

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

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October 2010

Acknowledgments

Funding for this study was provided by the Annie E. Casey Foundation, the Chicago Community Trust, and the Family and Youth Services Bureau in the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. Chapin Hall at the University of Chicago provided additional funds to support completing data entry. The authors wish to thank The National Runaway Switchboard, whose partnership in this project has been invaluable.

Six high schools in Chicago and two in Los Angeles County participated in the study. We thank all the principals, counselors, runaway and homeless liaisons, teachers, and the 1246 students who filled out questionnaires, without whom this report would not have been possible.

Patricia Wollack coordinated with the schools in Chicago; Diane Preciado and Bertha Lopez administered the survey in the schools in Los Angeles. Geng Tian and Erin Tracey entered the data. Jennifer Benoit-Bryan provided comments on an earlier draft. All remaining errors are ours.

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Executive Summary

Background

This report covers one part of a larger project on Runaway Youth's Knowledge and Access of Services. The full project involved interviews with youth in shelters and on the street, a survey of youth in schools, and interviews with youth currently in foster care who have previously run away from a foster care placement. An earlier report of findings from interviews with youth in shelters and on the street can be found at http://www.1800runaway.org/media/documents/NORC_Final_Report_4_22_10.pdf.

The school survey

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

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

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

Analysis of the school survey data will inform us about:

- The percentage of high school youth who have considered running away, whether or not they have done so.
- Some distinguishing characteristics of youth who have considered running away
- High school youths' knowledge of available services.
- Whether those who have run away at some time have more knowledge of services than students who have not.
- Whether those who have contemplated running away have more knowledge of services than students who have not.
- Whether youths are aware of information their school provides on help for runaway youth.

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

² Pergamit and Ernst (2010), p. 63.

³ *Ibid.*, p. 85.

- Whether information provided by schools increases students' knowledge of help available for runaway youth.
- Where youth turn for help if they feel they can't talk to their parents.

Methods

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

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

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

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

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

Sample

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

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

The sample is fairly evenly distributed across grades 10, 11, and 12, but has fewer students in 9th grade. In Chicago, twelfth grade provided the fewest students. The

age distribution looks as one would expect based on the grade distribution, with a lower percentage of 14- and 18-year olds than students ages 15 to 17.

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

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

Key Findings

Running Away: Contemplation and Experience

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

Knowledge of Services for Runaway Youth

- Youth have little knowledge of services available to help runaway youth, even if they have past runaway experience or have seriously thought about running away.
- However, youth with past runaway experience have more knowledge about available services than youth with no past runaway experience.

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 43

- Less than one quarter of responding students say their school provides information on services available to help youth who have run away.
- Students who say their school provides information are more informed about available services than other students.

How Youth Would Get Help

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

I. Introduction

This report covers one part of a larger project on Runaway Youth's Knowledge and Access of Services. The full project involved interviews with youth in shelters and on the street, a survey of youth in schools, and interviews with youth currently in foster care who have previously run away from a foster care placement. An earlier report of findings from interviews with youth in shelters and on the street can be found at http://www.1800runaway.org/media/documents/NORC_Final_Report_4_22_10.pdf.

The reader should refer to that report for the broader project context as well as more detail on comparisons this report makes with findings from the shelter and street samples.

Except where noted, all comparisons discussed in the text are statistically significant at $p=.1$ or better; usually the confidence level is quite high. Standard errors have been corrected using the Huber-White estimator to account for the clustering of students within schools (Greene 1998).

The school survey

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

- All high school aged youth without the selection criterion of being a current runaway.⁵
- Youth contemplating running away.

⁵ Although the population of interest is all high school aged youth, some youth will be missed due to absences, truancy, skipping class, or dropping out.

- Previous runaways who are currently housed.
- Current runaways who are housed somewhere other than with their parents (couch-surfers).

Second, schools may be one of the best points of attack for getting information to runaways and potential runaways. In the interviews of shelter and street youth, few had obtained information from school;⁶ however many of these youth cited school as a good potential focal point for distributing information.⁷

Analysis of the school survey data will inform us about:

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

The school survey was considered a small part of the overall study and the most exploratory. We had a modest budget that limited the number of school districts we could approach and the number of schools we could include. We also were not able to make adjustments to our protocol that would require more than minimal adjustments in

⁶ Pergamit and Ernst (2010), p. 63.

⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 85.

our budget allocation. The outcome can be best viewed as a pilot study for a future larger attempt to collect information from students in schools about runaway experiences and knowledge of services. A copy of the questionnaire is included as an appendix to this report.

II. Methodology

1. Fielding the Survey

Obtaining permission

We obtained permission from the Los Angeles Unified School District (LAUSD) and Chicago Public Schools to conduct the school survey; however, school principals decided whether or not their schools would participate. They also had final say over how the survey would be implemented in their schools.

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

First, it created more of a burden on the teachers because they had to hand out and collect permission forms as well as remind students to return their forms. This added to the number of days that our study was a presence in their classrooms. We encouraged schools to give students a few days to return the forms but ultimately, we managed this task on the schedule set by the school. It is difficult to say whether or not this added task resulted in more school refusals but teacher burden was one of the main reasons that schools refused.

Secondly, this necessitated a strategy for encouraging youth to return the forms. Major surveys conducted in schools expend significant resources to achieve consent

from parents. As noted earlier, our effort was managed on a very modest budget that did not allow us to provide significant incentives or to engage in large-scale follow-up practices. We offered students a two-dollar McDonald's coupon for returning the form with a signature. The student received the coupon as long as a parent or guardian had signed the form whether permission was given or refused.

