

*Why They Run: An in-depth look at America's runaway youth*, presented by the National Runaway Switchboard, sheds new light on the runaway problem in America and begins to fill in the gaps of what is already known and what can be done based on new research.

*Why They Run* is comprised of research from three main sources: 1) existing research and reports, 2) NRS Crisis Caller Trends report (April 2010), and 3) new research conducted with youth between ages 14-17 on the street and in shelters (in Chicago and Los Angeles), which was implemented by the National Opinion Research Center (NORC), a social science research organization affiliated with the University of Chicago. Below are key findings from the new research from the NORC study.

#### A planned departure?

- More than 70 percent of youth interviewed described their leaving home as occurring on the spur of the moment.
- Thirty-six percent who ran said they planned it in advance, while 23 percent who were thrown out said they expected to be thrown out and planned to run anyway.
- Fifty-six percent of youth who said they ran away also said that someone else knew they were planning to run away.

#### Preferred method of contact:

- Despite the proliferation of new communication technology, youth overwhelmingly preferred to talk directly via telephone instead of e-mail and text messaging when seeking help.
- Nearly 80 percent wanted to talk to a person to determine if that person sounded like they really intended to be helpful, and if they sounded honest and trustworthy.
- Youth felt that e-mail was not direct enough and they would have to wait for a response, and e-mail and texting would not convey urgency or their needs effectively. E-mail requires computer access but phones are more readily accessible.

#### What they'll do for money:

- Means reportedly ranged from getting a job, obtaining money from friends or family, the sex industry, selling drugs or some other source. Nearly 35 percent of youth resorted to panhandling, the single-most popular means of obtaining money.

#### Seeking shelter:

- Nearly 54 percent of youth who go to a shelter do so because they have run out of places to stay or are just tired of being on their own.
- Only 15 percent of interviewed youth reported finding their way to a shelter on their own.

#### On Staying Connected:

- More than half report that friends know where they are, while 26 percent have reported that parents and 25 percent have siblings who know their whereabouts. Only 13 percent said that nobody knew where they were.
- Nearly 45 percent of youth attended school, with 70 percent attending regularly.

- Nearly two-thirds of shelter youth attended school, while 28 percent of street youth continued attending school.

### Runaway or throwaway?

- Thirty percent of the youth explicitly described what happened as running away.
- Nearly half (48 percent) said they were thrown out of their homes.
- Twenty-two percent described the situation as both, some combination of running away and being thrown out.

### In touch through technology:

#### **Cell phones:**

- Fifty-eight percent of youth had access to a cell phone at least some of the time, and 20 percent had their own phone.
- Two-thirds of just the street youth report having cell phone access some of the time.
- Cell phone access increases with age. More than one-third of 14- and 15-year olds report having access; 60 percent of 16-year olds, and 63 percent of 17-year olds.

#### **E-mail:**

- Seventy-one percent of youth report having access to e-mail.
- Of those with access, 73 percent access e-mail at least once a week and 34 percent access e-mail daily.
- Youth obtain access via school, public libraries, shelters, drop-in centers or a friend's home.

#### **Social networking sites**

- Seventy-five percent of youth have a MySpace account and 22 percent have an account on Facebook; all but one Facebook user also had a MySpace account.
- More than half access their account weekly, with social networking sites being accessed somewhat less frequently than e-mail.

### Reasons they run

- Youth commonly describe a significant family conflict that led to the youth's departure.
- Some situations indicate a parent has insisted the youth leave.
- Other cases indicate the youth should leave and the youth feels s/he has no choice, though it is unclear that the parent has insisted.
- In many situations, family conflict has existed for a period of 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. Over time, the distinction becomes fuzzy in the mind of the youth.
- For GLBTQ youth, 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, which may lead them to run.

## Not easily labeled: how runaway youth view themselves

- Only one-third of youth interviewed considered the term "runaway" as an accurate description.
- Older youth and females were less likely to consider themselves as a runaway.
- GLBTQ youth were significantly less likely to identify with the runaway label compared to heterosexual youth.
- Those who consider themselves "thrown out" did not consider themselves as runaways.
- Only half who report they ran away actually consider themselves a runaway.
- Similarly, only half of those who describe their episode as a combination consider themselves as a runaway.