Running Away from Foster Care: Youths' Knowledge and Access of Services

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Executive Summary

Background

A sizable fraction of older youth in foster care run away from their placement at least once; many run multiple times. Estimates vary but indicate a serious problem. Courtney, Terao, and Bost (2004a) found that 46 percent of 17 year olds in substitute care in Illinois, Iowa, and Wisconsin stated that they had run away from care at some time; in Illinois alone the rate was 52 percent (Courtney, Terao, and Best 2004b). Nearly two-thirds of those who ran away did so more than once. A similar study of 17-year olds in Los Angeles foster care found 36 percent had run away from care at least once (Pergamit and Johnson 2009).

Unlike other runaways, youth who run away from foster care are generally not trying to escape from abuse or neglect, although they may experience conflict with caregivers. Having been separated from their families and friends, youth who run away from foster care are sometimes seen as running to something rather than running away (Courtney, et al. 2005).

While away from their placement youth may have need of shelter, medical care, counseling, and other services. These may be services they need because they are on the run (e.g. shelter) or services they need due to a specific event (e.g. becoming ill or injured). They may have been receiving some types of services while in care, such as counseling, medication, or substance abuse treatment, and being away from their placements may disrupt progress. Little is known about the extent to which foster youth use services while away from their placement or what knowledge they have of services.

This report constitutes the third part of a study on runaway youths and their knowledge and access of services. A description of the full study can be found in Pergamit and Ernst (2010a). This report is based on Interviews with a sample of youth who ran away from foster care placements in Chicago and Los Angeles. The information provided by these youths will help us to understand better why they run away and what can be done to prevent youth from running away from foster care. We also learn where these youth go when they run away. As with the other two parts of the study, an important aspect of this report is to give the opportunity to youth to express themselves, to "give youth a voice." No one from the foster care system was interviewed for this report.

Methods

The sample was derived from lists provided by the Departments of Child and Family Services in Illinois and California containing names and contact information for youth in a foster care placement who had run away at least once in the previous twelve months. One-on-one Interviews were conducted with youth in their current foster care placement in Chicago and Los Angeles from December 2008 through July 2009.

All the interviews were conducted by the same person and were audio-recorded with the youth's permission and transcribed for analysis. The protocol left all the questions open-ended, allowing the youth to tell their story. After the fact, a coding frame was developed that allowed the open-ended responses to be reduced to a set of coded responses.

The interviews took approximately 45-90 minutes and gathered information about the runaway event itself as well as the circumstances in the youth's life precipitating the runaway episode. Most questions were the same as those we asked of runaway youth on the street and in shelters with some extra questions pertaining to foster care experiences. Each youth was also asked to fill out a short self-administered questionnaire with basic demographic information and simpler versions of questions that would be asked in the full interview. Youth were paid $30 for their participation.

Runaway Foster Youth Sample

The sample consists of 50 youth in foster care at the time of the interview, 25 in Chicago and 25 in Los Angeles County. To be included in the sample, a youth had to be 14-17 years old, in out of home care under the supervision of the child welfare system, placed in the City of Chicago or in Los Angeles County, and have had at least one runaway episode in the previous twelve months.

Roughly half of the sample is seventeen years old, a quarter is sixteen, and a quarter is fourteen or fifteen. Compared with the lists provided by the two Departments, our sample is somewhat older, primarily with more 17-year olds and fewer 16-year olds. Females constitute 70 percent of the sample, only somewhat more weighted toward females than the original lists. The sample is mostly heterosexual with approximately one in five youth identifying as lesbian, gay, bisexual, or "something else."

Roughly half of the sample is African-American, about one-third Hispanic and only 4 percent white; the remaining 10 percent identified themselves as another race or multiple races. The level of educational grade attainment shows most of the sample roughly on track for their appropriate grade, based on their ages. Forty percent are in eleventh or twelfth grade and only six percent are not yet in ninth grade.

Key Findings

- Most youth in this sample have run away from foster care multiple times. Only one in eight had run away a single time while one in four youth had run more than ten times.

- The reasons youth run from their foster care placements can be classified into two basic categories: (1) wanting to be with family and friends and (2) disliking their placement.

- After a runaway episode, most youths return to care voluntarily. Reasons for returning included wanting to be back at their home, wanting to go to school, and avoiding getting themselves or others in trouble.

- The majority of sample youth ran away to a friend's home, including boyfriends and girlfriends. About one-third spent their first night at a relative's home. Only three youth reported spending any time of their most recent episode in an outside location such as a squat, a park, or an abandoned building. As a result, these youth do not seek services while they are on the run from a placement.

- Less than one quarter of sample youths reported having been in touch with their caseworker while on their runaway episode and most of those youths did not contact their caseworker right away.

- Youths who run away from foster care have more knowledge of services available than found for high school aged youth in general. Youth with foster care experience generally had similar or less knowledge than other runaway youth. In particular, youth in the foster care sample had less knowledge of services that typically comes from street experience including free meals, drop-in centers, street outreach and free showers.

- The biggest barrier to foster youths seeking services while on the run is that they believe they will be turned in, either directly to DCFS or to the police.

- Youths who were unhappy with their placements felt that a change in placement would have prevented them from running away. Youths wanted more freedom and fewer rules, reflected in more trust and more respect.

- Youths felt that they should be allowed to see their family more often and for group homes to give out passes more easily. Help should be given to facilitate visits with their family. More needs to be done to obviate the effects of being placed away from their neighborhood, family, and friends

- In general, there was a widespread feeling among youths that they need someone to talk to, who will listen to them and help work through problems. Many felt they couldn't talk to their foster parents. Youths in group homes felt that therapists in group homes turn over too frequently.

- Youths feel that caseworkers do not provide the support they need. They feel that caseworkers should visit more often and find out how the youth is doing. Caseworkers should take time to talk to the kids to understand them and try to make things better. Youths feel they are not asked their opinion and that caseworkers rely on the foster parent or a visual inspection to determine if everything is fine. Basically youths wanted caseworkers to listen to the youth, try to understand, be reasonable, and be flexible.

- Most youths do not hate the system or blame it for having to remove them from their home; they just want it to work better.

Introduction

A sizable fraction of teenage youth in foster care run away from their placement at least once; many run multiple times. Estimates vary but indicate a serious problem. Courtney, Terao, and Bost (2004a) found that 46 percent of 17 year olds in substitute care in Illinois, Iowa, and Wisconsin stated that they had run away from care at some time; in Illinois alone the rate was 52 percent (Courtney, Terao, and Best 2004b). Nearly two-thirds of those who ran away did so more than once. A similar study of 17-year olds in Los Angeles foster care found 36 percent had run away from care at least once (Pergamit and Johnson 2009).

