home at the time their current runaway/throwaway episode started; more than seven in ten interviewed youth described their leaving home as occurring on the spur of the moment (Table III-4). About one-third (36%) of youth who say they ran away say they had planned it in advance. Less than one-quarter (23.1%) of youth who say they were thrown out say they had planned ahead, stating that they expected it or that they were thinking of running away anyway. Of those who describe the episode as both running away and being thrown out, 29.4 percent said they had planned ahead, falling in between the percentages for runaways and throwaways. It should be noted, though, that 56 percent of youth who say they ran away say that someone knew they were planning to run away, implying that they may have been planning to run away but not specifically at that time.

Even when youth did not leave immediately, many youth described an event that led to conflict between the youth and his/her parent or guardian and resulted in the youth's subsequent departure (whether running away or being thrown out). Even among youth who had not planned ahead, several noted that they had thought previously about running away or expected that they might be thrown out at some point.

Table III-4 Planning to Leave Versus Leaving on the Spur of the Moment

Did youth plan ahead to leave home?	Ran away	Thrown out	Both	All
Youth says that they planned ahead	36.0%	23.1%	29.4%	28.4%
Youth says that they left on the spur of the moment	64.0%	76.9%	70.6%	71.6%

Nearly two-thirds (63.9%) of the youth had time to pack a bag, though they did not generally take much with them (Table III-5). Over 90 percent of youth who say they planned ahead packed a bag while just over half of youth who left on the spur of the moment packed a bag. Thirteen percent of interviewed youth said they got some money

and just under 16 percent called a friend before leaving the house. Again, the percentages were higher among youth who planned ahead. About one-third of the youth who planned ahead got some money and called a friend, one in six made some other preparation. Only a handful of those who left on the spur of the moment made these preparations.

Table III-5 Type of Preparation Made Before Leaving Home

Preparations	Planned ahead	Spur of the moment	All youth
Packed a bag	91.3%	55.2%	63.9%
Got some money	34.8%	3.4%	13.3%
Called a friend	34.8%	8.6%	15.7%
Other preparation	17.4%	5.2%	8.4%

c. Pathways from home—the first 48 hours

After leaving home, most youth stay within the metropolitan area (Table III-6). Over one quarter remain within their neighborhood. Those who went to a different city include youth who left the area but have since returned as well as youth who originally are not from the cities in the study.

Table III-6 Distance Youth Traveled When First Leaving Home

Distance youth traveled when first left home	
Stayed in neighborhood	26.5%
Stayed in city, left neighborhood	28.9%
Stayed in city, can't tell neighborhood	3.6%
Left town or city	25.3%
Unknown	15.7%

As can be seen in Table III-7, a majority of youth (56.1%) stay the first night at the home of a friend or relative (63.6% of females and 47.7% of males). These initial accommodations tend to be available for multiple nights though we see some movement

among the categories. Youth who do not go to a friend or relative's home the first night show some signs of seeking safer locations their second night, though the difference is relative. In L.A. the beach may be safer than being in a park, or in Chicago, riding the train may be safer than walking around. In general the distribution of where youth spend their second night looks fairly similar to the first night.

Table III-7 Where Youth Spent First Two Nights Away from Home

Where youth spent the night away from home	First night	Second night
Boyfriend's home	3.7%	5.0%
Girlfriend's home	1.2%	3.8%
Friend's home	42.7%	33.8%
Relative's home	8.5%	12.5%
On the train	6.1%	10.0%
Just walking around	1.2%	0.0%
In the park	8.5%	5.0%
At the beach	2.4%	6.3%
Squat	1.2%	1.3%
Abandoned building	3.7%	1.3%
Rooftop	2.4%	0.0%
Hospital	1.2%	1.3%
Shelter	3.7%	5.0%
Another place indoors	3.7%	3.8%
Another place outdoors	9.8%	11.3%

Table III-8 shows the distribution of where or how the youth obtained his or her first meal after leaving home. Youth who slept at the home of a friend or relative also obtained their first meals there. Some youth have money with them and pay for their first meals. Other youth found their way to a shelter or drop-in center. Other ways youth obtained food was by raising money through pumping gas or prostituting, asking people on the street (outside restaurants) for leftover food, and searching trash cans and dumpsters. A small percentage of youth did not eat.

Table III-8 How Youth Obtained First Meal Away from Home

How youth obtained his/her first meal	
From a friend's family	34.9%
From a relative	8.4%
Paid with money youth brought	12.0%
Paid with money from family or friend	2.4%
Paid with money earned other way	8.4%
Shelter or drop-in center	10.8%
At school	1.2%
Did not eat or unknown	8.4%
Other	13.2%

Most youth did not have any money with them when they left home. Of the 34 percent who had money, most had very little; the majority having less than \$50 (Table III-9). Thus over three quarters (78.4%) of interviewed youth had either no money or less than \$10. About one in eight youth (37% of those with money) had more than \$100 with a few “travelers” having prepared by accumulating a somewhat sizable amount of cash (two youth had over \$600).

Table III-9 Amount of Money Brought from Home

Have money when left home	
No	65.8%
Yes	34.2%
Amount (if had money)	
less than \$10	37.0%
\$10 - \$49	22.2%
\$50 - \$99	3.7%
\$100 or more	37.0%

Two fifths (40.5%) of interviewed youth had access to a cell phone when they left home. Some had taken a cell phone with them while others were able to use their friends' cell phones while staying with them. Although they may have brought a cell phone with them, some youth reported breaking the phone or running out of minutes soon after leaving home.

d. How long have they been away?

Table III-10 shows the distribution of time since the youth left home. The youth in our sample have been away for various lengths of time ranging from those freshly out of the home to those who have been living on the street for more than two years. Youths we interviewed on the street are slightly more likely to have been away longer than youth interviewed in shelters. Ten of the eleven youth that have been away from home longer than nine months are seventeen years old.

Table III-10 Length of Time Youth Has Been Away from Home at Time of Interview

Length of time away from home	Shelter	Street	All Youth
0-6 days	5.0%	4.7%	4.8%
7-13 days	12.5%	2.3%	7.2%
14 days to 1 month ago	20.0%	18.6%	19.3%
More than 1 month to 2 months ago	20.0%	18.6%	19.3%
More than 2 months to 3 months ago	7.5%	7.0%	7.2%
More than 3 months to 6 months ago	20.0%	16.3%	18.1%
More than 6 months to 9 months ago	7.5%	4.7%	6.0%
More than 9 months to 12 months ago	0.0%	4.7%	2.4%
More than 12 months to 18 months ago	2.5%	7.0%	4.8%
More than 18 months to 24 months ago	0.0%	2.3%	1.2%
More than 24 months ago	2.5%	7.0%	4.8%
Uncodable	2.5%	7.0%	4.8%

e. Living away from home

Runaway youth sleep in a variety of places after leaving home. As seen in Table III-11, the most common is a friend's house, where about 77 percent had spent at least one night (counting the homes of a boyfriend or girlfriend along with other friends). As we saw above, many youth go immediately to a friend's house after leaving home. Others use friends periodically during their runaway episode. Other common places include relative's homes (20%), a park (24%), a train (16%) and the beach (18%), in addition to

shelters.⁵ Spending the night on the train is mostly a Chicago phenomenon while spending the night on the beach occurs more in Los Angeles.

Table III-11 Places Youth has Spent the Night

Places youth has spent the night	
Friend's home	65.1%
Boy/girl friend's home	12.0%
Relative's home	20.5%
In a park	24.1%
On the train	15.7%
Walking around	10.8%
At the beach	18.1%
Abandoned building	9.6%
Squat	8.4%
Rooftop	7.2%
Parking garage	7.2%
Dumpster	2.4%
Hospital	4.8%
Shelter	50.6%
Another place indoors	18.1%
Another place outdoors	18.1%

Table III-12 shows the types of places where youth spend their days while away from home. During the day, most runaway youth mostly hang out in various places. Some continue to attend school (see section IV.d), but this is a minority and mostly among youth in shelters. Youth hang out with friends after school is out and on weekends, going to their homes or other places, similar to any teenager. Many go to parks, which make them less noticeable, and in Los Angeles they go to the beach, which is a major hangout location for homeless people. Nearly two-thirds (64.9%) of shelter youth spend time at the shelter during the day.

