

"Youth Who Run Away From Substitute Care," by Mark Courtney, Ada Styles, Gina Miranda, Andrew Zinn, Eboni Howard and Robert George, is a study recently published by Chapin Hall. This study is a comprehensive analysis of over 14,000 youth who ran away from out of home care in Illinois between 1993 and 2003.

The quantitative part of this study contains a mixture of the obvious and not obvious, e.g., 90% of children who run from placements are 12 or older, running away from substitute care doubled in Illinois between 1998 and 2003. Most runs are of short duration but nearly a quarter of youth who run from care are absent for more than five weeks. "... It is clear that many more youth run from away from residential care than from foster home or home- of- relative placements ...". Youth more often return, at least in Illinois, to the type of placement they ran from than to any other type of placement. "This is true regardless of whether a youth is running for the first, second or third time." However, multiple runs increase the risk of juvenile detention. Also, "a small but nontrivial percentage of runaways are discharged to "permanency", mostly reunification with family."

A multivariate analysis indicated that "... all else being equal, Black youth experience first runs from care at about 1.3 times the rate of White youth and that Hispanics experience first runs at about 1.24 times that of Whites." The mental health and substance abuse problems of youth increased the odds of a first run. The region of the state in which a child was placed affected the runaway rate after controlling for other variables. Girls run away from out of home care in Illinois more often than boys.

"Placement instability while in out of home care and movements into and out of care were both associated with runaway risk." "...Increased placement instability generally increased the estimated risk of first runs, with even one additional placement increasing the relative risk of running by nearly 70 percent." Children / youth with 6 or more placements were at a greatly increased risk of running away numerous times. On the other hand, multiple placement episodes due to failed reunifications decreased the risk of first runs for this sample of youth.

Children in kinship care were at greatly reduced risk of running away compared with children placed in a non - relative home. Children in residential care had the highest runaway rates by far. Children placed with siblings were at reduced risk of first runs.

A history of running away was found to be the best predictor of future runs. "Approximately one third of youth who run from DCFS care will run again, most within a relatively short time after they return to care."

The most interesting part of this study however is not the quantitative data; it is the information in the qualitative part of the study based on interviews with run away youth. For many youth, "running away was revealed to be a coping behavior and an attempt to make connection with family, friends and community where they sensed (or hoped) they belonged, were cared about and were wanted." These adolescents were "striving to gain autonomy and control, wanting to feel at once "normal" yet valued for their individuality." "They saw their running as a quest for what they believed was missing in their lives..."

The authors comment that "it was striking how often their running reflected healthy desires for family connections, social time with peers, or a better life." They go on to say that "three common threads emerged: the centrality of family, the importance of other adults (e.g., caseworkers, caregivers, and other professionals), and the struggle for autonomy (i.e., the ability to make choices) and the drive to "normative" experiences."

The youth interviewed in this study "described their biological families as exerting a distinct gravitational pull on them." Youth often ran to the birth family to help parents or siblings. Nevertheless, "The view of families of origin as representing neglect, rejection, and abandonment is central to many of their stories."

In the absence of connection to birth families, these youth attempted to create "family" in various ways, e.g., through connections to caseworkers, foster siblings, foster parents.".. These young people deeply and openly long for a family structure, particularly parental figures." "They have not given up hoping for family connections, or some version of a parent, in ways that often reflected mainstream constructions of family."

Caseworkers are important persons in the lives of these youth. "Some young people expected caseworkers to become extensions of their families, and they defined good caseworkers as those who really cared about them and looked out for them."

The authors summarize by saying that "we found that running was a way for youth to cope with or respond to difficult emotions, familial relationships, negative experiences in foster care, and the challenges of being an adolescent growing up in the child welfare system." Some runs are to family rather than from placement, though many youth "recognize that their families are neither healthy, safe, nor even reciprocally caring environments." Most of these youth express a strong desire for normality defined in socially conventional ways, i.e., having a family, playing with kids in the neighborhood, going to school. Sometimes running away is "rotating to the streets", providing a temporary sense of freedom and autonomy. "Youth with this running pattern were neither motivated nor deterred from running by the consequences they might face on return."

Other youth are seeking "to establish an eclectic community of care that combines both friends and family of origin ..." "... most of the stories they told showed resilience and great diversity in the constellations of challenges they face." "...a common theme was

hope for a connection with others who they believe cared about them and understood them, and who they could make proud."