This report constitutes the third part of a study on runaway youths and their knowledge and access of services. The first part of the report provided information obtained from interviews of youth in shelters, on the street, and in drop-in centers in Chicago and Los Angeles. The second part of the report provided information from a general population of high school students surveyed in several high schools in Chicago and Los Angeles. A description of the full study can be found in Pergamit and Ernst (2010a).

Youth who run away from foster care are generally not trying to escape from abuse or neglect, although they may experience conflict with caregivers. Having been separated from their families and friends, youth who run away from foster care are sometimes seen as running to something rather than running away (Courtney, et al. 2005).

While away from their placements youths may have need of shelter, medical care, counseling, and other services. These may be services they need because they are on the run (e.g. shelter) or services they need due to a specific event (e.g. becoming ill or injured). They may have been receiving some types of services while in care, such as counseling, medication, or substance abuse treatment, and being away from their placements may disrupt progress.

Little is known about the extent to which foster youth use services while away from their placement or what knowledge they have of services. Even if youths who run away from foster care know about the existence of services, they may find barriers to accessing them. Some services may not be available to them *because* they are in foster care. For example, some shelters do not serve wards of the state.[1]

Some of the same perceptions held by other runaway youths about services may also occur with youths running from foster care. These include lack of familiarity with the areas where services are located; belief that their identity will not be anonymous or kept confidential; unwillingness of minority youths to access services, especially lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, or questioning (LGBTQ) youth; and a belief that they have to pay for the service or have a parent with them to access it.

These barriers, both real and perceived, are discussed in more detail in Pergamit and Ernst (2010a). In that study we found that a significant barrier was the feeling that accessing a service might lead to the youth being turned over to his/her parents, the police, or put into foster care. For youths running away from foster care, it is unlikely they fear being turned over to their parents; however concerns about being turned over to the police or DCFS would be very real.

This study reports on Interviews with a sample of youths who ran away from foster care placements in Chicago and Los Angeles. In the report we refer to foster care to mean all out-of-home placements under the supervision of the child welfare system. We use the term "group homes" to refer to all congregate care (child welfare) facilities. The information provided by these youths will help us to understand better why they run away and what can be done to prevent youth from running away from foster care. We also learn where these youths go when

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[1] An example from the website of The Night Ministry in Chicago: "The Department of Children and Family Services (DCFS) manages programs for the state's wards. The Night Ministry does not serve wards of the State." (downloaded 1/9/11 from www.thenightministry.org)

they run away. The interviews address most of the same concepts covered in the shelter/street interviews (Pergamit and Ernst 2010a) as well as some issues unique to youth in foster care. As with the other two parts of the study, an important aspect of this report is to give the opportunity to youth to express themselves, to "give youth a voice." No officials from the foster care system were interviewed for this report.

To understand the knowledge and use of services by youths who run away from foster care, this report will focus on the following objectives:

- Understand the decision to run away from a foster care placement and what would have prevented the runaway episode.

- Understand the pattern of living arrangements after running away from foster care.

- Determine youths' knowledge of available services and how youths access them. How does the knowledge of youth in foster care compare with that of other runaway youths?

- Determine any barriers to accessing services for youths who run away from foster care.

- Explore issues that affect the ability to communicate and help youth while they are away from their foster care placement.

- Obtain youths' thoughts about the foster care system, who they want to live with, and what it would take for that to happen.

In the next section we review the literature on running away from foster care and describe the study methodology and resulting runaway foster youth sample. In Chapter 2 we examine the foster care experiences of sample youths. In Chapter 3 we discuss the youths' past experiences running away from foster care while in Chapter 4 we examine aspects of their most recent runaway episode.

Chapter 5 explores key issues about youth's knowledge of services and why they don't access services. Youths identify barriers to access, real and perceived, and discuss their concerns about being turned over to the authorities. Many runaway youths stay connected in

various ways to friends and family and this is explored in Chapter 6 in terms of their access to phones, e-mail, and use of social networking websites. Chapter 7 concludes the report with suggestions made by the interviewed youths about how running away could be prevented as well as general improvements to the foster care system. They also discuss with whom they would like to live and what they think it would take to be able to effect that living situation.

I. Background

a. Literature Review

As noted, several studies have highlighted that a significant fraction of youth in foster care have at some time run away from care, ranging approximately between one-third and one-half. Many of these youth run multiple times. In a study of 65 youth in foster care in St. John, Newfoundland, English and English (1999) found an average of four runaway episodes among youth who ran away from care. Similarly, Fasulo, et al. (2002) studied 147 youth in specialized foster care and found a mean number of 3.4, though most ran one or two times. Courtney et al. (2005) used administrative data on all youth in foster care in Illinois over a ten year period and found 56 percent of those who ran away ran more than once; 36 percent ran three or more times.

Youths who run away from foster care generally do not end up on the streets and most return to care voluntarily. Courtney, et al. (2005) found that only 12 percent of the youth they interviewed had spent the night in an unsafe place while on the run. Finkelstein, et al. (2004) found that two-thirds of the runaways they interviewed returned to care voluntarily and very few youth spent time on the streets and Fasulo, et al. found that 78 percent of 147 youth who ran away from specialized foster care returned to their placement.

Most runaway episodes tend to be short. English and English (1999) found episodes lasted three days on average. Courtney, et al. (2005) found nearly half lasted less than one week and two-thirds lasted two weeks or less. On the other hand, they found nearly one quarter lasted five weeks or more.

The likelihood of running away from care differs by demographic group, increasing with age (Courtney, et al., 2005; Finkelstein, et al., 2004). The length of the runaway episode also increases with age (Courtney et al., 2005). Females are more likely to run away than are males (English and English, 1999; Courtney and Wong, 1996; Fasulo, et al., 2002; Courtney, et al.,

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2005; Finkelstein, et al., 2004) but no race/ethnicity differences occur as race/ethnicity distributions of runaway foster youth look similar to the distribution of youth in care (Courtney, et al., 2005).

Runaways tend to have more problems in school, higher rates of suicide ideation, more reported behavioral problems (English and English, 1999); and more alcohol, substance abuse, and mental health disorders (Courtney, et al. 2005). Foster youth are more likely to run away their first time if they've entered care due to lack of supervision and less likely if they entered due to sexual abuse or physical abuse (Courtney et al. 2005).