⁵ Recall that half of our sample was identified while residing at a shelter.

Table III-12 Places Youth has Spent the Day

Places youth has spent the day	Shelter	Street	All Youth
Friend's home	51.4%	23.3%	36.3%
Boy/girl friend's home	10.8%	7.0%	8.8%
Relative's home	13.5%	4.7%	8.8%
At school	48.6%	14.0%	30.0%
In a park	29.7%	25.6%	27.5%
At the beach	8.1%	34.9%	22.5%
Hanging out (not at park or beach)	24.3%	39.5%	32.5%
Hospital	10.8%	0.0%	5.0%
Shelter	64.9%	2.3%	31.3%
Other	16.2%	51.2%	35.0%

A majority of youth (63%) say they are doing things to get money or they receive money from some source (Table III-13). The most common thing they do to obtain money is panhandling (34.6%). Approximately one in nine youth reports having a job and one in eight reports getting money from friends. A small number of youth receive money from their families or receive a social security check. Youth in shelters have engaged in fewer activities to obtain money than street youth, likely reflecting less need for goods and services.

In surveys, respondents are frequently reluctant to reveal socially undesirable behavior (Holbrook, Green, and Krosnick 2003). As a result, it is likely that youth chose not to report most types of illicit activities such as selling drugs (reported by only two youth) and engaging in sex work (reported by four youth). However, given the episodic nature of running away and the access to friends, it is conceivable that only a small minority of runaway youth actually engage in these types of activities. It is also possible that the youth willing to speak with us are the ones less likely to be engaged in illicit activities.

Table III-13 How Youth Obtain Money While Away from Home

What youth is doing to get money	Shelter	Street	All Youth
Youth is doing nothing to get money	47.4%	27.9%	37.0%
Youth is doing something to get money and/or is getting money from some source	52.6%	72.1%	63.0%
Has a job	7.9%	14.0%	11.1%
Pandhandles	13.2%	53.5%	34.6%
Gets money from friends	15.8%	9.3%	12.3%
Gets money from family	7.9%	4.7%	6.2%
Receives social security check	5.3%	0.0%	2.5%
Sells drugs	2.6%	2.3%	2.5%
Sex work	5.3%	4.7%	4.9%
Gets money from other source	7.9%	16.3%	12.3%

f. Getting to the shelter

Youth who eventually make it to a shelter came to be there for various reasons. A little over half (53.9%) go to a shelter because they've run out of places to stay or are tired of being on their own (Table III-14).

Youth find out about shelters in ways that differ by city. In Chicago, youth are likely to hear about a shelter from police (to whom youth must report before some shelters will accept them) or from a service provider such as Youth Outreach Services. In fact, 30 percent of Chicago shelter youth were brought to the shelter by the police and 40 percent were brought by a service provider (mostly Youth Outreach Services). Youth in L.A. most often identified a friend as telling them about the shelter and 45 percent stated a friend brought them to the shelter. A few youth find out from school counselors or other school officials and some are referred by other shelters.⁶ These people frequently help the youth get to the shelter. Only 15 percent of interviewed youth report getting themselves to the shelter.

⁶ The latter may reflect the youth being kicked out of the other shelter, a shelter having no vacancies, or matching youth better to their needs (e.g. sending a youth to a less structured shelter).

Table III-14 How Youth Heard About the Shelter
(Shelter Sub-Sample)

How youth heard about the shelter	Chicago	LA	All Youth
Police	25.0%	5.0%	15.0%
School Official	10.0%	5.0%	7.5%
Parent	5.0%	5.0%	5.0%
Relative (not parent)	0.0%	5.0%	2.5%
Friend	10.0%	35.0%	22.5%
Another shelter	10.0%	15.0%	12.5%
Drop-in center	0.0%	5.0%	2.5%
Other service provider	30.0%	15.0%	22.5%
Internet	10.0%	0.0%	5.0%
Phone book / yellow pages	0.0%	5.0%	2.5%
Other	0.0%	5.0%	2.5%

IV. Staying Connected

Key Findings

- A majority of sample youth said they had access to a cell phone at least some of the time, the majority having access through a friend. The youngest were the least likely to have access.
- Over 70 percent of sample youth said they have access to e-mail, three quarters of whom access it at least once a week.
- Three quarters of youth have a MySpace page; some of them also have a Facebook page. Over half of youth with a MySpace page access it at least once a week.
- Nearly half of sample youth said they were attending school while being away from home, two thirds of whom said they attended regularly.
- Over one fifth of sampled youth reported some involvement with a church; one-seventh reported attending worship services while away from home.
- Only 13 percent of sampled youth stated that nobody knows their whereabouts. The percentage was higher for younger youth and for youth recently away from home. One quarter said their parents know where they are.

a. Cell phones

Earlier we saw that 40.5% of the sample had access to a cell phone when they first left home. Over time, youth are able to keep in contact with family and friends if they can access a cell phone. This also gives them opportunity to call a crisis line, shelter, or other service provider. In our sample, approximately 58 percent of interviewed youth had access to a cell phone at least some of the time (see Table IV-1). The majority of these youth had access through friends; thirty-nine percent had their own phone, which means about one-fifth of the entire sample have their own cell phone.

Access to cell phones in this sample increases with age. Just over one third of 14-15 year olds report having any access to a cell phone while 60 percent of 16-year olds and 63 percent of 17-year olds report having access. Youth in shelters are in less need of having a cell phone than youth in the street since the shelter provides telephone

access. Approximately two-thirds of youth in the street sample report having access to a cell phone at least some of the time.

Table IV-1 Youth's Access to Cell Phones While Away from Home

	All	14-15 yrs	16 yrs	17 yrs	Shelter	Street
<i>Does youth have access to cell phone</i>						
No	41.6%	63.6%	40.0%	37.0%	51.4%	32.5%
Yes	36.4%	18.2%	35.0%	41.3%	35.1%	37.5%
Sometimes	22.1%	18.2%	25.0%	21.7%	13.5%	30.0%
<i>Cell phone ownership</i>						
Cell phone belongs to the youth	39.0%					
Cell phone belongs to friend(s)	61.0%					

b. E-mail

Seventy one percent of interviewed youth reported having access to e-mail (see Table IV-2). Of those with access, most (72.7%) access e-mail at least once a week, with over one-third (34.5%) accessing it every day. Youth in shelters generally have access to e-mail in the shelter. Youth who make use of drop-in centers generally have access to e-mail at the drop-in centers. About half of all interviewed youth with e-mail accessed it at the library and about a quarter accessed it at a friend's home. School provides another point of access for youth who continue to attend.

Table IV-2 Access to E-mail

<i>Youth has access to email</i>	71.4%
<i>Frequency youth checks e-mail</i>	
Every day	34.5%
A few times a week	25.5%
About once a week	12.7%
A few times a month	5.5%
About once a month	7.3%
Less than once a month	3.6%
Unknown	10.9%

c. Social networking websites

Social network sites such as MySpace and Facebook offer youth ways of staying connected to friends. Given the general access many runaway youth have to computers, these sites may be important links that might be exploited to get information to youth and to keep in contact with them. MySpace is the more popular with three-quarters of interviewed youth having a MySpace account while less than one-quarter (22.2%) have a Facebook account (see Table IV-3). In fact, of the sample youth with a Facebook account, all but one also have a MySpace account.