Most importantly, this requirement likely affected the representativeness of our sample. It is easy to imagine that the students who remembered to take home the form, obtain a parent or guardian's signature, and returned the form may not be representative of students in general. Furthermore, very few students returned the form.

Fortunately, the LAUSD did not require active parental consent; in fact their review board suggested this might be detrimental to the study. Instead, consent forms were provided for students to take home to parents, but parents only had to sign the form if they did not want their child to participate in the survey. As a result, response rates within the LAUSD schools were quite high.

Selecting schools

Our goal was to complete the school survey in three high schools in each site. To select schools, each school district was divided into sub-areas based on geography and race/ethnic composition. Within each sub-area, we identified schools which met the following criteria:

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

Chicago schools were grouped based on areas already defined by the Chicago Public Schools (CPS) District. CPS divides its high schools into four Areas numbered 19, 21, 23, and 24, moving from north to south in the city.

We included all schools listed by the District as “neighborhood” schools and imposed a minimum size school enrollment of 1,000. These criteria left us with 27 senior high schools from which to sample: thirteen in Area 19, three in Area 21, six in Area 23, and seven in Area 24. We selected the schools that best represented their areas in terms of their race/ethnicity distribution, shown in Table 1 below.

Table 1 Race/Ethnic Distribution of Areas in Chicago Public Schools

Area	Asian	Black	Hispanic	White
19	9%	19%	52%	20%
21	4%	58%	28%	9%
23	2%	48%	45%	4%
24	0%	86%	12%	2%

Source: Chicago Public Schools website:
http://research.cps.k12.il.us/export/sites/default/accountweb/Reports/RacialSurvey/FY09_Racial_Ethnic_Survey.xls.

We combined areas 21 and 23 into a single area and selected schools with the intention of conducting the survey in one school in each of the three areas. The final list from which we worked included all schools that met our race/ethnicity distribution criterion, considering them substitutable within areas. Thus, if the first rank school within an area chose not to participate, we moved to the next school on the list and so on. Given our difficulties in achieving good response rates due to the active parental consent requirement, we conducted the survey in more schools than originally planned.

To represent the Los Angeles metropolitan area, we worked with the Los Angeles Unified School District (LAUSD). The LAUSD covers a considerable amount of L.A. County, but there are numerous other school districts in the county. To devise the school sampling frame we took all senior high schools in the LAUSD and reduced the list

to “regular” schools by eliminating any specialty schools (e.g. tech prep, college prep, magnet, charter, and arts). We imposed a minimum size enrollment of 800 students. These criteria left us with 45 senior high schools from which to sample.

We then grouped schools first by geography by combining the LAUSD’s 8 local districts into 3 clusters. We grouped first by geography to capture differential access to services available to runaway and homeless youth; however we also attempted to form the clusters to include districts that are relatively similar in their race/ethnicity composition. These criteria give us the three clusters: (A) local districts 1 and 2 in the north end of the county; (B) local districts 4, 5, and 6 on the east side of the county; and (C) local districts 3, 7, and 8 capturing the central and southern parts of the county that are included in the LAUSD.⁸

Within each of these clusters, we grouped schools by their race/ethnicity distributions so as to identify schools whose distributions most resemble the race/ethnicity distributions of the cluster shown in Table 2 below.

Table 2 Race/Ethnic Distribution of Study Clusters in the Los Angeles Unified School District

Cluster	Asian	Black	Hispanic	White
A	5%	5%	64%	17%
B	3%	3%	89%	3%
C	10%	24%	63%	7%

Source: LAUSD website: <http://search.lausd.k12.ca.us/cgi-bin/fccgi.exe?w3exec=PROFILE0>

We found approximately six schools in Cluster A with race/ethnicity distributions similar to the cluster as a whole; nine schools in Cluster B and five schools in Cluster C. We intended to conduct the survey in one school in each area. As in Chicago, the final list from which we worked included all schools that met our race/ethnicity distribution

⁸ The L.A. Unified School District does not cover all of L.A. County. Neither the wealthier areas in the north of the county nor much of the southern part of the county are part of the LAUSD.

criterion, considering them substitutable within clusters. Thus, if the first rank school within a cluster chose not to participate, we moved to the next school on the list and so on. Although many schools appeared to be willing to participate, only two eventually did.

Recruiting schools, selecting classrooms

Within schools, our intention was to collect survey responses from approximately 100 youth per grade (grades 9-12). For planning purposes, we assumed homeroom sizes of 25 students implying we needed cooperation from 4 homeroom teachers. This could be adjusted if actual homeroom sizes varied significantly from 25. We worked with the principal or his/her designate to identify which homerooms were to be selected so as to best represent the entire school student body. Many schools no longer have homerooms, necessitating alternative plans. Several schools chose to have the survey administered in English classes as English is a required subject in all four years of high school.

Schools in Chicago were recruited from May of 2009 through February of 2010 and in Los Angeles from September 2009 through April 2010. We contacted principals or their designate. In several schools we worked with the runaway and homeless youth liaison. Schools varied in their ability to grant us access to classrooms and grades. As a result, for some schools we were only able to gain access to a few classrooms or one or two grades.

Administering the survey

We designed our protocol to minimize the impact of this research on the school, students, and staff. Our goal was to be as accommodating as possible in the methods used to distribute the parental consent forms, student assent forms, and self-administered questionnaires to the students.