Foster care experiences influence the likelihood of running away. The greater the number of placements, the more likely a youth will run away (English and English, 1999; Courtney, et al., 2005). Placement type is also a significant predictor with youth in group homes or residential facilities more likely to run away than youth in foster homes and youth placed with relatives are less likely to run away than youth placed in foster homes (Courtney and Barth, 1996; Courtney and Wong, 1996; Courtney, et al., 2005). Length of time in care does not necessarily predict runaway behavior; in fact, the later the age at which the youth entered care, the more likely they run away (Courtney, et al., 2005; Finkelstein, et al., 2004). Furthermore, Courtney and Barth (1996) show that the longer time spent in care, the more likely a youth emancipates from care than exits by running away.

On the other hand, youth tend to run soon after being placed. Fasulo, et al. (2002) found that two-thirds of runaways from their sample in specialized foster care ran within the first six months of entry into that placement setting. Examining chronic runaways (those who had run away at least twice during a placement spell), Finkelstein et al. (2004) found one-third ran away within six months of entering foster care, one-third between six and twelve months after entry, and one-third more than twelve months after entry (most of whom entered care before

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age 13). Courtney, et al. (2005) found the conditional probability of running away is highest in the first few months, falls and levels off, then increases gradually after two years in care.

Youth run away from foster care for several reasons. One key reason, to be with family and/or friends, distinguishes this group from other runaways. Fasulo, et al. (2002) followed the subset of their study youth who ran away permanently and found 44 percent back with their biological family, 39 percent with friends, and 17 percent ran to a friend or extended family member living in their community of origin. Courtney, et al. (2005) found youth typically ran to their family of origin or rotated among friends. Finkelstein et al. (2004) found that a majority of runaways in their study left to see family and/or friends though a majority stayed with friends (including boyfriends), rather than family, frequently hiding their runaway status.

Another important reason youth run away from foster care is their discontent with their placement. Finkelstein, et al. (2004) found that most youth in their study of group homes had left care because of perceived or actual problems with their placements. They perceived lack of movement in their cases and disliked restrictions including curfews and punishments such as limits on TV or going outside. Many in the group homes felt bored with nothing to do during evenings, weekends, and summer. They also did not feel connected with either their peers or staff in their facilities. Courtney et al. (2005) identified similar themes and patterns for running away including a desire for autonomy, living a "normative" experience, and chafing at rules and restrictions.

b. Estimating the Size of the Population

No national numbers are available to tell us the number of youth who run away from foster care. However, data from the Adoption and Foster Care Analysis and Reporting System (AFCARS) indicate that on September 30, 2009, 8,047 foster youth were considered to be on runaway status. Out of 420,698 children and youth in care on that date, this seems like a small number. However, younger children are not typically considered to be runaways even when they go missing. If we limit the population to 14-17 year olds, we see in Table I-1 that 5.5 percent of the youth in this age group who were "in placement" were on runaway status. The percentage rises steadily with age with nearly 8 percent of 17-year olds on runaway status. Furthermore, if we look at youth who were discharged from care during FY2009, prior to September 30, we find 2 percent were discharged due to being on runaway status. This percentage also increases with age with 3.4 percent of discharges of 17-year olds for reason of being a runaway.

Being point in time measures, these underestimate the percentage of youth who may have run away at some time during the year or during their entire time in foster care. Also individual states (or counties) have different policies or practices regarding coding a youth as a runaway. Rates of "runaway" as a current placement status for 17-year olds varied from none in New Hampshire to 17.4 percent in Texas. Rates of "runaway" as a reason for discharge ranged from none in eleven states and the District of Columbia to 17.2 percent in Oregon. It is impossible to know how much of the variation is due to real differences in youth behavior and how much is due to different coding practices.

Despite the limitations of the AFCARS data, they do indicate a significant percentage of older youth on runaway status, placing a difficult burden on child welfare agencies.

Table I-1 Percentage of Youth on Runaway from Foster Care
September 30, 2009

age	14	15	16	17	Total
in care, runaway status	2.6%	4.3%	6.0%	7.8%	5.5%
discharged, runaway	0.7%	1.2%	2.1%	3.4%	2.0%

Source: Author's tabulations from AFCARS

c. Methodology

This report covers youth in foster care with a history of running away. An earlier report covered interviews conducted with youth residing in shelters or "on the street" (the "runaway" sample). The foster care sample interview protocol asked all the same questions as the interviews with the runaway sample with additional questions about foster care experiences. The interviews with both samples were conducted during the same time period.

Interviews took place in Chicago and Los Angeles from December 2008 through July 2009. The interview was conducted one-on-one with youth in their current foster care placements. All the interviews were conducted by the same person and were audio-recorded with the youth's permission and transcribed for analysis. The protocol left all the questions open-ended, allowing the youth to tell their story. After the fact, a coding frame was developed that allowed the open-ended responses to be reduced to a set of coded responses. Since interviews can take all kinds of twists and youth may veer sharply from the intent of the question, not every response could be assigned a code in our code frame. However, the large number of interviews provides a solid picture of the lives and thoughts of these youth.

The interviews took approximately 45-90 minutes and gathered information about the runaway event itself as well as the circumstances in the youth's life precipitating the runaway

episode. Each youth was also asked to fill out a short self-administered questionnaire (derived from our school questionnaire) with basic demographic information and simpler versions of questions that would be asked in the full interview. This short questionnaire was filled out prior to the one-on-one interview to avoid contamination of responses so that our foster care sample can be compared with our runaway sample as well as a more general sample of youth in schools. Youth were paid $30 for their participation.

d. Runaway Foster Youth Sample

The sample consists of 50 youth in foster care at the time of the interview, 25 in Chicago and 25 in Los Angeles County. To be included in the sample, a youth had to be 14-17 years old, in out-of-home care under the supervision of the child welfare system, placed in the City of Chicago or in Los Angeles County, and have had at least one runaway episode in the previous twelve months. A list of youth who met these criteria was initially drawn from administrative records. We had no response rate targets and provided the interviewer substantially more names than she needed, allowing her to interview whomever she was able to schedule first.

Few youth refused; most noninterviews were due to an inability to make contact. When a case was considered unattainable, that youth was replaced with another youth with the same age, gender, and race, if possible; this was also the order of precedence if no such match existed. Noncontact occurred for a number of reasons; one significant reason was that the youth was on runaway status from their current placement.