More than half of the youth with a MySpace account access it at least once a week; nearly 44 percent of youth with a Facebook account access it at least once a week. The places where they access these accounts mirrors the places they access e-mail although MySpace is accessed somewhat more frequently at friends' homes than is e-mail.⁷

Table IV-3 Use of MySpace and Facebook Websites

<i>Youth has MySpace page</i>	75.0%	<i>Youth has Facebook page</i>	22.2%
<i>Frequency of access to MySpace</i>		<i>Frequency of access to Facebook</i>	
Every day	29.8%	Every day	31.3%
A few times a week	14.0%	About once a week	12.5%
About once a week	10.5%	A few times a month	12.5%
A few times a month	15.8%	Less than once a month	12.5%
About once a month	12.3%	Unknown	31.3%
Less than once a month	7.0%		
Unknown	10.5%		

⁷ It is likely that e-mail is not always distinct from a MySpace or Facebook account; however some youth clearly don't think about MySpace or Facebook when asked about e-mail.

d. Attending school

Some youth continue to attend school despite being out of their home. In our sample, about 45 percent attended school, two-thirds of whom attended regularly (see Table IV-4). School attendance is more common among shelter youth who have a place to stay and because shelters may help facilitate the youth getting to school. Nearly two-thirds (65.8%) of shelter youth attended school. This is comparable to Thompson, Kost, and Polio (2003) who find about two-thirds of youth in shelters attending school at the time they enter the shelter. Although much lower, nearly 28 percent of street youth in our sample continued to attend school. Many of these youth couch-surf, which helps them stay in school.

There were notable differences by city. Shelter youth in L.A. reported somewhat higher percentages of attending school than youth in Chicago shelters (74% and 58%, respectively).⁸ The street sample showed a very different comparison. Half of the Chicago street sample was attending school, but only two of the twenty-three L.A. street youth were attending (not shown). The low percentage for L.A. street youth is likely explained at least in part by the number of youth not originally from the L.A. area.

⁸ Since nearly all youth in each city were interviewed at one shelter in that city, these differences could reflect differences in the types of youth each shelter serves.

Table IV-4 Staying in School

<i>Youth currently enrolled in school</i>	
All	45.7%
Shelter	65.8%
Street	27.9%
Chicago	57.9%
LA	73.7%
<i>Frequency of attendance (enrolled youth)</i>	
Not regularly	27.0%
Regularly	67.6%
Unknown	5.4%

e. Churches and other organizations

Churches provide services to various disadvantaged populations and are dedicated to helping the down-and-out. Because of this, we thought that churches may be a point of contact for helping runaway youth. In fact more than one-fifth (21.8%) of our sample reported some involvement with a church; one-seventh (14.5%) reported attending worship services while away from home. No other activity was mentioned more than a couple of times.

Only about 10 percent of sample youth mentioned involvement with some other organization, but the types and locations of these programs do not allow us to identify any particular direction for targeting information.

f. Family and Friends

We did not ask explicitly who the youth keeps in touch with; however, we did ask who knew where they were during the time they were away from their home. Most youth appear to be keeping in touch with someone; only 13.3 percent said that nobody knew where they were (Table IV-5). On the other hand, there is little indication that most youth's whereabouts are known by more than a few people.

The percentage of sample youth who had nobody who knew their whereabouts fell with age. Nearly one quarter (23.1%) of 14-15 year olds said nobody knew where they are, while 15 percent of 16 year olds and 10 percent of 17 year olds said nobody knew. Only 8 percent of youth who described their episode as running away said nobody knew where they are; mostly because they ran to friends' houses. Fifteen percent of those thrown out and 16.7 percent of those who described their episode as both running away and being thrown out said that nobody knew where they are. Finally, the longer the youth had been away from home, the more likely someone knew where they are. One fifth of those who had been away less than two weeks said nobody knew where they are falling to only six percent of those who had been away longer than six months.

Table IV-5 Percent with Nobody Knowing Whereabouts

Percent with Nobody Knowing Whereabouts	
<i>All youth</i>	13.3%
<i>Age</i>	
14-15 yrs	23.1%
16 yrs	15.0%
17 yrs	10.0%
<i>Runaway/Throwaway Status</i>	
Ran away	8.0%
Thrown out	15.0%
Both	16.7%
<i>Length of time away from home</i>	
0-13 days	20.0%
14 days - 1 month	18.8%
1 month - 6 months	10.8%
more than 6 months	6.3%

About one quarter (26.5%) reported that their parents know where they are and a similar percentage reported that siblings know (Table IV-6). More than half (59%) report

that friends know where they are (recall that many runaway youth spend their days with friends and some times spend nights at friends' homes).

Table IV-6 Who Knew Where Youth Was While Away from Home

Who knew where youth was while away from home	
Nobody	13.3%
Parents	26.5%
Grandparents	13.3%
Siblings	25.3%
Other family members	19.3%
Friends	59.0%
Friends' families	25.3%
Other family members	22.9%
"Too many to list"	3.6%

V. Knowledge and Use of Services

Key Findings

- Over one third of sample youth had previously used a shelter.
- One third of the youth interviewed on the street had previously used a shelter, but three quarters of those had used a shelter only once. Youth interviewed in shelters who had previous shelter experience mostly had used shelters multiple times.
- Other services with the highest usage include drop-in centers (58%), free meals (54%), street outreach (41%), and counseling (40%).
- Youth who had not used a service typically did not know where to find it.
- Less than half of the sample youth had felt they needed health care since leaving home; about three quarters of those sought care.
- Half of the sample youth said that concerns about being turned over to the authorities some times kept them from seeking help. The percentage was higher for those under 17 years old. Three quarters of those who said they had run away had these concerns.

And I didn't want to come at first (to the shelter) because it was like, you know, I was going to be away from my friends and my family and everything. But I was just doing really bad out there. So that last night I slept in that abandoned house, I was like I don't want to do this. I want somewhere where I can take showers and eat, and lay my head and know that I'm going to be safe, you know? So I was like okay. It may work and change is going to be good, so I came out here. And now I'm here. (17-year old female)

(On calling a crisis line) At first I was very frustrated because they were giving me all these numbers with no names to them, and I didn't know where I was calling, who I was calling, what was it about or anything. Then I called one place and she broke everything down for me. Like she basically told me everything about this place (a shelter), so that's what really made me like okay, let me really call them. She told me this place is a good place to go to, like if anyone needs, is in help. She said this is a really good place to go to. (17-year old female)

a. Service Usage and Knowledge

Service usage and awareness

Because of our sample design, we cannot directly examine how many youth use shelters. However, we asked all the youth whether they had used a shelter previously.

Table V-1 shows that a little over one third (35.8%) had used a shelter before. Those currently in a shelter showed a little higher rate than those in the street, but basically there was little difference as one-third of interviewed street youth had used a shelter at some time. Between 19 percent and 33 percent of street youth also know where to find a shelter and many of the others know how to find one if they want one.⁹

More notable is the amount of previous usage. Those currently in a shelter who had previous shelter experience had been in shelters multiple times. Approximately 80 percent had previously been in a shelter two or more times. Street youth, on the other hand, did not have as much previous experience. Those who had any previous experience had mostly only been to a shelter one time, and none reported having been in a shelter more than twice.

Table V-1 Previous Shelter Usage

	All	Shelter	Street
<i>Ever used a shelter before now</i>	35.8%	38.5%	33.3%
<i>How often youth has used a shelter</i>			
1 time	41.4%	6.7%	78.6%
2 times	41.4%	60.0%	21.4%
3 times	6.9%	13.3%	0.0%
More than 3 times	3.4%	6.7%	0.0%
Unknown	6.9%	13.3%	0.0%

Table V-2 shows the extent interviewed youth used various services or knew how to find the service. Caution should be used in interpreting these numbers because the sample is not random. Shelter youth and youth found through the Broadway Youth Center in Chicago have direct access to many services. To help identify the impact of these locations on our estimates we show service use by sample type and by city in Table V-3.