National Opinion Research Center (NORC) staff provided the schools in both sites with the parental consent forms and cover letters for the students to take home to their parents or guardians. We anticipated this happening at the beginning of the selected classes. Students were asked to give the cover letter and consent form to their parent or guardian, giving parents or guardians the opportunity to refuse participation if desired. We asked that teachers remind the students to return the forms before the day of the survey.

In Chicago, those students whose parents or guardians did not refuse consent and who returned the forms signed and granting permission were then given the self-administered questionnaires. In Los Angeles, any student whose parent did not refuse consent was given the questionnaire.

Written assent from the students was also required. Teachers were instructed to read the assent form to the students before beginning the survey. The survey was administered in class and we did not plan to take students out of their classrooms. Students whose parents refused consent for their participation did not receive the questionnaire and could use the questionnaire administration time as a study period or as the teacher determined. These students did not have to leave the classroom while other students were completing the questionnaire. We anticipated that this entire process would take approximately 15-20 minutes.

Schools deviated from the protocol in many ways. Mostly these deviations only affected the number of classrooms and grade levels selected. However, one school did not allow the survey to take place in a classroom. This school required students to pick up a copy of the survey from an office if they were interested in completing it and they were to turn it in by a specific date.

2. The Sample

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

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

In Table 3, we show the demographic distributions by city and for the sample as a whole. The sample is fairly evenly distributed across grades 10, 11, and 12, but has fewer students in 9th grade. In Chicago, twelfth grade provided the fewest students.⁹ The age distribution looks as one would expect based on the grade distribution, with a lower percentage of 14- and 18-year olds than students ages 15 to 17. We note that 128 students were at least 18 years old and were thus adults.

Students split equally between male and female as expected. Race/ethnicity distributions were reasonably similar to their actual distributions for these school districts;¹⁰ however, the larger proportion of the sample being from L.A. highly skewed

⁹ In two Chicago schools, the survey was conducted in the Spring after seniors had already graduated.

¹⁰ Race/ethnicity distributions can be found at the LAUSD website <http://search.lausd.k12.ca.us/cgi-bin/fccgi.exe?w3exec=PROFILE0> and the Chicago Public Schools website http://research.cps.k12.il.us/export/sites/default/accountweb/Reports/RacialSurvey/FY09_Racial_Ethnic_Survey.xls.

the overall sample distribution. Eighty percent of the L.A. sample was Hispanic, yielding an overall rate of 71.5 percent. Twenty percent of the entire sample was African American; 46 percent in Chicago and 13 percent in L.A. Only 3 percent of the entire sample was white with 8 percent in Chicago and 2 percent in L.A.

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

Table 3 School Survey Sample Description			
	Chicago	Los Angeles	Total
<i>Sample Size</i>	283	963	1246
<i>Grade</i>			
9	17.3%	18.3%	18.1%
10	31.1%	24.4%	25.9%
11	39.6%	27.9%	30.6%
12	12.0%	29.4%	25.4%
<i>Age</i>			
13	4.0%	0.0%	1.0%
14	6.0%	11.1%	10.0%
15	21.2%	20.2%	20.4%
16	30.4%	27.0%	27.8%
17	28.3%	32.0%	31.1%
18	11.7%	8.5%	9.2%
19	1.8%	6.0%	9.0%
20	0.0%	3.0%	2.0%
Missing	4.0%	3.0%	3.0%
<i>Sex</i>			
Male	48.4%	50.8%	50.2%
Female	51.6%	48.6%	49.3%
Missing	0.0%	6.0%	5.0%
<i>Race/ethnicity</i>			
White	7.8%	2.0%	3.3%
African American	45.9%	12.9%	20.4%
Hispanic	42.4%	80.1%	71.5%
Other	3.2%	3.8%	3.7%
Missing	0.7%	1.2%	1.1%
<i>Family Type</i>			
2 bio parents	43.1%	58.9%	55.3%
Step-family	8.8%	10.9%	10.4%
Single parent	34.3%	24.5%	26.7%
Other	13.1%	4.0%	6.1%
Missing	0.7%	1.7%	1.4%

III. Running Away: Contemplation and Experience

Identifying Youth Who Have Contemplated Running Away

One of the main objectives of the school survey was to identify youth who have contemplated running away. To assess whether a youth had contemplated running away, we asked youth whether or not they had ever considered running away and, if so, how seriously they had considered it. The seriousness was measured using a Likert-type scale of “very seriously,” “somewhat seriously,” “not very seriously,” and “not at all seriously.”

Nearly two in five (38 percent) students said they have thought about running away; 23 percent said they have thought about it “somewhat” or “very” seriously (see Table 4).¹¹ Females were more likely than males to have thought about running away with nearly half of girls (48 percent) having thought about it compared with 39 percent of boys ($p < .001$). Furthermore, 27 percent of girls had thought about it “somewhat” or “very” seriously, considerably greater than the 18 percent of boys ($p < .01$).

Significant differences also appear for youth living in different family structures. Youth living with both biological parents are the least likely to have thought about running away (33 percent). Youth in step-families had the highest rates of having thought about running away (61 percent), followed by youth in “other” family types (44 percent) and youth in single-parent households (40 percent), each significantly different from youth living with both biological parents (all significant at $p < .05$). For those who thought about running away “somewhat” or “very” seriously, the ordering remains the same (33 percent in step-families, 27 percent in “other” family types, 25 percent in single-parent families, and 19 percent in intact families).

