

Addressing Youth who Leave/Run Away from Child Welfare Placements

Youth who leave/run away from their child welfare placement are at high risk of becoming victims of trafficking¹. One study indicated that about 50 percent of youth in foster care placement will run away while they are in care.² In New York City, the Administration of Children's Services average 4,000 youth run away from their placement per year³. From the research that exists, as well as from the expert advice from direct care workers, we are learning what some of the push/pull factors are when youth make the determination to leave care.

Following factors are known to contribute to a youth's decision to run away from placement.^{4,5,6}

- **Separation of youth from their siblings and/or their own children**
- **Overly restrictive placements.** The more restrictive and punitive an individual placement is, the more likely it is that a youth will run away from it compared to a similar program with more flexibility. While professionals often place youth in more restrictive settings to protect them, youth frequently experience new trauma as a result of being moved to a more restrictive setting
- **Untreated substance abuse** Substance misuse is another common coping mechanism youth use to deal with trauma. When we remove one coping mechanism from a youth (like using a substance) they may adopt new ones (like running away).
- **Need for a healthy coping mechanism** Some youth have learned that leaving home is the best way for them to respond to a negative situation. When youth are used to leaving home they will need support from staff to develop safer and healthier coping mechanisms while in care.
- **Frustration in their lack of involvement or control over an assigned placement** In some states, youth are to provide input in their placement via permanency hearings. In practice, some youth are offered very little substantive involvement in planning their placement. Further, direct care staff and case managers are sometimes prevented from contributing substantive input in a youth's placement. In these instances the decisions are not necessarily in the best interest of the child can result in a youth running away.

¹ Department of Education. (2014). Statutory guidance on children who run away or go missing from home or care. Retrieved from https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/307867/Statutory_Guidance_-_Missing_from_care_3.pdf

² Finkelstein, M., Wamsley, M., Currie, D., & Miranda, D. (2004). *Youth who chronically AWOL from foster care. Why they run, where they go, and what can be done.* New York: Vera Institute.

³ *Ibid.*

⁴ Behavioral Health and Welfare Program Institute for Juvenile Research, University at Chicago. (2010). *Residential runaway risk assessment user guide.* Retrieved from http://www.nrcpfc.org/teleconferences/4-21-10/Runaway_Risk_Assessment_User_Guide_.pdf

⁵ Thomson, N. (2014, December 10). Conference call.

⁶ Day, A., & Riebschleger, J. (2007). Circumstances and suggestions of youth who run from out-of-home care. *The Michigan Child Welfare Law Journal, Fall*, 20-30.

Risk Assessment⁷

- **All youth should be assessed for their likelihood of running away from care upon intake.** Assessment should be ongoing and reviewed whenever risk factors change. Minimally, a new assessment is recommended 30 days after intake and at quarterly reviews.
- **Assessment should identify the presence of behavior patterns and other variables (see above) that indicate a youth's likeliness to leave a placement** Risk assessments should also be used to determine a youth's level of vulnerability in the community in the event that he/she runs from placement.

Suggestions for working with youth at high risk of running away from placement.^{8, 9, 10, 11}

- **Give youth an active role in their placement planning**
When youth are engaged in their own treatment planning they have an increased sense of control over their lives.
- **Support safe connections to non-offending family members** Youth are most successful when they have at least one consistent adult in their life.
- **Acknowledge that youth *can* run away from placement, even though you don't want them to** Be factual and non-threatening about what can happen if a youth does run away from care. Help youth create safety plans for what to do if they do run away and get into trouble.
- **Create an environment where the youth feel safe and supported** Youth need to feel physically and psychologically safe in their placements. Youth also need to feel that the adults in their environment genuinely care about their wellbeing and that their decisions and wishes are supported. Be friendly!
- **Provide youth with leadership opportunities and responsibilities in placement and within their community** Young people who are contributing members of the community are less likely to exhibit rebellious and delinquent behavior and are more likely to become effective in coping with their own challenges.
- **Provide support, training, and supervision to front-line staff regarding running away from placement** It will help them provide better services to youth and prevent staff

⁷ Behavioral Health and Welfare Program Institute for Juvenile Research, University at Chicago. (2010). *Residential runaway risk assessment user guide*. Retrieved from

http://www.nrcpfc.org/teleconferences/4-21-10/Runaway_Risk_Assessment_User_Guide_.pdf

⁸ Shared Hope International, ECPAT-USA & John Hopkins University. (2013). *National colloquium 2012 final report: An inventory and evaluation of the current shelter and services response to domestic minor sex trafficking*. Retrieved from <http://sharedhope.org/wp-content/uploads/2013/05/National-Colloquium-2012-Report-B.pdf>

⁹ Finkelstein, M., Wamsley, M., Currie, D., & Miranda, D. (2004). *Youth who chronically AWOL from foster care. Why they run, where they go, and what can be done*. New York: Vera Institute.

¹⁰ Day, A., & Riebschleger, J. (2007). Circumstances and suggestions of youth who run from out-of-home care. *The Michigan Child Welfare Law Journal, Fall*, 20-30.

¹¹ Thomson, N. (2014, December 10). Conference call.

burnout.

- **Staff should be supported in not taking youth's behaviors personally** Staff might perceive that they 'failed' when a youth runs away from placement. Running away is not about staff members. Programs need to be accepting of the risk inherent in working with youth and be supportive of their staff.
- **If a youth runs from placement once, or makes one bad decision, understand that the young person does not 'become' that one decision.** Youth are teenagers who make mistakes -it's part of the normal maturing process.
- **Be happy when youth returns after running away from placement.** When child welfare staff show that they're happy that the youth has returned safely, it helps to build healthy relationships and strong connections with youth.
- **Don't make youth less safe by taking shoes or coats to blocking them from leaving.** Youth have the right to their belongings, and keeping these items does not effectively prevent youth from running away from placement. Traffickers are also known to target youth without coat, shoes, and other necessities.
- **Be factual about why there is not room for youth upon return** If a youth's bed was filled when they return from running away from placement, staff should state this fact in a neutral way to let the youth know that the bed was reassigned not as a punishment, but because another youth needed a safe place to be.

This project was supported by Grant No. 2016-X1068-IL-TA, awarded by the Office on Violence Against Women, U.S. Department of Justice. The opinions, findings, conclusions, and recommendations expressed in this publication/program/exhibition are those of the author(s) and do not necessarily reflect the views of the Department of Justice, Office on Violence Against Women.