⁹ Due to the way our questions unfolded during the interview, several youth did not tell us whether they knew where a shelter is. Many of them knew how to find one, giving specific places where they could find out (e.g. naming a drop-in center). Unfortunately, we could not always distinguish between those who knew a specific place to find out and those who knew they could “ask someone” or “look on the internet.”

Although a large fraction of our sample had access to numerous services, most services were used by only a minority of youth. For example, drop-in centers provide homeless youth a space for hanging out, usually with restricted access. These facilities usually provide direct access to a set of on-site services and connections to other services in the community. Despite our heavy reliance on the Broadway Youth Center in Chicago to identify youth who used this drop-in center, more interviewed youth in L.A. had used a drop-in center than had Chicago youth. Few youth who had never used a drop-in center knew how to find one.

In addition to shelters and drop-in centers, crisis lines and street outreach are intended to provide youth access to a broad set of services. Street outreach usually involves dispensing items useful to youth on the street such as food, bottled water, blankets, and clothes. It is intended to help develop ongoing relationships with street youth in order to help them leave the streets.

Only about 19 percent of youth had ever called a crisis line and another 13 percent said they know how to find a crisis line. Only seven percent of street youth had ever called a crisis line. Street outreach had been used by 41 percent of all youth, but few who had not used it knew how to find it (most youth had never heard of such a thing). Only ten percent of shelter youth had ever encountered street outreach.

Other more specific services include free meals, used primarily by street youth and generally not known to those who haven't used them. Health care has been used by nearly half the sample and another 19 percent know how to find it. Dental care, however, has not been used widely. Nearly 40 percent of youth have had counseling and another 23 percent know how to find it, most likely reflecting past experience with counseling. Only 12 percent have had mental health care since being away from home, though another 24 percent know how to find it, again reflecting past experience. Less than ten percent of youth had had any alcohol or substance abuse treatment, though

about a third knew where to find it. Finally, nearly half had used a free shower, though those who had not typically didn't know where to find one. Not surprisingly, street youth had higher usage of free showers than shelter youth.

Table V-2 Service Use and Knowledge

Types of services	Used	Know where to find	Total
Drop-in center	57.8%	2.4%	60.2%
Crisis line	19.3%	13.3%	32.6%
Street outreach	41.0%	4.8%	45.8%
Free meals	53.0%	7.2%	60.2%
Health care	45.8%	19.3%	65.1%
Dental care	14.5%	21.7%	36.2%
Counseling	39.8%	22.9%	62.7%
Mental health care	12.0%	24.1%	36.1%
Substance abuse treatment	8.4%	33.7%	42.1%
Alcohol abuse treatment	4.8%	31.3%	36.1%
Free shower	48.2%	7.2%	55.4%

Table V-3 Service Use by Sample Type and City

Types of services	Shelter	Street	Chicago	L.A.
Drop-in center	35.0%	79.1%	52.5%	62.8%
Crisis line	32.5%	7.0%	22.5%	16.3%
Street outreach	10.0%	69.8%	40.0%	41.9%
Free meals	25.0%	79.1%	47.5%	58.1%
Health care	50.0%	41.9%	52.5%	39.5%
Dental care	15.0%	14.0%	22.5%	7.0%
Counseling	47.5%	32.6%	52.5%	27.9%
Mental health care	17.5%	7.0%	17.5%	7.0%
Substance abuse treatment	10.0%	7.0%	5.0%	11.6%
Alcohol abuse treatment	7.5%	2.3%	2.5%	7.0%
Free shower	25.0%	69.8%	40.0%	55.8%

How youth learned about services

Youth obtained their knowledge from various sources, but a few stand out. Those youth who become connected to either a shelter or drop-in center have access to many services. Other service providers may also be sources of information to youth, but in a more idiosyncratic fashion.

Even if a drop-in center does not offer a particular service, they can provide referrals to other service providers or information on where to find a service. Shelters do not tend to function as sources of information about services outside the shelter except where they use an outside service. For example, youth in Hollywood may be referred to the Los Angeles Free Clinic nearby which then makes them knowledgeable about where to find health care in the future. Likewise, some shelters have relationships with drop-in centers, e.g. the L.A. Youth Networks shelter is a few blocks from a drop-in center, My Friend's Place, and many LAYN shelter youth spend time at this drop-in center. Since shelter youth don't have a current need for such services as free showers or free meals, they remain unknowledgeable about such services if they leave the shelter and later find themselves on the street.

Approximately one-quarter (24.7%) had used the internet to try to find a service or help, and that included such things as looking for a job. About 63 percent of those who had used the internet to find services had done so in search of a shelter, though percentages of internet use did not differ between the shelter and street samples. Only one youth reported using the internet to find a crisis line of any sort.

Beyond these focal points for service provision, youth tend to learn of services available by word-of-mouth, citing "friends" as the most common source of information for most services. Friends were the dominant source for finding shelters, free meals, free showers, and drop-in centers. Friends were not the main source of information on where to get health care or counseling where other sources dominate.

Surprisingly, street outreach was not given as a source of information about service availability. Youth who used street outreach found out about it from drop-in centers, friends, and direct contact. They appear to use street outreach as a source of snacks, water, blankets, and other supplies; it seems to function as a means toward street survival, but not as a focal point to get to other services.

How youth would look for services

We asked youth who had not used a particular service how they would try to learn about where to find that service. Youth who used a drop-in center cited the drop-in center as where they would go to find out about services. The internet was seen as the place to look for several services including crisis lines, free meals, street outreach, and alcohol abuse treatment. Interestingly, although youth recognized the internet as a source of information, we saw above that only 25% had actually used the internet to find services. However, for crisis lines, the internet and phone books (yellow pages) were the most often cited sources. It appears this service, being a “phone service” evokes the idea of looking at a phone-related source. Recall, though, that only one youth had used the internet to find a crisis line, implying that either youth don’t know that such things as crisis lines exist, they misunderstand what these lines can help them with, or they aren’t interested in using one.

For most health related services, including health care, dental care, and substance abuse treatment, youth considered drop-in centers and service providers as the sources they would consult. However, for health and dental care, several youth said they would return to where they got care when they were with their family; usually the family physician or dentist, but some times the local clinic or hospital.

Friends were not often cited as a potential source of information, possibly because if their friends knew of the service, the youth would already know about it from those friends. Youth also did not cite school as a place they would seek information (and it wasn’t cited often as the source for youth who had used a service).

b. Perceived health needs

One major concern about youth living away from home is whether they might need health care of various sorts and do not seek it. Roughly 45 percent of the youth we interviewed said they had needed some sort of (physical) health care while on their own (see Table V-4). About three-quarters of these youth had sought treatment. While a few report seeking help for basic conditions such as a cold or flu, most were for more serious situations. Several girls reported needing help because they were pregnant. Other pre-existing conditions included asthma, allergies, diabetes, and the need for psychotropic medications. More acute conditions included cuts; broken and sprained bones; pneumonia and bronchitis; migraines and other head pain; STD tests; and stomach cramps.

A majority (57.1%) of youth felt they needed counseling and about two-thirds of those who felt they needed counseling sought it. Many of these youth had previous experience with counseling. A much smaller percentage (15.6%) felt they needed mental health care for a psychological or emotional problem; only 42 percent of these youth sought this help. Most likely these were youth who had been undergoing treatment and most now were not getting in. Some clearly did not want it, though a few mentioned not being able to get their medication was a concern of theirs.

Less than ten percent of interviewed youth felt they had needed alcohol or substance abuse treatment; just over half (57.1%) of those sought it out. Most youth felt they do not have a substance abuse problem. Most admit to smoking marijuana, though they don't always include that as a drug.

