

Issue Brief

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CHAPIN HALL
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AT THE UNIVERSITY OF CHICAGO

Youth Who Run Away from Out-of-Home Care

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The plight of children missing from foster care has gained increasing attention in recent years. Although the term evokes images of small children lost by those responsible for them, the overwhelming majority of missing children, in fact, are adolescents who have run away from care. While on the run, many are exposed to sexual and criminal victimization. They are at risk of abusing drugs and alcohol and of committing crimes themselves. Running also interrupts their schooling and thus their ability to acquire the education and skills needed to become economically self-sufficient.

Beyond the potential dangers running may present, it may also be a red flag that there are other things going on with youth while in care. They may be experiencing harm in their placements, missing family, receiving inadequate attention to their mental health needs, or lacking access to normative youth experiences such as sports.

Although running away from out-of-home care is clearly a problem for child welfare agencies and the youth they serve, the scope of the problem is still not clear. However, recent research conducted at Chapin Hall is beginning to help paint a better portrait of who runs away and why, so that service providers and policymakers can develop better strategies for preventing runaways and the risks associated with running. This Issue Brief, which draws on findings from the Chapin Hall study of runaways from out-of-home care in Illinois, examines what distinguishes youth who run away and what the youth have to say about their runaway experiences. The study, carried out with the collaboration of the Illinois Department of Children and Family Services (DCFS)¹, involved both analysis of administrative records and interviews with the youth themselves.

The largest study to date conducted of this population, the research included analysis of government administrative data on more than 14,000 youths who ran away from out-of-home care in a 10-year period between 1993 and 2003, as well as interviews with 42 youth who had recently run away and returned to care.² During the course of the study, foster parents and child welfare professionals were also interviewed. The interviews as a whole, which capture the voices of youth who run away as well as the perspectives of those with whom they may have the most extensive contact, provide a richer understanding of what youth are seeking when they run from out-of-home care, what are they hoping to escape, and what brings them back into care.

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Who Runs Away From Out-of-Home Care

Although most youth in out-of-home care never run away, the problem is certainly not uncommon. In Illinois, 14,282 youth ran away from out-of-home care between January 1, 1993, and December 31, 2003.

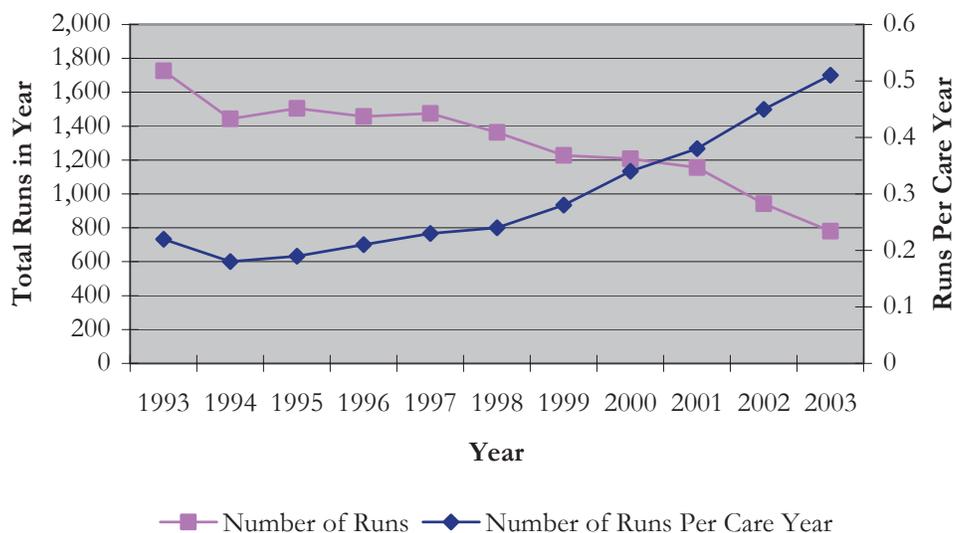
We examined how a range of potential factors might be associated with the likelihood that youth would run away from care. The predictors of first runs were not always the same factors that are related to subsequent runs. The vast majority (90%) of runners were between ages 12 and 18. Age 14 seemed to be the turning point where running became more prevalent; those older than 13 were significantly more likely than 12 and 13 year olds to run away. Girls were more likely to run than boys, and Black and Hispanic youth were more likely to experience a first run than Whites, though race/ethnicity was unrelated to later runs. Youth with substance abuse problems were at heightened risk of runaway, as were youth with some kinds of mental health diagnoses. Youth with a developmental disability or cognitive delay were less likely to run for the first time than their peers without such limitations, but this factor had no effect on subsequent runs. Youth who experience placement instability were much more likely than those with stable placement histories to run. Youth in foster home care were less likely to

run from care than those in residential care, and those living in the home of a relative were even less likely to run. Youth placed with a sibling were generally less likely to run than those not placed with a sibling.