¹¹ Several students circled “no,” that they had not thought about running away, but then circled some level of seriousness. If we include these students as having thought about running away, the percentages rise to 46.5 who have thought about running away and 25.0 percent who have thought about it “somewhat” or “very” seriously. Because we don’t know how to interpret the inconsistency in their responses, we retain the more conservative estimate for the rest of the report.

Table 4 Percentage of Youth Who Have Thought About Running Away					
	Never	Percent Thought About Running Away			
		Not at all seriously	Not very seriously	Somewhat seriously	Very seriously
<i>All Youth</i>	61.5	4.4	11.4	14.9	7.7
<i>Sex</i>					
Male	71.3	3.9	7.1	11.8	5.9
Female	51.7	5.0	16.0	18.0	9.3
<i>FamilyType</i>					
2 bio parents	67.4	4.2	9.1	13.7	5.7
Step-family	38.6	8.7	19.7	20.5	12.6
Single parent	60.2	2.5	12.4	16.4	8.6
Other	56.0	5.3	12.0	13.3	13.3

Identifying Youth with Runaway Experience

To identify youth who had previously run away, we ask explicitly if they had ever run away, the number of times they ran away, the age at which they first ran away and the age when they most recently ran away. This group may have more knowledge of services and may have accessed them.

Like other studies of runaway youth, our interviews of youth in shelters and on the street missed several groups of youth, including runaways that are currently couch surfing. Most of the runaways we interviewed in shelters or on the street had spent time in the homes of friends and relatives and were not always in shelters or on the street.¹² In the street and shelter interviews we also saw that nearly half of the runaways were currently attending school.¹³ We hoped to identify current runaways, either couch-surfing or on the street, by asking who they currently live with, focusing on caregivers. It is possible though that youth interpreted our questions in a less immediate sense and

¹² Pergamit and Ernst (2010), p. 48.

¹³ *Ibid.*, p. 55.

responded about who they most recently or typically live with. Thus if they had been living with their mother, but spent the last week living with a friend or in an abandoned building, they may have responded that they live with their mother. As a result, we do not attempt to distinguish between current runaways and youth who have run away in the past but are currently back at home. However, the likelihood that most have returned home, as most runaways do¹⁴ makes for an interesting comparison with what we found for youth on the street or in shelters.

Table 5 shows that nearly 16 percent of the students surveyed had run away at some time, defined as having spent the night away from their parents without their parents' permission when their parents did not know where they were. This compares quite similarly with national data that indicate nearly 20 percent of all youth have run away before turning 18 (Pergamit 2010).¹⁵ In our sample, girls were less likely to have run away than boys ($p=.1$). This differs from national studies that show either similar rates by gender (Hammer, Finkelhor, and Sedlak 2002) or slightly higher rates for girls (Pergamit 2010).

Family structure once again shows significant differences in runaway experience for youth not living with both biological parents. Youth living in households without a biological parent were the most likely to run away (30 percent), followed closely by youth in step-families (26 percent), a difference that is not statistically significant. Only one in

¹⁴ Hammer, Finkelhor, and Sedlak 2002; Toro, Dworksy, and Fowler 2007; Milburn, et al. 2007

¹⁵ There are many reasons we expect the percentage of our sample that has run away to differ from other estimates. The sample is not randomly selected even within the two cities. It comes from two large urban areas, is over-representative of Hispanics and under-represents Whites, misses truants, reflects an unknown selectivity in response in the Chicago schools, and includes youth not yet 18 years old. Considering all these differences, the percentage is remarkably in the right ballpark.

ten youth living with both biological parents had run away while nearly one in five (19 percent) youth in single-parent homes had run away.¹⁶

Table 5 Percent of Youth with Runaway Experience	
	Percent Ran Away
<i>All Youth</i>	15.7
<i>Sex</i>	
Male	17.3
Female	14.0
<i>FamilyType</i>	
2 bio parents	10.3
Step-family	26.4
Single parent	18.8
Other	29.7

An apparent contradiction appears between Tables 4 and 5. Table 4 shows that girls are more likely than boys to have thought seriously about running away, but Table 5 shows that girls have actually run away less than boys. If we look at the degree to which youth say they have thought about running away only among those who have run away at some time, we see that nearly one-third of students who have run away say they have never thought about running away (see Table 6). Only somewhat over half (54.8 percent) have thought about running away “somewhat” or “very” seriously.

It isn’t clear what we should infer from this apparent contradiction. The question we asked about whether they have ever thought about running away does not provide a definition of running away whereas the question about having ever run away does. This

¹⁶ All pairwise-comparisons of family type other than the difference between step-families and “other” families are statistically significant (the highest p-value is .04 between step-families and single-parent families).

may make the two concepts incomparable. However, the definition of running away only clarifies what we mean and the youth is answering that they have run away.

Additional insight might come from the interviews with shelter and street youth. In those interviews, only 36 percent of youth who had ever run away said they had planned ahead.¹⁷ The remaining 64 percent said they had left on the spur of the moment. It is possible this same phenomenon is reflected in the school survey results for youth who had run away but say they had never thought about running away.

	Never	Percent Has Thought about Running Away			
		Not at all seriously	Not very seriously	Somewhat seriously	Very seriously
<i>Youth with runaway experience</i>					
Yes	32.4	2.2	10.6	26.8	27.9
No	65.7	5.1	11.8	13.4	4.1

Table 7 shows the runaway experiences for those in our sample who had run away at some time. Two out of five of the youth with runaway experience first ran away when they were less than 14, prior to high school age. Although less than observed in national data (Pergamit 2010), this shows a significant percentage of youth ran away at very young ages. More than three fifths (61.3 percent) of the runaways in our sample have run away more than once; one seventh (14.3 percent) have run away six or more times.