The process for selecting the sample differed slightly between Chicago and Los Angeles, but the results were roughly the same. In Chicago the Illinois Department of Children and Family Services (IL DCFS) extracted names, contact information, demographic variables (age, race, and gender) and placement type and provided them to NORC. Before the list was delivered, the Guardian *ad litem* signed a consent form for each youth on the list, allowing them to be interviewed. In order not to overburden this person at any one time, lists were generated

at two points. They began with the most recent runaways and worked backwards, but did not have to go through all youth who ran away in the past year before we had achieved our target number of interviews.

In Los Angeles, a complete list of youth meeting the criteria was supplied to NORC, allowing us to control the ongoing substitution process. Permission to interview the youth was obtained through the L.A. DCFS with approval by the Superior Court. Despite having obtained this permission, we were not successful at gaining access to higher level group homes within our data collection period. Given these types of placements likely have high rates of youth running away, the sample may not fully represent all youth currently in placement who have run away in the past year.

In both locations we deleted cases that were currently placed outside the respective jurisdiction (the City of Chicago or the County of Los Angeles). In L.A., we also eliminated 19 cases that were currently placed in a part of the county called Antelope Valley. Antelope Valley is at the northern end of the county over the mountains and requires driving at least two hours to get to.

The final sample is a "convenience" sample and may not generalize to all youth in foster care or the population of youth who have run away from foster care. In particular, as a sample of youth in a placement, we do not represent youth who were on runaway status. Thus we do not capture youth who never return to care and we likely under-represent longer runaway episodes. On the other hand, the literature suggests that nearly all runaway foster youth return to foster care, mostly after a short time. Courtney et al. (2005) show less than 0.6 percent of first runs were still in progress when they extracted their data; only a slightly larger percentage of second and third runs were still in progress.   Also, as discussed above, AFCARS data indicate only 2 percent of youth discharged while on runaway status.

Table I-2 below shows the demographic distributions of our sample of interviewed youth. Roughly half (48%) of the sample is seventeen years old, a quarter is sixteen, and a quarter is fourteen or fifteen. Compared with the lists provided by the two Departments, our sample is somewhat older, primarily with more 17-year olds and fewer 16-year olds. Females constitute 70% of the sample with males only 30%, only somewhat more weighted toward females than the original lists (which were 66% female). The sample is mostly heterosexual (78%) with approximately one in five (18%) youth identifying as lesbian, gay, bisexual, or "something else" (LGBTQ).

Race/ethnicity is shown as a set of mutually exclusive categories where any youth identifying as Hispanic is coded as such and only non-Hispanics are coded as white, black, or other/multiracial. Roughly half of the sample (52%) is African-American, about one-third (34%) Hispanic and only 4 percent white; the remaining 10 percent identified themselves as another race or multiple races. The original lists differ only somewhat as they are composed of a greater percentage white (16%) and a lower percentage Hispanic (28%) and others (2%); however these differences may also reflect differences between administrative records and self-reported race and ethnicity. The level of educational grade attainment shows most of the sample roughly on track for their appropriate grade, based on their ages. Forty percent are in eleventh or twelfth grade and only six percent are not yet in ninth grade.[2]

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[2] This does not mean, however, that they are on course to graduate on time.

Table I-2 Runaway Foster Youth Sample Description

	n	%
City		
Chicago	25	50%
L.A.	25	50%
Age		
14	6	12%
15	7	14%
16	13	26%
17	24	48%
Gender		
male	15	30%
female	35	70%
Sexual orientation		
heterosexual	39	78%
LGBT	9	18%
missing	2	4%
Race/ethnicity		
white	2	4%
black	26	52%
Hispanic	17	34%
Other/Multi	5	10%
Current or most recent grade		
7-8	3	6%
9	6	12%
10	21	42%
11	15	30%
12	5	10%

II. Foster Care Experiences

Key Findings

- Although older youth in foster care experience numerous placements, youth who run away from foster care in this sample have had more placements than the average foster youth of the same age.

- A greater percentage of youth in this sample had reentered foster care than is typical for foster youth of the same age, that is, they had at some time returned to their family only to return to foster care.

a. Number of Placements

Older youth in foster care experience numerous placements. In our sample, nearly one in five reported having more than ten placements in foster homes and over one in five reported having more than ten total lifetime placements (Table II-1). One quarter reported having three or fewer lifetime placements; only 8.5 percent reported having had just one lifetime placement. Although many foster youth have multiple placements, these distributions indicate somewhat more placements than are typical. For example, in a sample of 17-year old youth in foster care in Los Angeles, Pergamit and Johnson (2009) found a greater percentage with a single lifetime placement (14.3%) and a lower percentage with ten or more placements (15.7%). Given that all the youth in that sample were 17 years old and the youth in this study's sample are 14-17, we would have expected significantly fewer placements in our study sample, indicating that youth who run away from foster care most likely have an above average number of placements. The split between foster home and group home placements, however, is similar to the split found for 17-year old youth in Illinois as reported in Courtney, Terao, and Bost (2004b).

Table II-1 Number of Foster Care Placements

Number of Placements	Foster Homes	Group Homes	Total Lifetime Placements
0	4.3%	17.0%	0.0%
1	14.9%	36.2%	8.5%
2-3	23.4%	32.0%	17.0%
4-6	31.9%	10.6%	40.4%
7-10	6.4%	0.0%	12.8%
11+	19.1%	4.3%	21.3%

b. Reentry into Foster Care

In addition to numerous placements, a sizable percentage of youth experience more than one removal; that is they are returned home from a foster care placement only to reenter care. Table II-2 shows nearly one-third (31%) of the youth in this sample report multiple entries into care. This is somewhat higher than the 20 percent of 17-year old youth who reported reentries in Illinois (Courtney, Terao, and Bost 2004b) or the 26% of 17-year olds in Los Angeles reporting reentry (Courtney, et al. 2008). Given our sample includes youth ages 14 to 17, we'd expect to have lower rates than found in either of these studies which focused exclusively on 17-year olds, suggesting that the increased turmoil in these youths' lives is associated with running away from care.[3]

Table II-2: Reentry into Foster Care

number of times reentered foster care	
0	68.8%
1	16.7%
2	10.4%
3+	4.2%

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[3] In similar tabulations, Courtney, et al. (2005) found the probability of running away increased with each reentry; however, in multivariate work, they found that holding all else constant, reentry actually decreases the probability of running away from care.

III. Runaway Experiences

Key Findings

- Most youth in this sample have run away from foster care multiple times. Only one in eight had run away a single time while one in four youth had run more than ten times.