Table V-4 Youth's Assessment of Their Health Needs

Service	Youth Needed	Youth Sought (if needed)
Health Care	44.7%	73.5%
Counseling	57.1%	65.9%
Psychological or emotional help	15.6%	41.7%
Alcohol or drug abuse treatment	9.3%	57.1%

c. Reasons for not using services

(on what stops a youth from getting help): *Hard headedness. Most of us, seriously, we think there's nothing wrong with us. We think we don't need help and everything's fine. We think everything, we're doing things the way we want and we like what we're doing. And if someone offers us help or something... If someone came up to me and said "Hey, you're an alcoholic. You need to do this and that," I'd be like, "No, man. No thanks, man." Or tried to say "Hey, call this number." Like if someone came up to me and said "If you need this help, call this hotline. You're homeless or whatever, we'll talk about it, we'll try to help you out," I would be like "Alright, thanks, I don't think I need any help. I'm living just fine out on the streets." I'd crumple it up and throw it away.* (15-year old male)

They have a lot of programs, but it's all programs. I hate that word. I just don't like, I want to do what I want. I don't want to have programs everywhere I go. (17-year old female)

Across the full range of services we asked about, three main reasons for not using the service were given on a consistent basis: (1) they don't feel they need it, (2) they don't know where to find it, or (3) they didn't know such a service exists. For youth who had not used a shelter, about one-third (36.6%) felt they don't need it and a quarter (24.4%) did not know where to find one. About 10 percent noted they were afraid they would not be safe in a shelter. About one-third of those who had not called a crisis line felt they don't need one and another third did not know how to find one. One quarter of youth who had not used a drop-in center did not feel they need one while over half (55.6%) had never heard of them. Similarly 59 percent of those who had not encountered street outreach had never heard of it (even when it was described to them).

Just cause I don't feel safe there at all. I don't feel, I don't feel safe in the streets but I can find my safe haven for a little bit, at least for the night and I'm good. But as far as shelters go, no, you can get robbed, you can get beat up. Who knows? There's all kinds of junkies there and you never know what can happen...(17-year old male)

When discussing what keeps youth from using services more generally, youth cited lack of information as one of the biggest barriers to using services. They feel that many runaway and homeless youth don't know what services are available or how to find out what services might be available. This was a theme that repeated itself in many contexts and is consistent with the cumulative knowledge we found in this sample.

Many youth noted that there is a certain embarrassment about getting services; that they feel judged or that pride gets in the way. They don't feel that a young person should be in the position of needing services and they think "people" will think negatively about them if they seek services, that being homeless is their fault because they are bad people (see section II.b. on the word "runaway").

Yeah, kind of like if your friends know, "Oh, she stays in a shelter." It makes you feel sad and bad about yourself, like you're in a shelter. You know your friends are in a house, a home, and it's like... It just makes you feel all bad. (17-year old female)

Cause it's hard. You wouldn't want to picture yourself in a shelter or group home. You would want to be with family or friends, not around a bunch of kids who need help, home, or whatever. So it's taking a big risk, like do I really want to go through this? Would it be better, would it be worse? It's scary; it's not things like most kids wake up and say "Yeah, I'll just go to a shelter." No, it's not something you really think about...(17-year old female)

The "pride" theme also emerges as a desire to make it on their own. Many youth have been told repeatedly that they are losers and will not succeed in life. When they leave home, they want to prove they can make it on their own; seeking services would be admitting they are failures.

Only about 10 percent of the youth cited rules and constraints, such as curfews, as barriers. The references are mainly about rules in shelters. Other barriers cited include not being able to access services if the youth is under age 18, particularly health care, and the distances to services and the lack of transportation. Youth did not express many other general privacy concerns, although some did not like to have to give their name or present an ID. Some worried about whether what they told others would be kept confidential.

Sometimes I wish you could keep it confidential and we don't really have to give our names or like, I would like to get an ID, but once again, I'm afraid that I'll get in trouble or get arrested. (16-year old male)

Like say if I said to somebody that somebody raped me, they're gonna have to tell, you know? Even if I don't want them to tell. Or if somebody helped me or was putting their hands on me, abusing me, they're gonna have to tell but I wouldn't want them to tell. And the third thing if I asked them not to tell, sometimes they're gonna say "Okay, we won't tell." And then the next day, "Oh, well this person said this, you have to go talk to them." (17-year old female)

More than a quarter of the youth felt that fears of being turned over to the authorities stops many youth, or just a general fear of what may happen to them if they seek services. When asked about their own worries, half of interviewed youth felt they did not seek help out of concern about being turned over to "the authorities" (see Table V-5). For approximately one-fifth, this meant being returned to their parents (20.5%) or being turned over to the police (23.1%). For most, these are not the same, i.e. being turned over to the police did not equate with being returned to parents. Some youth had committed crimes and believed they would go to jail if they were turned over to the police; others seem to just have a general fear that they would get in trouble.

Fifteen percent feared being turned over to DCFS. A strong dislike of foster care kept this group of youth from seeking help. Recall that over 27 percent of our sample had previous experience with foster care. In fact, 43 percent of those with foster care

experience were concerned about being turned over to DCFS while only a few other youth expressed that concern.

Interestingly, youth interviewed in shelters expressed more concern about being turned into the authorities than youth interviewed on the street. Youth in shelters have sought help in the shelter so one might expect them to have had fewer worries. It could be that youth who have chosen to “make it” on the street, rather than opt for a shelter, are just more fearless in general. To some extent this may also reflect the nature of samples obtained in studies of this kind. Youth on the street who were willing to speak with our interviewer are those who did not believe she was a threat; those who feared being turned into the authorities may not have participated. Youth in shelters would not self-select in this fashion as the interviewer has essentially been “vetted” by the shelter.

Seventeen year olds report less concern about being turned over to the authorities than younger youth, likely reflecting their shorter time left as a minor. Finally, nearly three quarters (73.9%) of youth who report having run away felt that worries about being turned in kept them from seeking help while about half (48.6%) of those who say they were thrown out report this concern. Interestingly, only 22 percent of those who report the episode as a combination of running away and being thrown out felt that the possibility of being turned in kept them from seeking help.

Table V-5 Youth Worries about being Turned In to Authorities

Youth worries about about being turned in	
All	50.0%
<i>Sample type</i>	
Shelter	57.9%
Street	42.5%
<i>Age</i>	
14-15	63.6%
16	60.0%
17	42.6%
<i>Runaway/throwaway</i>	
Ran away	73.9%
Thrown out	48.6%
Both	22.2%
<i>Type of concern</i>	
Parents/guardians	20.5%
Police	23.1%
DCFS	15.4%

VI. The National Runaway Switchboard / 1-800-RUNAWAY

Key Findings

- Over half of the youth interviewed in Chicago, but only one third of youth interviewed in L.A. had heard of 1-800-RUNAWAY.
- Two-thirds of interviewed youth either did not know what 1-800-RUNAWAY could do for them or had a wrong perception.
- Overwhelmingly youth chose telephone as their preferred method of contact with 1-800-RUNAWAY.
- Half of the sample youth said anonymity was important to them when calling a crisis or help line; the percentage was higher for younger youth. Females were much more concerned about anonymity than males. Only 30 percent believe a crisis line when they say they are anonymous.

a. Knowledge

The National Runaway Switchboard maintains a centralized help line, 1-800-RUNAWAY. This service provides a line that youth who are not living at home because they've run away or been thrown out of their home can call for help in locating a shelter, a health clinic, a place to get a meal, or any other help they might need. Nearly half (45.6%) of all interviewed youth had heard of 1-800-RUNAWAY with no difference between youth interviewed in shelters and those on the street (Table VI-1). Youth in Chicago were more likely to have heard of this number than youth in L.A. (55.9% and 35.9%, respectively), probably reflecting Chicago as the home base for the National Runaway Switchboard (NRS) and the higher level of interaction between the NRS and local service providers.¹⁰

Having heard of 1-800-RUNAWAY is not an indication of knowing anything about it. Few youth really understand or even make reasonable guesses about what calling 1-

¹⁰ Because of the heavy influence of youth interviewed at the Broadway Youth Center in Chicago, we worried that the Chicago percentages might be over-stated by a significant percentage of the sample having accessed a particular service where they might have been more likely to hear about 1-800-RUNAWAY. However, limiting the comparison to youth in shelters in both cities did not change the relative knowledge between Chicago and L.A. youth, further implying that NRS's local involvement might explain the disparity.