Trends in Running Away Over Time

Although the absolute number of runaway events per year declined between 1993 and 2003, this is due to the decline in the foster care population in Illinois over this period. The actual average likelihood that an individual youth would run away increased significantly starting in the late 1990s. Figure 1 shows the total number of runs and the average number of runs per care year between 1993 and 2003. It shows the decrease in absolute numbers over ten years as well as the doubling of the likelihood that youth would run away from care in Illinois beginning in the late 1990s. Moreover, our analysis suggests that the increase is due almost entirely to an increased likelihood of *subsequent* runs rather than first runs. Beginning in the late 1990s, youth who ran away at least once from out-of-home care were increasingly likely to run again. Although our data cannot identify the precise reasons for this trend, it seems unlikely to be a result of changes in the characteristics of the foster care population in Illinois. In other words, perhaps some of the reasons that youth run away are becoming more common as time goes on.

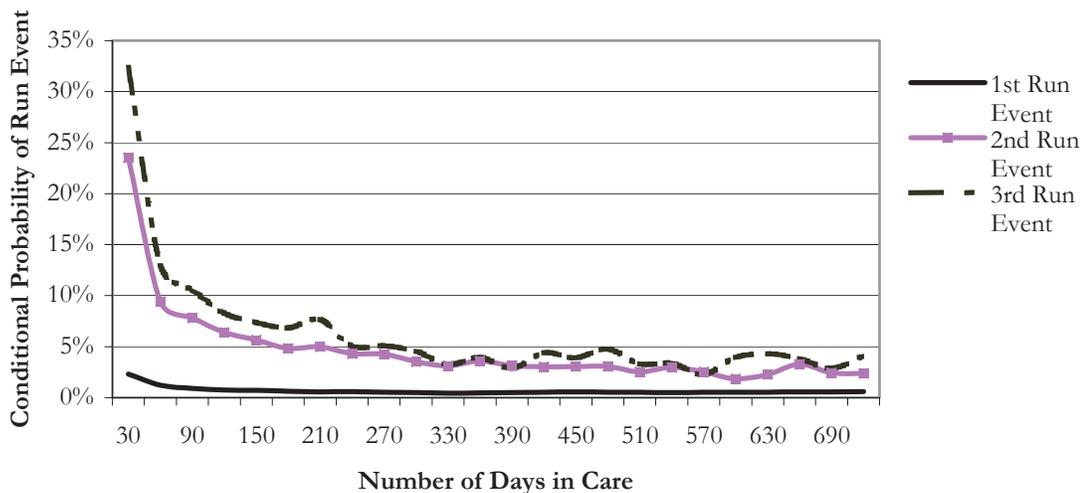
FIGURE 1: NUMBER OF RUNS DECLINES OVER TIME, LIKELIHOOD OF RUNNING INCREASES



We also examined trends in the likelihood that youth would run away over the course of their stays in out-of-home care. The “conditional probability” of runaway is the percentage of children still in care at the beginning of a time period, that then run away during that period. Figure 2 shows changes over time in the conditional likelihood that youth in care will run away during each 30-day period after they enter care. Among youth in out-of-home care for the first time,

the likelihood of runaway is generally very low. In contrast, the likelihood that a youth who has run once will run again is relatively high, particularly during the period immediately after his or her return to care. For example, over 20 percent of youth who have run once before will run again within 30 days of reentering care, and over 30 percent of youth who have run twice before will run again within 30 days of reentry.

FIGURE 2: PROBABILITY OF RUNNING AWAY IS HIGHER FOR THOSE WHO HAVE RUN AWAY BEFORE, AND IS HIGHER IMMEDIATELY AFTER RETURNING HOME



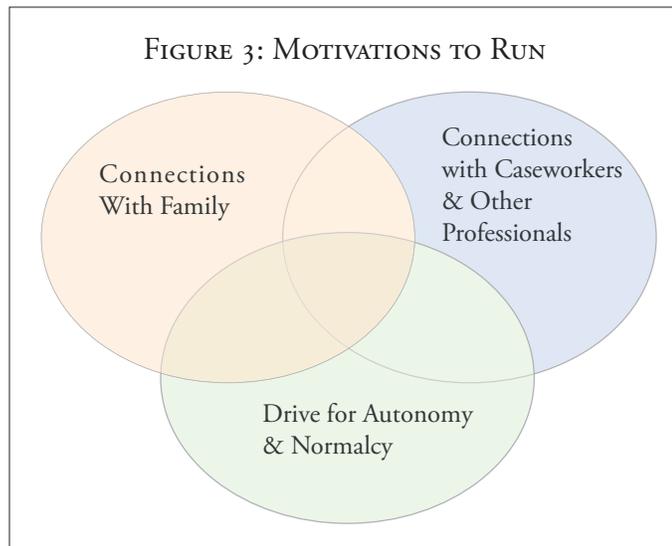
What Happens to Youth When They Run Away