- After a runaway episode, most youths return to care voluntarily. Reasons for returning included wanting to be back at their home, wanting to go to school, and avoiding getting themselves or others in trouble.

- Nearly three quarters reported having their placement changed at least once after returning from a runaway episode.

a. Number of runaway episodes

Most youth in this sample have run away from foster care multiple times.[4] Only one in eight had

run away a single time; another quarter had run away two or three times (Table III-1). One in

four youth had run more than ten times. This reflects a greater number of episodes than found

in Courtney, Terao, and Bost (2004a) where 35 percent had run away only once and 38 percent

had run away five or more times in three Midwest states.

Table III-1 Times Ran Away from Foster Care

Times ran away from foster care	
1 time	12.8%
2 - 3 times	25.5%
4 - 6 times	21.3%
7 - 10 times	14.9%
11 - 20 times	8.5%
>20 times	17.0%

b. Returning to placement

Most youths return to care voluntarily, though as we've seen they are likely to run again. In

describing their runaway histories, two thirds of the sample (68%) report that some times they

have returned voluntarily with half of the youth saying they always returned voluntarily (Figure

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[4] We did not ask about times they may have run away from their original homes.

III-1). About half have been returned to foster care involuntarily some times; nearly one-third saying they never returned voluntarily. About one fifth describe their histories of some times returning voluntarily and other times involuntarily.

Figure III-1 Voluntarily and Involuntarily Returning To Care
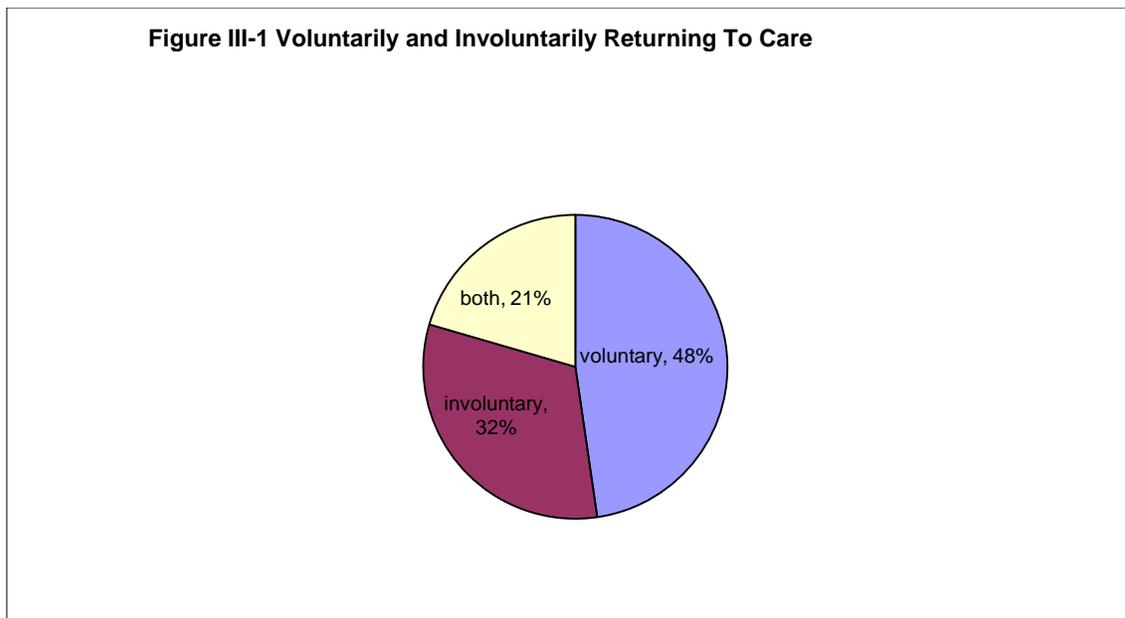
When youth return to care from a runaway episode, they may return to the same placement from which they ran or they may be put into a new placement. Nearly three quarters (71%) reported having their placement changed at least once after returning from a runaway episode.

Only 29 percent reported that things got better after they returned to care and the same percentage reported that things got worse after returning (Figure III-2). Another 10 percent reported that some times things were better and other times worse while 31 percent reported that things were generally the same as they had been before running away.

Figure III-2 How Things Were After Returning to Care

sometimes better
others worse, 10%

worse, 29%

better, 29%

no change, 31%
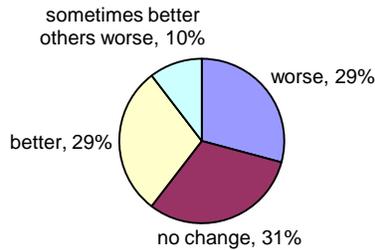
Unlike other runaways, most youth in foster care have a home they feel they can return to and be safe; as a result, most return voluntarily. Several youth spoke about returning because that placement was their home. Their clothes and other possessions were there and that's where they lived. Many weren't running away from the placement as much as wanting to connect with other people; they were away for awhile but then returned home. Some who were away longer noted they came back because they wanted to return to a normal life. Several noted that their family or friends encouraged them to return.

Because my family was telling me to come back and plus, my clothes was here and that meant a lot to me. (15 year old female)

Many youth recognized what they were missing by being away from placement, most notably that they wanted to resume going to school. One youth needed medication for certain health conditions while another youth had gotten pregnant.

I wasn't in school and that was the main reason why I came back. (16 year old female)

I needed to get myself together, too, because of for my future. So I'm like, if I'm not in school, I'm not trying to get my education, how my life will be? How will my life actually turn out? When I came to the conclusion I really didn't like it so I thought it was time for me to go back and try to get myself back together. (16 year old male)

I know I'm still a minor and I can't make it on my own right now at this point in time and I still need school, I need to finish high school. I mean, I have high hopes of going to college and making a good life for myself. So just living in the streets wasn't one of my options, it was just trying to like seek attention. And I guess I wasn't really happy about going back, but I knew that it would be one of the best choices for me to do. (16 year old female)

Several youth returned to avoid getting in trouble or avoid getting family or friends in trouble for harboring them. Some felt there would be specific bad consequences of not returning: one youth feared they'd take her baby away; another youth worried they'd change her placement and she was concerned it would be farther away.