Focusing on their most recent runaway episode, half of all episodes lasted only one night. Another quarter (26.2 percent) lasted 2 to 3 nights; however 15 percent lasted at least one week, with over 7 percent lasting at least one month. The majority of

¹⁷ Pergamit and Ernst (2010), p. 43. The percentages of youth who say they planned ahead are even lower for youth who had been thrown out or who had both runaway and throwaway experiences.

youth (63 percent) went to a home with an adult present, either a relative's home or a friend's home. Another 13 percent went to a friend's house, but with no adult supervision (an additional 6 percent went to a friend's home, but did not indicate if a parent was present). Only 7 percent spent their first night in a less safe environment such as in a car, on the street, in a park, or in an abandoned building.

Table 7 Runaway Experiences	
<i>Age first ran away</i>	Percent
before age 12	17.3
12--13	23.0
14--15	41.0
16--17	18.6
<i>Number of runaway episodes</i>	
1	38.7
2	23.8
3--5	23.3
6+	14.3
<i>Duration of Most Recent Episode</i>	
1 night	50.0
2--3 nights	26.2
4--7 nights	8.9
1--2 weeks	4.2
3--4 weeks	3.6
1--2 months	2.4
longer than 6 months	4.8
<i>Place Spent First Night</i>	
Relative's home	27.8
Friend's home, parents present	35.8
Friend's home, no parents present	12.7
Friend's home, parents presence unknown	5.9
Shelter	0.6
Car/street/park/abandoned building	6.9
Multiple responses and "other"	13.3

In general, most youth have not contacted a service intended to help runaway youth, even among youth who have run away or who have seriously considered running away (Table 8). Only 9 percent of youth who had ever run away have contacted a service aimed at helping youth who run away¹⁸ and only 11 percent of those who have thought “very seriously” about running away have contacted such a service.

Table 8 Percentage of Youth Having Contacted a Service for Runaways	
	Percent contacted service that helps runaway youth
<i>Has runaway experience</i>	8.6
<i>Has Thought About Running Away</i>	
Never	2.0
Not at all seriously	0.0
Not very seriously	3.6
Somewhat seriously	3.9
Very seriously	10.6

Finally, we asked the students to identify (without names) anyone from their school that the student knows is not currently attending school *because* they are not living with their parents. Only about ten percent of the students could name such a person (Table 9). Of those who identified other students, about three quarters could only name one.¹⁹ However, prior runaway experience and serious contemplation of running away are correlated with knowing an absent youth who isn’t with his/her parents. Over one quarter (26 percent) of youth who have run away know someone who isn’t currently in school because they aren’t living with their parents, compared with only 8

¹⁸ We do not know if the contact occurred as part of a runaway episode.

¹⁹ Not shown in the table, 7.6 percent of all youth could name one absent student, 2.7 percent could name two or more absent students.

percent of those who have never run away ($p < .001$). Similarly, the percentage rises monotonically with the degree of serious contemplation, rising from 6 percent of those who have never thought of running away to nearly one quarter (24 percent) of those who have thought seriously about running away (statistically different from those who have never thought about running away at $p < .001$). These findings imply that youth who run away or who would seriously contemplate running away are in the same social networks within schools.

Table 9 Percentage of Youth Knowing Absent Students	
	Percent know a student not at school or at home
<i>All youth</i>	10.4
<i>Runaway experience</i>	
Yes	25.8
No	7.7
<i>Has Thought About Running Away</i>	
Never	6.4
Not at all seriously	7.4
Not very seriously	12.2
Somewhat seriously	17.1
Very seriously	24.5

IV. Knowledge of Services for Runaway Youth

Youth can gain knowledge about services available to runaways through a variety of channels. Schools can provide information directly, such as a teacher discussing the subject in a classroom, or indirectly, such as posting signs on a bulletin board. Alternatively, schools may provide information only upon request.

Information can be obtained outside of school from other organizations, on the internet, through advertising, or from relatives and friends. Finally, knowledge may be obtained through first-hand experience using these services. In addition to prior runaway experience, some youth may have experienced family homelessness that introduced them to services that may be used by youth and adults. Table 10 shows the percent of students having knowledge of four specific services. Comparisons are made between youth with and without runaway experience and for youth with different levels of serious consideration of running away.

General knowledge of responding students

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.

In general, students responding to the survey did not have much knowledge about four specific services available for runaway youth: hotlines, shelters, places to get a free meal, and places to get medical care. The most commonly known service was a place to get a free meal, known by 14 percent of the students (Table 10). Students in low-income families may have experience with food banks and even "soup kitchens," sources of free meals they may believe they could tap if they were to run away. Shelters

and a place to get medical care are known by roughly one in twelve students. Less than 4 percent of students know of a hotline they can call if they run away from home.

When we look across all four types of services, we find that nearly 22 percent of the students have knowledge of at least one of them. Most of these youth know one or two of the services; only a handful knows all four. However, knowledge of at least one service could be critical as any one of these services could be a gateway to other services if a runaway youth were to access it.

Knowledge of youth with runaway experience or contemplation

Table 10 shows that previous runaway experience is associated with knowing about more services. Youth who have run away are more than twice as likely as other youth to know about a shelter ($p=.02$), though only 15 percent have this knowledge. They also have significantly more knowledge of where to get a free meal ($p=.02$) or medical care ($p=.01$). Although youth with runaway experience have more knowledge of hotlines than other youth ($p=.07$), it is still a small percentage (6 percent). Looking across all four types of services, nearly one-third of youth with previous runaway experience know about at least one of these services compared with one-fifth of other youth ($p<.01$).