Most youth are gone for only a week or less when they run away, but a sizable proportion is gone for more than a month, especially among older youth; more than one-third of runs by youth age 16 or older lasted at least one month. The longer a youth is gone, the greater the risk of harm. Interviews revealed that youth often experienced traumatic or destructive events while on the run, such as being sexually or physically victimized, engaging in delinquent behavior, and using drugs or alcohol. However, youth also reported suffering trauma in the past while not on the run, as well as problematic behavior both before and during their stay in out-of-home care. In other words, it is far from clear that all of the negative experiences that befell them while on the run were a consequence of being on the run per se.

Why Youth Run From Out-of-Home Care

Youth run for a number of reasons, but three common themes stood out from the interviews. First, youth and the adults we talked with all emphasized the role of *family* in the reasons why youth run. Many of the youth described their biological families as exerting a distinct emotional pull on them. In some cases, this was manifest in the urge to reconnect or stay connected. Second, *caseworkers, caregivers, and other professionals* were seen to play a crucial role. Many youth attempted to recreate family in various ways in order to access the sense of connectedness, support, and guidance they needed. Some reached out to caseworkers or foster parents. Some young people expected caseworkers to become extensions of their families and defined “good” caseworkers as those who really cared about them and looked out for them. Third, the *struggle for autonomy and drive for normalcy* often play out in runaway behavior.

ior. Like other teens, foster youth experience the drive for autonomy and for progressively greater freedom. Unlike other teens, their environment often offers little safety for experimentation and little flexibility to accommodate individual preferences. They are, moreover, often missing the linchpin of normalcy that is assumed to offer some inoculation against the hazards of the street—a nurturing and supportive family.



These three themes combine in different ways in the following four general categories of runners:

Running to Family of Origin

For a number of the youth, their runs centered on their family of origin; in fact, unlike the majority of runaway youth who appear to be running away from family, foster youth often report that they are running to family. This might help explain why the presence of a sibling in the same placement appeared to encourage youth to stay put. However, this group is not marked solely by strong attachments to and relationships with their families of origin. Some recognize that their families of origin are neither healthy, safe, nor even reciprocally caring environments. But many youth equated being around a biological family with being “normal,” and their desire for a “real home” (which foster care was not, in their minds). Some were drawn back to their biological families in order to help their mothers or their siblings.

Rotating to Friends and the Streets

Some of the youth we interviewed chafed at the rules and restrictions imposed on them in their placements. The quest for freedom and the need to assert their adulthood were central in their stories of running from placement. Rather than viewing their rejection of rules and routines solely as oppositional or reflective of some personal deficit, the young people saw their running away as consistent with their experiences in their families and communities of origin. These youth described themselves as already grown, in large part because they have had to take care of themselves.

Touching Base and Maintaining Relationships

Some youth ran both to family and to friends; they seemed to need to “touch base” in order to maintain their relationships with biological family, foster family, friends, and other people and places important to them. Paradoxically, they also needed to run away from these same people from time to time. In contrast to the first group, they do not describe their running as a persistent longing to be with family. Nor do they talk about being rejected by, or rejecting, their biological parents. Instead, these youth seem to be attempting to establish and maintain an eclectic community of care that combines both friends and family of origin.

Running at Random

A number of the girls we interviewed had experienced an extraordinary number of challenging experiences and traumas, both in their families of origin and during their foster care stays, such as the death and/or incarceration of family members, sexual assaults, miscarriages, giving birth, and having a child removed by DCFS. When asked why they run, they spoke generally about the need for a sense of freedom from stress and worry. These youth uniformly felt uncared for and unattached, and their runs seemed triggered by nearly random opportunities, such as an impulse to see the ocean or an invitation from friends or strangers.

Implications for Child Welfare Practice

The degree to which the comments of the key informants and the stories that the youth told dovetailed was remarkable. This connection suggests some poten-

tial areas of focus for child welfare agencies that wish to reduce the number of youth running away from out-of-home care. In particular, beginning to view running away as coping behavior may help agencies to design prevention strategies, improve the care teens receive in out-of-home placement, and inform caseworkers about the potential they have to influence their wards. Below are some specific areas where interventions may be targeted.