Cause I didn't want to get into no trouble. (17 year old male)

Because I had to because of my mom will get in trouble for holding me there. (15 year old female)

I really didn't want to come back some of the times but I kind of had no other choice. Cause my boyfriend's 18, well he was 17 but now he's 18 and I didn't really want to put him in the risk of him going to jail. So I turned myself in…'cause I didn't want to put my boyfriend and his family at risk cause they could get in trouble for it. (14 year old female)

…if you're gone for more than 30 days you get discharged, so they send you somewhere farther. And I wasn't trying to go nowhere farther than here. I know people around here now but when I first entered I didn't know nobody around here….and I didn't want them to keep sending me from place to place. So that's why I never left again. (17 year old male)

Finally, youth some times returned because their caseworker had alerted them to a (favorable) change that would be made. In one case, a new placement was found for the youth in the area where he wanted to live; in another case, the youth thought he and his siblings were about to be reunited with their mother (which did not happen).

IV. Most Recent Runaway Episode

Key Findings

- The likelihood of running away from a foster care placement is greater in a group home than in a foster home and much higher than in a relative's home.

- Over one third of our sample ran away within the first three months of a placement; over half ran away within the first six months. However, 22 percent of the sample had been in their placement between one and five years.

- The reasons youth run from their foster care placements can be classified into two basic categories: (1) wanting to be with family and friends and (2) disliking their placement.

- One in six youth specifically said they did not feel safe in their placement. The rate in group homes was twice as high as in foster homes. Nearly one quarter of interviewed youth said they had conflict with their caregivers. Conflict was more likely among youth in foster homes than with youth in group homes.

- Two-thirds of sample youth said they ran on the spur of the moment and one-third said they had planned ahead.

- Over one-quarter of the runaway episodes lasted less than two weeks, one in five lasted two weeks to one month, and roughly half of the episodes lasted between one and six months. Few lasted longer than six months.

- The majority of sample youth ran away to a friend's home, including boyfriends and girlfriends. About one-third spent their first night at a relative's home. Only three youth reporting spending any time of their most recent episode in an outside location such as a squat, a park, or an abandoned building.

- Numerous people know where the youths are when they're on the run; only one youth said nobody knew his whereabouts. Three-quarters of the youth say friends know where they are. Although some youth clearly ran away to see their family, the majority did not inform their family where they were staying.

- Less than one quarter of the sample youth reported having been in touch with their caseworker while on their runaway episode and most of those youth did not contact their caseworker right away.

Youth in foster care can be reported on runaway status if they are gone longer than a specified number of hours without permission. These short absences mostly occur in group homes and residential facilities with strict rules. Some times the youth left without permission; other times the youth overstayed the length of time they are allowed to be away. Many times they hang out

with friends or family. Although these short episodes may be indicative of a broader set of issues for the youth and for the foster care system, our interest is in what youth do when they are away from care for longer periods. Thus, in this section we focus specifically on the youth's most recent runaway episode lasting at least 48 hours or two nights.

a. Placement Type

Figure IV-1 shows the placement type from which youths ran away on their most recent episode. Few youths in our sample had run away from a relative's home on their most recent episode. Just over half (52%) had run away from a foster home while 42% had run away from a group home or residential facility. If the likelihood of running away was equal across placement types, this distribution would mirror the distribution of placement types for 14-17 year olds; however, this is clearly not the case. In Los Angeles, for example, roughly 30 percent of 14-17 year olds were placed with relatives as of July 1, 2010 (Needel, et al. 2011), far greater than the percentage in our sample. It is more difficult to line up other placement types in the child welfare data with those in our sample, but it is clear from the reports found at Needel et al. (2011) that the ratio of youth in this age group placed in foster homes to those placed in group homes is much greater than the ratio of those placement types in our sample. In other words, it appears that the likelihood of running away from a foster care placement is greater in a group home than in a foster home (and much higher than in a relative's home), consistent with findings from other studies.[5] Because so few youth had been living with a relative when they began their most recent runaway episode, we do not show cross-tabulations with this placement type in the rest of the report.

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[5] Using tabulations from Courtney et al. (2005) for up to three runs indicate about 21 percent were from relatives, 24 percent from foster homes and 55 percent from residential settings and group homes. Their multivariate analysis shows the likelihood of running away from a relative home to be significantly less than the likelihood of running away from a foster home, which is significantly less than the likelihood of running away from a group home.

Figure IV-1 Placement Type Ran From
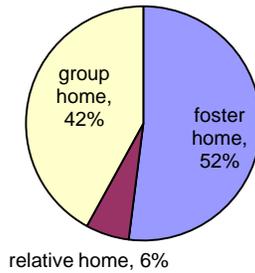
Running away from foster care can occur at any time after a placement begins. In our sample, over one third (36%) ran away within the first three months of a placement; over half (54%) ran away within the first six months (Figure IV-2). However, 22 percent of these runaways had been in their placement between one and five years. Recall, though, that we are capturing their most recent runaway episode; this does not represent the first time they ran away from the same placement.[6]

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[6] Recall that Courtney et al. (2005) find that the conditional probability of running away (for the first run) is highest in the early months of placement into care. It flattens out after about six months, but starts increasing after two years in care. This refers to total time in foster care, not time in a single placement.

Figure IV-2 Time in Placment Before Running Away

more than 1 year to 5 years, 22%

0 - 3 months, 36%

more than 6 months to 1 year, 24%

more than 3 to 6 months, 18%
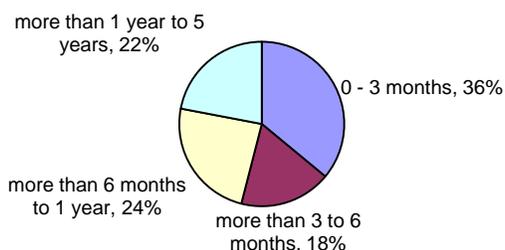
b. Why Did They Run?

Youth run from their foster care placements for a variety of reasons; however several themes come through from the interviews. We classify these into two basic categories: (1) wanting to be with family and friends and (2) disliking their placement. These themes are similar to those identified in Finkelstein, et al. (2004) and Courtney, et al. (2005). Some youths cited multiple reasons that cut across these categories such as not liking their placement because it interfered with their ability to see their friends and family.

Ties to family and friends

Many youths talked about their desire to see family and friends, including boyfriends and girlfriends. Several in group homes discussed the need to obtain passes in order to go somewhere and several mentioned they were denied passes to see their families. Usually this was because they had misbehaved or violated a rule and were not eligible for a pass. Some youths felt denying passes as punishment wasn't right if it was to see their family and that this practice encourages running away.