One would hope that youth who are thinking about running away would invest in acquiring knowledge of available services. However, Table 10 reveals no clear pattern of knowledge with respect to the level of serious contemplation about running away. Youth who have thought about running away “very seriously” have the most knowledge of three of the services, but the differences are generally not statistically significant.²⁰ Nor are they the group with the highest rate of knowing about at least one service.

²⁰ For example, youth who have thought very seriously about running away are more knowledgeable about where to find a hotline than are youth who have never thought about running away ($p<.001$), but not more than youth who have thought about running away “not at all” seriously ($p=.45$).

Table 10 Youths' Knowledge of Runaway Services					
	<u>If youth ran away, percent knows where to find...</u>				
	free meal	medical care	shelter	hotline	at least one service
<i>All youth</i>	13.5	8.7	8.5	3.7	21.8
<i>Runaway experience</i>					
Yes	19.0	13.7	15.4	5.9	32.0
No	12.1	7.7	6.9	3.2	19.6
<i>Has Thought About Running Away</i>					
Never	13.9	9.1	8.1	2.0	21.3
Not at all seriously	16.7	9.3	9.3	9.3	31.5
Not very seriously	11.6	5.8	7.3	5.8	20.6
Somewhat seriously	12.6	5.6	9.5	3.9	19.3
Very seriously	11.8	11.8	12.9	11.7	26.4

Schools' provision of information to help runaway youth

Schools can be a focal point for disseminating information to youth about how to get help if they are having trouble at home or if they run away from home. Based on youths' responses, schools either do not typically provide such information openly or it does not make an impression on the students.²¹ Less than one quarter (23 percent) of the students responding to our survey reported that their school provided this type of information (see Table 11). While the percentage varied somewhat across schools, the differences were not significant. It is not clear whether or not the schools did not provide information or whether it was done in a manner or place that did not register with most students. Most schools had 17 to 35 percent of the responding students affirming that the school made information available implying that most students are not aware of this

²¹ The study design was based on collecting the youth's point of view. We did not attempt to discern what information schools actually provide or how they provide it.

information if it exists. Even looking within single grades within a school did not reveal more agreement among the students about information being available.

When we asked about two specific ways schools make information available, roughly one in ten students responded that this type of information was provided by teachers, for example, during homeroom. Similarly one in ten students responded that the information was posted somewhere that they see it regularly.²² Only 4 percent of students answered that both teachers and postings were sources of information in their school.

Table 11 Percent of Students Indicating School Provides Information on Help for Runaway Youth	
<i>Students say:</i>	Percent
school provides information	23.1
--teacher provides in classroom	9.9
--posted	10.6
----teacher provides and posted	4.4

Schools' provision of information and youths' knowledge of runaway services

If schools are providing information to students about ways to get help, one would expect students in these schools to be more knowledgeable about available services. In fact, this is the case. Students who say their school provides information are more knowledgeable about each of the four services we asked about than students who say their school does not provide such information, although the difference for knowing hotlines is not statistically significant ($p=.21$) (see Table 12). At least 15 percent of the students who say their school provides information know where to find a shelter, where to obtain a free meal, or where to get medical care if they run away; still, only 5 percent know of a hotline they can call for help. In total, one third of students who say their

²² There was greater consistency in response within schools for these two items, but mostly because the percentages are low.

school provides information know of at least one of the four services, compared with 18 percent of students who say their school does not provide information ($p < .001$).

Given that we don't see consistency in response from students within schools with regard to the school providing information, these differences may reflect how and when schools provide the information as well as differences in student's attention to the information. It could also be that schools that have larger numbers of runaways are more likely to provide information to help runaways.

Remarkably, the distributions in Table 12 are very similar to those in Table 10 which showed student's knowledge by their runaway experience. This calls into question whether the findings about the impact of the school providing information might merely reflect the knowledge a youth might gain from a runaway experience. Table 12 shows that students with runaway experience are generally more knowledgeable if they say their school provides information; however, only differences in knowledge of where to find a shelter, and of "at least one of the four services" are statistically significant ($p < .05$). More importantly, youth without runaway experience are more knowledgeable if they say their school provides information, suggesting that there is a genuine effect of information from schools informing youth about services available to help them if they run away.²³

²³ All comparisons except knowledge of a hotline are statistically significant at $p < .05$. The comparison of knowledge of hotlines is not significant ($p = .2$).

Table 12 Youths' Knowledge of Runaway Services if School Provides Information					
<u>If youth ran away, percent knows where to find...</u>					
	free meal	medical care	shelter	hotline	at least one service
<i>School provides information</i>					
Yes	18.6	15.3	15.5	5.0	33.9
No	11.7	6.4	6.2	3.1	18.0
<i>Youth has runaway experience</i>					
School provides information	24.5	20.0	31.5	5.4	48.1
School does not provide	16.0	9.9	7.5	4.9	24.1
<i>Youth does not have runaway experience</i>					
School provides information	16.8	14.3	10.9	4.9	30.0
School does not provide	11.0	5.7	5.7	2.7	16.9

V. How Youth Would Get Help

In order to understand how to get information to youth, we wanted to know how they go about getting help when they need it. Within the sequence about knowledge of services, we asked the students if they would call a hotline if they were to run away from home.