800-RUNAWAY can do for them. Only five youth (6%) gave an explanation that demonstrated they have a reasonable understanding of the type of help they might get (Table VI-2). Another 28 percent of the youth had some idea or made reasonable guesses about what help they might get, such as that they might be connected to a shelter. Over one third (34.1%) said they did not know what would happen if they called the number or gave a very general statement that it was a place to get help. Nearly one third (31.7%) gave a description that was completely wrong. Youth who had heard of 1-800-RUNAWAY were just as likely as those who hadn't to say they don't know what it does, gives a general response of "they help you," or give a completely wrong description.

They probably take you back home. Or they'll try to put you in somewhere you don't want to be. (17-year old female)

They contact the police. They take you to a shelter. (14-year old male)

They look for a runaway, I don't know, try to get a runaway or a runaway on the loose, I don't know. (14-year old female)

He reports himself as a runaway? They either try to get 'em home or try to talk 'em into going home. This might just be me being weird, but they probably call the authorities and send them to where they are and take 'em home. (16-year old male)

They get helped. Probably, probably get put in foster care or taken back to their parents, or taken to a relative that can take care of them, or just helped out in some way. I don't know. (15-year old male)

I don't know they'd probably ask me where I am and they'd probably want to know why I was running away first off and what kind of situation I'm in. Other than that I really don't know I mean I'm not sure if they would either try to turn me in or try to help me for the moment being it's kind of hard to say. It's a hard shot to call I'd have to be really lucky for them not to turn me in yeah. (17-year old male)

Table VI-1 Youth Knowledge of 1-800-RUNAWAY or The National Runaway Switchboard

Youth heard of 1-800-RUNAWAY	
All	42.2%
<i>Sample type</i>	
Shelter	40.0%
Street	44.2%
<i>City</i>	
Chicago	52.5%
L.A.	32.6%

Table VI-2 Youth Reports on What Help 1-800-RUNAWAY Provides

What does youth say that 1-800-RUNAWAY does?	Youth heard of 1-800-RUNAWAY		
	All	Yes	No
Youth says they don't know what this crisis line does	19.5%	20.6%	18.8%
Youth just says generally that they help people	14.6%	14.7%	14.6%
Youth correctly identifies part of what they do but doesn't appear to fully understand what they do	28.0%	20.6%	33.3%
Youth's answer is correct and has enough detail that it appears the youth understands what they do	6.1%	11.8%	2.1%
Youth gives an answer that is incorrect	31.7%	32.4%	31.3%

b. Usage

Only three interviewed youth had ever called 1-800-RUNAWAY. Youth gave many reasons for never having called (see text box). Youth living with friends and youth who feel self-sufficient do not feel a need to contact any sort of crisis line. Some youth had heard of 1-800-RUNAWAY from some time in the past (before running away) such as in school or from an advertisement, but didn't remember it existed at the time they ran away (or couldn't remember the number). Some specifically didn't call because they had been thrown out and had not run away and others thought that it wouldn't be helpful in their particular circumstances. Still others thought the authorities would be called to come get them.

Some of this reticence reflects the lack of understanding discussed above. Even if they know some of what NRS does, they may only know of something that doesn't interest them. For example, some youth thought that 1-800-RUNAWAY reunites you with your family and they did not want to be reunited. While this is something the NRS can be helpful with, the youth did not realize that the NRS could help them in other ways.

Those who had heard of 1-800-RUNAWAY were more likely to have called a crisisline/hotline/helpline than youth who had never heard of it (see Table VI-3). While it is difficult to know how to interpret this, it might imply that youth who are seeking help through a crisis line may come to hear of 1-800-RUNAWAY, but choose an alternative help line.

Table VI-3 Use of Crisis Lines by Whether Heard of 1-800-RUNAWAY

Ever used a crisis line, hotline, or any sort of help line	Heard of 1-800-RUNAWAY	
	No	Yes
Yes	20.0%	33.3%
No	80.0%	66.7%

Heard of 1-800-Runaway, but reasons DID NOT call

Never ran away

Didn't feel the need. I can usually do things by myself.

Cause I didn't want help.

I didn't think of it as a good thing to do. I just thought something bad was going to come out of it...That I would get taken away or that, I don't know. I heard stuff about foster care and stuff like that, what happens to people in there like that. The picture that was painted in my head wasn't a good one. It was just like it's a bad thing...

...I never thought about it, it's like, because I always had somewhere to go, you know.

Because when I first seen it, I was still living with my mom. It was on a commercial, and I felt like, oh I will never need to use that number, and then when it finally came, I'm like, oh snap, what is that number. I couldn't even remember it. I was like, oh my gosh, what the hell is the number. I need the number. And I just, when I was looking for it, I was like, I'm not even looking for it no more. I'm just going to give up, and I just gave up, like I don't even care.

Cause they can't help me in the situation I'm in right now.

I forgot there was a number for it when I was running.....I just forgot about that number and I never used it

Because I mean I get counseling at school, and a whole bunch of people always talk to me about the stuff that I was going, why I was running away. So I felt like I don't need a hotline; I already have enough people talking to me, helping me.

c. Preferred contact method

We described to the youth what 1-800-RUNAWAY does and asked what method of communication they'd prefer if they were to contact such a service. Overwhelmingly youth stated they would prefer to use the telephone over e-mail and text messaging with over three quarters (79.2%) selecting this option (see Table VI-4). Most youth noted that they'd rather talk to a person and determine if that person sounded like they would really intend to be helpful. Youth thought of e-mail as something that wasn't direct and that they'd have to wait until someone checked their e-mail before receiving a response whereas the phone is more immediate (as long as it is always staffed). They had similar thoughts with regard to texting. In addition, they felt that e-mail and texting would not convey urgency or would not convey their needs well. Furthermore, e-mail required getting to a computer while phones are more readily accessible.

Those who did prefer e-mail or texting had more mixed reasons. Some youth felt that they could do a better job of explaining their needs if they could compose an e-mail; they could be more articulate and not feel the pressure of the immediacy of the phone. Others felt their emotions might hinder communicating effectively over the phone; some because they'd get emotional about their situation, others noted that they might get too angry.

Table VI-4 Youth's Preferred Method of Contact for 1-800-RUNAWAY Service

Preferred method of contact	
Phone	79.2%
Email	9.1%
Text messaging	10.4%
Youth says it doesn't matter	1.3%

d. Anonymity and Confidentiality

As seen in Table VI-5, youth split fairly equally on whether or not it would be important for a crisis line to know who he or she is or from where he or she is calling. The

percentage that feel anonymity is important falls with age; 63.6 percent of 14- and 15-year olds think it is important, 57.9 percent of 16-year olds, and 47.7 percent of 17-year olds. There are also distinct gender differences as 70 percent of females think anonymity is important, compared with 40 percent of males.

Most youth who felt it wasn't important just didn't think it mattered. Many youth recognized that for the person to be of help, they probably needed to know where the person is calling from. Others recognized that they could call from somewhere where they wouldn't be found anyway or that they could hang up if they thought something was fishy.

Over half (56.4%) of those who did feel that anonymity was important had concerns that calling a crisis line would result in them being turned over to authorities. Several noted that they feared they would be placed into foster care. About a quarter of this group cited their desire to keep their business private.