Sometimes I run to go see my mom or my dad or my sister or my girlfriend. (16 year old male)

…they give us like passes to go home but I can't get them, so I went anyway. (17 year old male)

I ran away because I've been away from my family for a long time and I asked my caseworker could I go on the visits and see my mom for her birthday and he said no…I just felt that I was being treated different from the other kids cause they got to go on passes and I was the only one who couldn't. (17 year old female)

Cause my caseworker wasn't giving me passes and I couldn't stand being up in that house. I mean I couldn't leave the building with no passes, and it's like you can't leave nowhere without staff. So I left 'cause I didn't want to be there. (17 year old male)

Some youth discussed how their placement wasn't near their old neighborhood where their family and friends live. That made it hard to see them routinely, leading them to run away in order to see them. They were neither unhappy with the placement *per se* nor with being in foster care, but they wanted to be placed nearer their families. Furthermore, they didn't know anyone in the area in which they were placed. To get an idea of the distances involved, data for July 1, 2008 to June 30, 2009 from Needell, et al. (2011) show that in Los Angeles County, among youth not placed with relatives, 56 percent were placed at least six miles from their home address; 36 percent were placed more than ten miles from their home address. Rates for the entire state of California are slightly higher (58 percent placed six or more miles from their home, 41 percent placed eleven or more miles).

I didn't want to be there no more…it was farther out so I didn't like it…I want to be closer to my family. (15 year old female)

*I didn't like being out there cause I wasn't close to family and plus because I didn't like that lady because she only like we had to sit in the house like every day…(*17 year old female)

Unhappy with current placement

A large number of youths expressed unhappiness with their current placement. Youths in group homes would discuss not liking their peers in the group home noting that other youths would misbehave, use drugs, steal items from other youths, and generally create too much "drama." They complained about the need for passes to leave the house, the excessive rules and restrictions, and unresponsiveness of staff. They felt group homes offer too little freedom and too few activities. Several referred to feeling "cooped up" and felt bored with nothing to do.

> *I felt like I couldn't take it no more. There was too many women and it was like 18 of us and it was like too much drama and I just felt like I didn't want to be a part of it….some girls was like psychotic and they just put anybody in our group home cause it was a behavioral group home.* (17 year old female)

> *Like literally, they didn't care about me, like they forgot about me. And I was like, hello, I'm kind of like going through a cycle right here where I'm becoming very depressed because the people, the environment, it's not getting anywhere. Plus the girls were always doing drugs and doing stuff there. Like in the group home they always sneaked in stuff or like they went out and awoled and did other stuff and came back with it. So I didn't like that environment and I wanted to be taken out of there…(*16 year old female)

> *I felt as if I had no freedom. They wouldn't let me do what I want to do. I felt as if I'm at the age where I should be able to go and leave freely. I mean they wouldn't let me go so I just left.* (17 year old male)

> *I was pregnant, pregnant and you couldn't eat what you want to eat. You have a money schedule so I lived at one of my friend's house and that's where I stayed.* (17 year old female)

> *…it's just, you gotta' wait too long to do anything. You know, to go outside you have to wait like 2 months, 3 months, so it was too long. I can't be locked up in the house at all...(*16 year old male)

> *Cause sometimes it gets boring and you have nothing to do, and the best thing you can do is leave.* (15 year old male)

Youth in foster homes were more likely to complain about not liking their foster parent. Some times it was a personality mismatch, but they also complained about rules and restrictions they felt were beyond what would exist within a typical family. Many felt their caregivers were only in it for the money.

The way she was talking about me, I really didn't like it at all… you wouldn't talk about your own kids the way you talked about me. It's because I'm a foster child and it's because my grandma can't take care of me no more because she's sick. So I didn't think that was fair and that hurt my feelings. So it was like, okay, if she don't care then I might as well go. She's just here for the money. So in that case I'll be gone, she won't get no money. So it ain't gonna hurt me, it's gonna hurt her. (16 year old male)

Like this one lady…I was livin' with in a foster home, she gonna' tell me that I can't go see my brother and sisters and it's the summer time. ..Then she told me to go look for a summer job, but it'd be on the days that she want me to go. So I had a problem with that 'cause if I'm gonna' get a summer job I need to be out there every day tryin' to find a job, not on the days that she wanted me to go...She wanted me to sleep with the door open, and I really couldn't play music like that. And I love music, it really keeps my mind stimulated, keeps me calm… (17 year old female)

Many youth reported that they had informed their caseworker of their dissatisfaction and wanted to change placements. Several reported that their caseworker never returned their calls. Others said their caseworker had said a new placement would be sought, but nothing had come of it and they felt the promise was merely a brush off.

Given that these youths have had many placements suggests that it may be difficult to find a placement they'd be happy in, perhaps even impossible. A few youths even admitted as much. However, only a few suggested that they ran away because they disliked the foster care system.

I guess running away from the problems, pretty much. Not from the system and not from the house, just from the problems. Running away from my problems. (16 year old male)

I was just thinking I wanted to run and get away from everything. I didn't want any worries, and I didn't want to think about anything anymore. I didn't want caseworkers involved; I didn't want counselors involved; I didn't want medication. I didn't want anything, any services DCFS was providing me at the time. (17 year old female)

In Table IV-1 below we show tabulations for two specific issues raised by youth: feeling unsafe in their placement and having conflict with their caregivers. One in six youth specifically said they did not feel safe in their placement. As can be seen, the rate in group homes was twice as high as in foster homes. The rate increased with age, though that partly reflects the fact that older youth are more likely to be placed in a group home. Females had slightly higher reports than males, but the difference isn't large. Notably, LGBT youth felt less safe than heterosexual youth, although recall that only nine youth identified themselves as LGBT.

Nearly one quarter of interviewed youth said they had conflict with their caregivers. This increased with age and was much higher for females than males. LGBT youth were more likely than heterosexual youth to have conflict with their caregivers. Conflict was also more likely among youth in foster homes than with youth in group homes. In addition, several youth in foster homes did not report conflict, but did not feel close enough to their caregiver to discuss their problems. For a few youth with problems they felt were serious, this inability or unwillingness to talk with their caregiver contributed to their running away.

Table IV-1 Feelings about Placement

	felt unsafe in placement	conflict with caregiver(s)
All youth	16.0%	24.0%
Age		
14-15	0.0%	7.7%
16	15.4%	23.1%
17	25.0%	33.3%
Gender		
Male	13.3%	6.7%
Female	17.1%	31.4%
Sexual Orientation		
Heterosexual	10.3%	20.5%
LGBT	33.3%	44.4%
Placement Type		
Foster home	11.5%	30.8%
Group home	23.8%	19.0%

c. Preparation for Leaving

Two-thirds of sample youths said they ran on the spur of the moment and one-third said they

had planned ahead. As shown in Table IV-2, planning ahead did not translate necessarily into

much preparation. While nearly 59 percent packed a bag, only a minority did anything else to

prepare. On the other hand, those who left on the spur of the moment did not make much

preparation at all, indicating the episode really was impulsive.