Only one in five said they would call a hotline if they ran away (Table 13). Interestingly, the rates were nearly identical for youth who had run away in the past and for those who had never run away. The percentages for different levels of serious contemplation do not form a clear pattern. Most disturbing is that only 13 percent of those who have “very seriously” considered running away would call a hotline if they were to run away.

Table 13 Percent of Youth Who Would Call a Hotline if They Ran Away	
	If ran away, percent of youth would call hotline
<i>All youth</i>	20.5
<i>Runaway experience</i>	
Yes	20.6
No	20.2
<i>Has Thought About Running Away</i>	
Never	24.1
Not at all seriously	9.4
Not very seriously	13.1
Somewhat seriously	19.1
Very seriously	12.9

If the student was unwilling to call a hotline under the hypothetical proposition that they had run away, an open question asked them to explain why not. We grouped these into similar or related responses. Roughly half of the students supplied an answer, however nearly 40 percent of these responses did not lend themselves to coding. Typical of these responses were “because” or “I don’t know.” Of the codeable 61 percent, 7 percent couldn’t imagine that they would run away. The remaining responses broke down into roughly six types of responses. These categories of responses are:

- The youth doesn’t know a number (12%).
- The youth doesn't want anyone in their business, or just doesn't want someone to know (where they are or in general), or that the point of running away is for no one to know where you are, or they want to be alone (11%).
- The youth has other help (11%).
- The youth is worried about being caught/found, or someone finding out, or doesn't trust the hotline (9%).

- The youth doesn't think they need help, or they can manage on their own, or want to try (6%)
- The youth doesn't think calling the hotline would help or that the hotline staff wouldn't understand (6%).

At the end of the questionnaire, we posed the following hypothetical question to the students:

If you needed help and felt you couldn't talk to your parents, which of the following would you do?

Table 14 shows the percentage of students that selected each of the possibilities we listed (youth could circle as many as they wanted). By far, the most students selected talking to a friend (74 percent); no other item was selected by even a majority of students. Talking to another adult such as a relative or neighbor was second (39 percent), exceeding talking to a teacher or school counselor (28 percent) or talking to a friend's parents (20 percent). In the interviews with shelter and street youth, we found that friends were the primary source of information for a number of services (shelters, free meals, free showers, and drop-in centers), though less so for where to get health care or counseling.²⁴

Clearly, we posed a very general question that could have been interpreted in many ways in terms of "needing help." However, we note that the most likely confidants are perhaps the least knowledgeable about available help.

²⁴ Pergamit and Ernst (2010), p. 63.

	Percent of Youth
talk to a friend	74.3
talk to another adult such as a relative or neighbor	38.7
search the internet	28.6
talk to a teacher or school counselor	28.2
talk to a friend's parents	19.6
Talk to someone at your church or other religious organization	17.1
call a hotline	5.6
go to a shelter	4.1
wouldn't tell anyone	2.5
Other	5.3

VI. Discussion and Key Findings

Running away from home is more common than one might think. National data indicate that nearly one in five youth will run away before turning age 18 (Pergamit 2010). The survey of high school students in Chicago and Los Angeles found nearly 16 percent had run away from home at some time. The survey also revealed that as many as one in four high school students had seriously considered running away, though most had not done so.

In general, students have little knowledge of services available to runaway youth, even if they have run away in the past or have seriously considered running away. In particular, students are unfamiliar with hotlines and few would call a hotline if they were running away. This is surprising and could be detrimental to young people. Hotlines are an easy service to access and provide a conduit to other services. Hotlines can be a major resource for youth contemplating running away.

Schools provide an important focal point for supplying youth with information about how to get help if they run away or if they are having trouble at home. Students who said their schools provided information about services for runaway youth were more knowledgeable about available services than other students. Current runaways cite

school as a good place to inform youth about available services (Pergamit and Ernst 2010).

The data suggest that youth who run away or contemplate running away may be in the same social networks within schools. That possibility, coupled with the finding that youth typically turn to their friends when they need help and feel they can't talk to their parents, implies that providing information in schools may be a good way to create knowledge circulation through the social network to the youth who most need it. Given that many runaway episodes appear to be unplanned, arming youth with information can help prevent a bad situation from becoming worse.

Key findings from the survey of high school students include:

Running Away: Contemplation and Experience

- Nearly two in five students had at sometime considered running away; nearly one quarter had considered it “somewhat” or “very” seriously.
- Girls were more likely than boys to have considered running away (48 percent compared with 39 percent). Girls were more likely than boys to have considered running away “somewhat” or “very” seriously (27 percent compared with 18 percent).
- Youth in step-families were the most likely to have considered running away “somewhat” or “very” seriously (33 percent), followed by youth in household without a biological parent (27 percent), youth in single-parent families (25 percent), and youth living with both biological parents (19 percent).
- Although 16 percent of responding students had run away at some time, not all said they had ever thought about running away. Consistent with the interviews of

youth in shelters and on the street, a sizable portion of runaway episodes may be unplanned spur of the moment decisions.²⁵

- Few youth with runaway experience or who have seriously considered running away have contacted a service intended to help runaways.
- There appears to be a social network in schools among youth who have run away or have seriously considered running away.

Knowledge of Services for Runaway Youth

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

How Youth Would Get Help

- Youth turn primarily to friends for help if they feel they can't talk to their parents.
- Youth do not know about hotlines and would not call if they were to run away; only 13 percent of youth who have seriously considered running away would call a hotline.