Table VI-5 Importance of Anonymity When Calling a Crisis Line

	Important	Not important
All	52.7%	47.3%
<i>Age</i>		
14-15 yrs	63.6%	36.4%
16 yrs	57.9%	42.1%
17 yrs	47.7%	52.3%
<i>Gender</i>		
Male	40.0%	60.0%
Female	70.0%	30.0%

If a crisis line stated that their calls are anonymous, 42.7 percent of interviewed youth would not believe it. Only 30.7 percent would believe it with the remaining quarter being unsure (Table VI-6). Of those who would not believe that their call would be anonymous, over half felt there is no way they could be convinced. Those who thought they could be convinced discussed what would have to happen on the call. They noted

such things as judging the honesty of the person they were speaking to by the person's voice and by what the person said. While some youth would never be convinced, others thought that if the person answering the phone made it clear up front that they weren't recording the call or using caller-ID, the youth would believe them.

Youth appeared to mix confidentiality and anonymity together. Other aspects of communication that would help convince the youth of confidentiality include if the person clearly was trying to help and didn't sound like they were trying to push the youth in a particular direction and if the person was clearly being honest. Youth's responses mostly implied a judgment call on their part and many felt they could never make that judgment without seeing the person to whom they were speaking.

Table VI-6 Youth's Belief that Crisis Line is Anonymous

Does youth believe a crisis line when they say they are anonymous	
Yes	30.70%
No	42.70%
Youth is not sure	26.70%

VII. Improvements—What do Youth Suggest?

Key Findings

- Sample youth tended to be very satisfied with the services they receive.
- Many youth felt that how service providers deal with them needs improvement. They want respect, honesty, sensitivity, and flexibility.
- Youth felt that it is not always clear who is eligible for a service, particularly if age is a restriction.
- Youth stressed the need for increased awareness of services. They felt that lack of knowledge about what services exist, what those services can do for them, how to find services, and where to find the, are the biggest barriers to youth getting help.
- Youth suggested there be a comprehensive list of service agencies with contact information that would be made widely available.
- Youth who had experience in shelters noted the need for more after-care services; shelters and other service providers should check up on youth after being returned home, finding out from the youth how things are going. Provide youth with the list of services when leaving the shelter.
- Youth felt that services need to be more dispersed, available in neighborhoods and in less populated areas.
- Youth felt that school is a good focal point for getting information to youth, particularly before they run away.
- Youth also felt that the internet provides a good focal point for information, though they noted it must be easy to find.
- Youth suggested posting information in places where youth hang out, not just homeless youth. They also suggested advertising on TV, but aimed at youth at home contemplating running away.
- Using the term “runaway” in advertising would work with some youth, but not others. Youth stressed that making it clear what the service has to offer is more important than the labels used.

a. Improving Services

Youth who had used services were overwhelmingly satisfied with those services and felt that most service providers were really trying to be helpful. When asked about specific services, they mostly felt that those service providers should keep doing what they are

doing. The rare complaints came primarily with regard to health care, where youth used free clinics or hospitals and found they faced long waits, problems from staff shift changes, and other delays from immediate treatment. However, they were satisfied with the care they eventually received. About 40 percent of the youth in L.A. who had used free showers felt that there was inadequate privacy, some didn't provide hot water, or no soap was available. Note that these are mostly public showers at the beach.

Because we worried that youth would be overly positive about services they used, especially if they were being interviewed in a shelter or drop-in center, or perhaps providing socially desirable responses (a common problem in surveys), we separately asked more generally about improvements service providers could make.

Dealing with Youth

Many youth felt that how service providers deal with them was something that needs improvement. Their comments can be summarized:

General interaction:

- Treat youth with respect. Youth on the street don't feel respected. They come from homes where they did not feel respected and they do not feel respected on the streets, e.g. by the police or by how they are looked at by passers-by.
- Be honest and direct. Don't sound insistent, making your suggestions sound like something they must do. This is a turn-off to teens.
- Be sensitive to emotional situations and what youth are going through, recognize how what they are going through affects their behavior.
- Be more thoughtful on individual needs. Don't treat all youth the same. Show more flexibility, recognizing these are teens in need of help.

- Reduce “processing” requirements. Ask for less information—kids on the street have trust issues.

Recruiting and referring to service:

- Better referral process. If can't help youth, get them hooked up with someone who can. Don't just send them on a long chain of phone calls trying to find the right people to help.
- Be clear about who is served and what service is provided, e.g. if only serve a specific age group.
- Make clear youth won't be turned over to parents/authorities.

Shelters:

- Separate older youth from younger youth. This is especially necessary if the shelter allows youth over 18. A 20-year old is much older than a 15-year old.
- Not surprisingly, several youth felt that shelter curfews are too strict.
- Be more forgiving on rule-breaking. Youth understand that they will be punished if they break rules, but did not feel they should be kicked out of a shelter for it.

Increase Awareness of Services

When we asked youth how to improve services, many focused on the need for more awareness of services. As seen earlier, youth feel that lack of knowledge about what services exist, what those services can do for them, how to find services, and where to find them, are the biggest barriers to youth getting help.

One theme that came up in different contexts was the idea of having a list of services with phone numbers and making that list available widely. In Los Angeles, there is a booklet called Youth Yellow Pages produced by Teen Line, a program affiliated with Cedars-Sinai Medical Center's Department of Psychiatry

(teenlineonline.org). At the conclusion of our interview, we gave each youth one of these booklets and many were quite appreciative, noting that they wish they had seen this long ago. Although this booklet has been around for quite some time, few youth have ever seen it.

Aftercare Service—Follow-up

The primary goal of shelters and other service providers is to put youth in a safe environment. Most youth who enter shelters get reunified with their parents or guardians. In the FYSB Basic Center Program (BCP), two-thirds (67%) of all exits from shelters in fiscal year 2009 were to a parent/legal guardian's home.¹¹ Exits to parent or guardian homes accounted for 64.6 percent of all exits in California and 75.3 percent of all exits in Illinois.

All BCP shelters are required to provide aftercare services to youth after they leave the shelter.¹² The amount and type of service likely varies by shelter and by youth. Several youth noted that when you leave a shelter, you may still need services. If youth are returned home, they are returning to the same environment they left, which may have been full of conflict. This may lead to a repeat runaway or throwaway episode.

Youth suggested that shelters (and other service providers) should check up on youth after being returned home, finding out from the youth how things are going. Be prepared to facilitate helping the youth, including a possible return to the shelter.

Youth also felt that shelters could provide the provider contact booklet discussed above. As noted earlier, youth in shelters do not become acquainted with other services they may need (and may choose not to return to the shelter), so acquiring the booklet

¹¹ Authors' tabulations from the Runaway and Homeless Youth Management Information System Extranet.

¹² See <http://www.acf.hhs.gov/programs/fysb/content/youthdivision/programs/bcpfactsheet.htm> for a description of the services BCP shelters are required to provide.

would be helpful if they find themselves in need of help. They particularly emphasized this with regard to returning home, so that they could call someone before another runaway or throwaway episode occurs.

Add or re-allocate resources

Many of the suggestions for improvements reflected the need for more resources.