Role of Caseworkers

Caseworkers are often seen by youth as part of the new “families” they were trying to establish while in out-of-home care. In addition, caseworkers are often the only adults who have access to a foster child’s complete history. As such, they are the main facilitators of other relationships—with schools, with earlier placements, with family—and can help provide a sense of consistency and stability as young people move through the system. Clearly, caseworkers can play an important role in the lives of these youth.

Importance of Connections

A common theme among the youth was their hope to connect with others whom they believed cared about them and understood them. The strong relationship between placement instability and the likelihood of running away speaks to the importance of helping youth in out-of-home care find stable, and hopefully permanent, homes.

Ties to Family

Relations with the family of origin, good or bad, were a part of every youth’s story and played an important role in many of the runaway episodes. The fact that youth in kinship foster care are much less likely to run away than those in the care of nonrelatives also speaks to the importance of family bonds in reducing the risk of runaway. Similarly, being placed with a sibling appears to have a preventive effect. Caseworkers and others involved in the lives of foster youth would do well to attend closely to the relationships between foster youth and their families and to use these relationships to help maintain stable living arrangements for the youth, and to be in a better position to prevent family relationships from causing youth to run away.

Need for Normalcy

Both young people and key informants stressed the importance of opportunities to participate in activities that give foster youth access to developmentally appropriate experiences. Both groups also stressed the importance of school as a connection to normalcy, and as a way to develop life skills. Child welfare authorities should work to ensure that foster parents and residential care providers do not erect unnecessary barriers to the participation of foster youth in the normal activities of adolescents. They should also work with educational authorities to ensure that foster youth are not stigmatized in school.

Mental Health and Substance Abuse Disorders

Youth with diagnosed histories of substance abuse and some mental health disorders were at increased risk of running away. More attention to the assessment and treatment of these problems earlier in a youth’s exposure to out-of-home care may lower the risk of running away.

Interventions Immediately After First Run

Although prevention efforts should not ignore youth in care for the first time, the likelihood that a given youth will run away is fairly low and difficult to predict. In contrast, at least in Illinois, if a youth runs once, he or she is very likely to do so again—unless something is done to address the reasons for not wanting to stay put. Interventions timed to engage youth immediately after they return from running away would likely be more effective because they were targeting those most likely to run away again.

Relationship of Race and Gender to Running Away

Blacks and Hispanics are much more likely to run away from out-of-home care than whites, and females are more likely to run away than males. Unfortunately, our data do not tell us why this is so. Given the negative consequences associated with running away, it is important for child welfare practitioners and researchers to find answers to why these groups are at greater risk of running away from state care.

Final Considerations

From the perspective of the young people interviewed, running away might be viewed as a coping behavior and an attempt to make connections with family, friends, and a community where they sensed (or hoped) they belonged, were cared about, and were wanted. Most of the stories the young people told showed great resilience; in some ways, describing their behavior as “running away” is to oversimplify their absences from care, dismiss their choice to leave care when they felt they were being mistreated, and ignore the fact that these are young people who are trying to cope with overwhelming life events—both current and in their past. This resilience is reflected in part in the efforts many of them made, while on the run, to stay in school, to maintain relationships with family and others, and to arrange better placements.

Notes

¹ *Youth Who Run Away from Substitute Care*, by Mark E. Courtney, Ada Skyles, Gina Miranda, Andrew Zinn, Eboni Howard, and Robert M. Goerge. (2005)

² The youth interviewed were all from Cook County (Chicago), and they were primarily African American (88%). They were evenly divided between females (52%) and males (48%), and about three-fourths were between the ages of 16 and 18. The youths’ current living circumstances were fairly evenly distributed between group home placements (29%), non-relative foster home placements (26%), foster home placements with kin (21%), and some residential (9%) and transitional and independent living (15%) placements.

CHAPIN HALL RESOURCES:

- *Youth Who Run Away from Substitute Care*, by Mark E. Courtney, Ada Skyles, Gina Miranda, Andrew Zinn, Eboni Howard, and Robert M. Goerge. (2005)
- *Midwest Evaluation of the Adult Functioning of Former Foster Youth: Conditions of Youth Preparing to Leave State Care*, by Mark E. Courtney, Sherri Terao, and Noel Bost. (2004)
- *Educational Experiences of Children in Out-of-Home Care*, by Cheryl Smithgall, Robert Matthew Gladden, Eboni Howard, Robert Goerge, and Mark E. Courtney. (2004)

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