²⁵ Pergamit and Ernst (2010), p. 43

- Youth wouldn't call hotlines because they don't have the number; don't want to tell others their business; wouldn't want to be found; has other help; doesn't trust hotlines; doesn't think they need help; or believe it would not do any good or that hotline staff would not understand their situation.

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Appendix
School Survey Questionnaire

Runaway Youth and Service Access Survey

C				
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Youth ID Number

Teacher's name _____ Current Time: _____

Part I

Please answer the following questions about yourself.

1) What grade are you in? (circle one)

9 10 11 12

2) How old are you? (circle one)

12 13 14 15 16 17 18 19 20

3) Are you male or female? (circle one)

Male

Female

4) Are you of Spanish, Hispanic, or Latino origin? (circle one) Yes No

5) Please select one or more of the following categories on this card to best describe your race. (circle one or more)

1. American Indian or Alaska Native
2. Asian
3. Black or African American
4. Native Hawaiian or Other Pacific Islander
5. White

6) Circle the number next to EACH person you are currently living with.

1. Mother
2. Father
3. Step-mother
4. Step-father
5. Grandmother
6. Grandfather
7. Foster mother
8. Foster father
9. Aunt
10. Uncle
11. None of the above –
please tell us with whom you live or where you live

Part II

1) Have you ever thought about running away from home? (circle one) Yes No

1a) How seriously have you thought about running away from home? (circle one)

1. very seriously
2. somewhat seriously
3. not very seriously
4. not at all seriously

2) Have you ever contacted a service aimed at helping youth who run away? (circle one)

Yes No

3) Do you know of any hotline numbers that you can call if you are a youth who has run away from home? (circle one) Yes No

3a) If yes, what is the number (or name)? _____

4) If you were to run away from home, would you call a hotline? (circle one) Yes No

4a) If not, why not? _____

5) Do you know of any shelters where a youth who has run away can stay in your community? (circle one) Yes No

6) Do you know of any places in your community where a youth who is away from home without any money could go to get served a free meal? (circle one) Yes No

7) Do you know any places in your community where a youth who is away from home without any money could go to get medical care? (circle one) Yes No

8) If you needed help and felt you couldn't talk to your parents, which of the following would you do?

Circle the numbers of ALL the things you would do.

1. search the internet
2. talk to a teacher or school counselor
3. talk to a friend
4. talk to a friend's parents
5. talk to another adult such as a relative or neighbor
6. call a hotline
7. Talk to someone at your church or other religious organization
8. go to a shelter
9. other _____

9) Does your school provide information on where you can get help if you are having trouble at home or if you run away from home? (circle one) Yes No (Go to #10)

9a) If yes, is this information provided by a teacher, for example, during homeroom? (circle one) Yes No

9b) Is this information posted somewhere that you see regularly? (circle one) Yes No

10) Have you ever run away from home? By “running away from home” we mean have you ever spent the night away from your parents without their permission when they did not know where you were? (circle one) Yes No (Go to #11)

10a) If yes, how many times have you run away?(circle one)
Once Twice Three times Four times Five times Six or more times

10b) How old were you the *first* time you ran away? (fill in the blank) _____years

10c) How old were you the *last* time you ran away? (fill in the blank) _____years

10d) Thinking about the *last* time you ran away, for how long were you gone? (circle one)

1 night 2-3 nights 4-7 nights 1-2 weeks 3-4 weeks
1-2 months 3-6 months longer than 6 months

11) Thinking about the last time you ran away, where did you spend your first night away from home? (circle one)

1. At a relative’s house/apartment
2. At a friend’s house/apartment where there were parents
3. At a friend’s house/apartment where there were no parents
4. In a shelter
5. In a car
6. In a hotel/motel/Single Room Occupancy
7. On the street, in a park, or in an abandoned building
8. Other (please tell us where) _____

Part III (Note: The original questionnaire provided 11 of the boxes shown below. We have deleted them here to conserve paper and space.)

Think about anyone from your school that you know is not currently in school *because* they are not living with their parents. These students may have left home because they wanted to, or they may have been asked to leave. No matter what the reason, now they are living somewhere else, perhaps temporarily—maybe with friends, or relatives, in a shelter, or in a car.

Please complete a box for each student you know who is not attending school *because* they are not living at home. If you need more boxes, please write on the back of this page.

If you don't know any students not attending your school and not living at home, check here _____ and go to the last page.

<p>Initials of student not attending your school and not living at home: _____ (Initials are NOT used to track down any individual)</p> <p>Grade (circle one): 9 10 11 12 Unknown</p> <p>Gender: Male Female</p> <p>Race: White Black Asian Hispanic American Indian Unknown Other _____</p> <p>Where is he or she living now? Relative Friend Foster Family or Group Home Car/street/abandoned building Other(please describe) _____</p> <p>How long has he or she been living away from home? 0-1month 2-5months 6-12months 13months-2years Over 2 years Unknown</p> <p>Does he or she still attend school some times? Yes No Unknown</p>
<p>Initials of student not attending your school and not living at home: _____ (Initials are NOT used to track down any individual)</p> <p>Grade (circle one): 9 10 11 12 Unknown</p> <p>Gender: Male Female</p> <p>Race: White Black Asian Hispanic American Indian Unknown Other _____</p> <p>Where is he or she living now? Relative Friend Foster Family or Group Home Car/street/abandoned building Other(please describe) _____</p> <p>How long has he or she been living away from home? 0-1month 2-5months 6-12months 13months-2years Over 2 years Unknown</p> <p>Does he or she still attend school some times? Yes No Unknown</p>