These included comments such as

- provide more street outreach to find the youth in need
- provide more transportation to help get youth to shelters
- increase staff at health care facilities to reduce long wait times
- provide anger management classes
- provide access to dental care
- increase access to housing; reduce waitlists for transitional housing
- help getting a high school diploma or GED
- help with legal emancipation would get youth off the streets
- In shelters and drop-in centers
 - More opportunity for recreational activities (playing sports, going to movies, swimming, etc.). Provide more to do outdoors.
 - Provide opportunity for schooling and vocational training
 - Provide mentors. Alternatively, have someone who has been through the experience come talk to youth periodically.
 - Where there may be heavy service usage, e.g. at a drop-in center, restrict usage time so that more youth can have access.
- Services need to be dispersed into more areas

- Services tend to get put where a lot of runaway and homeless youth congregate, which means most parts of a metropolitan area are missed. In Illinois, the Comprehensive Community Based Youth Services (CCBYS) partly deals with this, though few of our interviewed youth had ever heard of any of these organizations. Having positive influences within neighborhoods would give youth access to activities and to people who could connect them to services.
- More access in less populated areas. Some youth we interviewed had migrated to either Chicago or Los Angeles from other areas of the country; some had come from small towns or rural areas. They noted the lack of resources in their areas.

b. Getting information to youth

Not enough information available

- As we've noted now several times, many youth mentioned that there isn't enough information available. They felt that if you aren't immediately in need, you wouldn't have reason to know about services. However they thought that you need to know in a general way that there are services available. They mentioned frequently that when they were looking for help, they didn't know where to look and the people they asked didn't know where to look.
- As discussed above, small towns may not have much in the way of services, so youth suggested more outreach to these small towns.
- Youth who are system-involved, especially those in foster care, thought that social workers should be more knowledgeable and more prepared to help quickly. One mentioned court hearings as a place to get information.

School a good focal point

- A lot of youth mention schools as a way to get information out through guidance counselors; school bulletin boards; in the hallways, cafeteria, classrooms, gym, office, and everywhere else. One youth suggested handing out materials outside the school since some runaways may not attend classes, but will come meet their friends.
- Some youth suggested having teachers talk about issues and make students aware that there is help available for youth having problems at home. Some described this as a presentation, others as a “short course.”
- Some youth thought it beneficial to have presentations by people who have been through a runaway/homeless experience.
- Make a list of services and contacts (see earlier discussion of booklet) easily available. Can give it out in class, but youth know that most will throw it away. But if they know it exists and know they can get a copy (e.g. at the guidance counselor’s office), they know where to go when they need it. Note that it needs to be easily accessible. Some youth won’t ask for it to avoid embarrassment.
- One youth emphasized focusing on middle schools to get to kids who are less likely to figure things out for themselves.

Online a good focal point

- As noted earlier, only a small percentage of youth had used the internet to find services, yet nearly all felt the internet was a key place to provide information on available services. To prove useful, they felt it must be easy to use Google or Yahoo and find what they are looking for quickly.

- Some youth mentioned putting information on specialized websites like Adam4Adam.com, a gay men's website.
- Youth suggested putting the organization's website address on posters/pamphlets so that youth can check it out before calling.
- Post information on MySpace. As we saw earlier, MySpace accounts are prevalent among this population and accessed with high frequency.

Post in visible places

- As one might expect, youth suggested posters placed in visible places where youth congregate. These locations include those where runaway and homeless youth congregate, locations where all teens hang out, and places where there are a lot of people in general and thus become likely locations for runaways to panhandle.
- They suggested posting on bulletin boards; billboards; poles; bus stops, sides of buses, on the bus; storefronts; fast food restaurants; hospitals, clinics; YMCAs, youth centers; police stations (Chicago); train stations; public bathrooms; and gas station windows (where youth offer to pump gas for customers to earn money).
- They also suggested posting at shelters so that youth can take note of phone numbers and websites for when they leave the shelter
- A couple of youth suggested using stickers. One specifically suggested putting stickers on pay phones.

Advertise on TV

- Also, as one might expect, youth suggested advertising on TV, mainly on shows youth watch. They suggested cable stations like Nickelodeon and Comedy Central; music channels; and movie channels (HBO, Cinemax).
- Youth on the streets do not have access to television. Even when staying with friends, viewing may be irregular. Thus some youth thought television advertising should be aimed more at youth living at home and having problems with their families.

Advertise in places where youth look for other things/services

- Put in newspapers, or places that list jobs or things youth go to look for.

Personal contact

- Some youth think personal contact is best; they felt more street outreach is needed.
- Outreach needs to go beyond where runaway and homeless youth congregate. People should go into communities and spread the word, talking to people about services available and asking if people know someone who needs help.

c. On use of the term “Runaway” in advertising

Earlier we saw that some youth do not like the term “runaway” or feel it does not apply to them. Even in these cases, many youth still understand who it is aimed at and that includes them.

You would notice it. You're gonna think about that because it's all you think about is, where can I sleep at. If you're homeless, that's all you think about, where I'm gonna eat, where I'm gonna use the bathroom, where I'm gonna sleep, and where I'm gonna take a shower. (17-year old male)

We discussed with the youth whether or not something that said it was for runaways would resonate with them. Several issues emerged. Note that even if they felt the term applied, that doesn't mean they'd call the service.

When it would not be noticed

- If the youth is still at home, it wouldn't be noticed. Youth contemplating running away are thinking about their problems, but the message should target dealing with those problems, not being a runaway.
- Youth who had their basic needs met, mainly having a place to stay and being able to eat, did not feel it would attract their attention.

I guess if it's raining outside or like have nowhere to stay or I don't have my friends with me and stuff I think I'd probably use it. But if I have my friends and I'm getting fed and like you know I wouldn't pay much attention to it. (17-year old female)

- The term might not attract some of the youth who did not run away or those who think the service is intended to reunite them with their parents.

It probably wouldn't apply because I didn't run away. (17-year old male)

- One youth mentioned that there is a problem recognizing legitimate help as there are predators who attract youth through postings.

What should it say?

- There was some disagreement on the use of the term "homeless" to attract attention. Some youth felt that described their situation without the value judgment of "runaway," while others felt that being homeless is the embarrassing part of their situation. They feel it's acceptable to leave a bad situation (i.e. run away), but embarrassing not to have a home to go to. Some would be attracted to the term while others view "the homeless" as older adults. In addition to not

wanting to be equated with the older homeless, they may not think the service applies to young people.

As of now it would apply to me, but coming from where I come from people wouldn't think it would apply to them. Cause first it's "runaway or homeless" so the runaway is cool, the homeless is not cool. So you know, people are not going to want to take, be walking around with a sheet in their pocket that says "runaway and homeless" because of the category that is going on in teenage life. Maybe not "runaway and homeless," maybe "runaway and troubled youth" probably would be better, but not homeless. (16-year old male)

If it said "Runaway" something, I probably wouldn't, but if it said "Help for youth," or "Youth help – homeless," yeah, I'd definitely take a look at it. (16-year old female)

Just put it like ads somewhere, "Need Help? 1-800-YOUTH-LINE" or something, just something. (15-year old female)

- The material should be designed to catch a person's eye. Nobody will get the information if they aren't drawn to look at the material in the first place.

Like it depends, like if it's an interesting logo on there, not necessarily a logo. Like if it had a picture that was interesting and it looked interesting and colors, I'd read it and see what it's talking about. And if it applied to me I would sit there and think about it...And I'll try to remember the number in my head. (17-year old female)

- Youth felt that rather than worry about labels, the material (advertisement, poster, pamphlet) should focus on what is being offered and make it sound non-threatening.

I don't think of myself as a runaway, but it depends on what they were offering me and that's what I would definitely call. (17-year old female)

If it said something like "Free Food at this Soup Kitchen" or "If you're homeless... Free Food" or something catchy, something that would catch my eye. Especially food or money, like "Free Supplies for Squatting" or something. "Sleeping Bags and Soap," something like that and I'd be like oh, check it out. Okay, this is where it's located. I might... Okay, if I need this, I'm going to go here, check it out and see what they have to offer. (15-year old male)

I'd probably assume that it didn't apply to me. If it would just kind of, hey, you need help, somethin' like that might help. Or food, clothes, come here and then they'd get advice, something simple, not too threatening.

*....That would get my attention more. Like, hey you need a friend.....
Want a hug? (17-year old female)*

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