Table IV-2 Type of Preparation Made Before Leaving Home

Preparations	Planned ahead	Spur of the moment	All youth
Packed a bag	58.8%	42.4%	48.0%
Got some money	23.5%	6.1%	12.0%
Called a friend	29.4%	6.1%	14.0%
Other preparation	17.6%	0.0%	6.0%

Fewer than one in four (23.5%) youth specifically got some money before running away, so that most only had the money they kept on their persons. As seen in Table IV-3, over one-third (37%) left without any cash, though 31% had at least $50 with them.

Table IV-3 Amount of Money Brought from Home

Amount of money youth left home with	
$0	36.7%
less than $10	4.1%
$10 - $49	28.6%
$50 - $99	14.3%
$100 or more	16.3%

d. How Long Were They Away?

As seen in Figure IV-3, the lengths of the runaway episodes varied considerably, though few were for more than six months (4%).[7] Over one-quarter (28%) lasted less than two weeks, one in five lasted two weeks to one month, and roughly half (48%) of the episodes lasted between one and six months.

Figure IV-3 Length of Time Youth Was Away From Care

6+ months, 4%

2-13 days, 28%

14 days - 1 month, 20%

1-6 months, 48%

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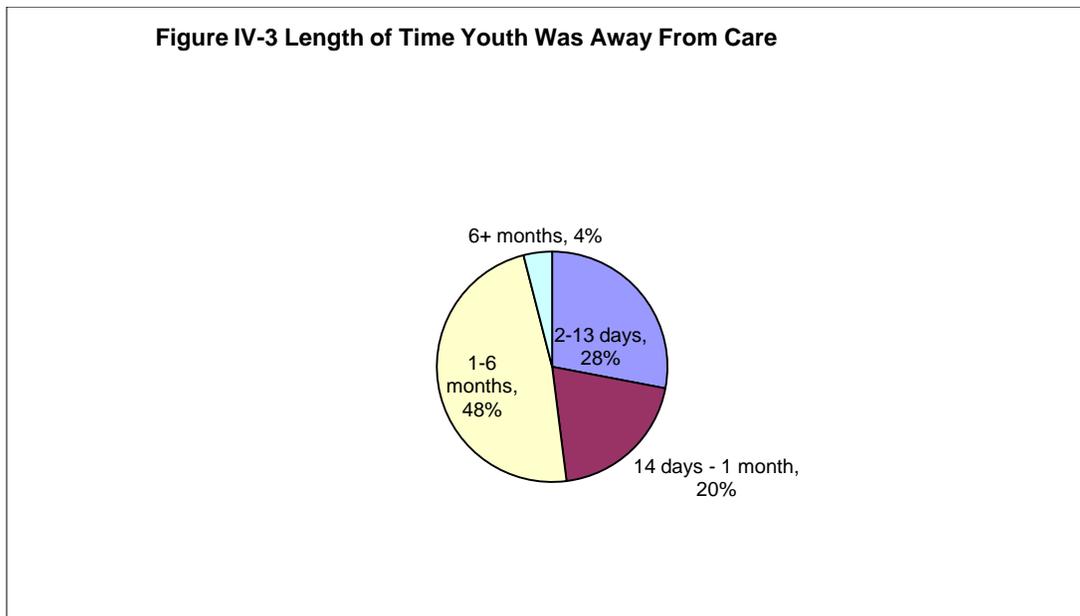
[7] Bear in mind that all these youths were in placement when interviewed and the runaway episode had to have occurred within the past 12 months.

e. Where Do They Go?

The majority (63%) of sample youths ran away to a friend's home, including boyfriends and girlfriends (see Table IV-4). About one-third (35%) spent their first night at a relative's home. Only one youth ran away to "the street", spending the first night in an outdoor location. These initial locations tended to be stable living situations for the duration of the runaway episode. Although some youth talked about moving among several friends and relatives, many stayed at the same home until their return to care. Over the course of the entire episode, one-fifth stayed with a boyfriend or girlfriend and over half (54%) had stayed at another friend's home. Nearly half (44%) spent at least one night at a relative's home. Only three youth reported spending any time of their most recent episode in an outside location such as a squat, a park, or an abandoned building.

Table IV-4 Where Youth Spent Nights Away from Care

Where youth spent the night away from home	First night	Second night	Since leaving
Boy/girlfriend's home	14.3%	18.4%	20.0%
Friend's home	49.0%	46.9%	54.0%
Relative's home	34.7%	30.6%	44.0%
Another place indoors	---	2.0%	4.0%
Walking around	---	---	2.0%
In the park	---	---	2.0%
Squat	---	---	6.0%
Abandoned building	---	---	2.0%
Another place outdoors	2.0%	2.0%	2.0%

f. What Do They Do While They're Away from Care?

Most youth spent their days at the home of the friend or relative where they were staying. Table IV-5 shows nearly half (47%) reported hanging out with friends and about one third (33%) mentioned going to the park, though many youth did not venture out much at all. Those who were most afraid of being caught talked about staying inside most of the time. For most youth, this meant they did not attend school (although some of the episodes occurred during the

summer when school was not in session). The youth specifically noted they would not attend school because they assumed the school would be notified they were a runaway.

Table IV-5 Places Youth has Spent the Day

Places youth has spent the day	
friend's home	51.0%
hanging out	46.9%
relative's home	36.7%
in the park	32.7%
boy/girlfriend's home	24.5%
at the beach	6.1%
other	22.4%

g. Who Knows Where They Are?

Just over half (56%) of our sample ran to their old neighborhood. As we saw above over half of the youth were staying with a friend (Including boyfriends and girlfriends) and about one-third were staying with relatives. Thus it does not come as a surprise that numerous people know where they are when they're on the run; only one youth said nobody knew his whereabouts. As seen in Table IV-6, the reliance on friends is very pronounced with three-quarters of the youth saying friends know where they are. On the other hand, only 30 percent said a friend's family knows where they are. Some times the parents think the youth is staying over for a couple of nights, but don't know the youth has run away. Many of these youth stay with friends surreptitiously. These youths described sneaking into their friend's home on a nightly basis so that the friend's parents wouldn't know.

Relatives are much less informed with only 30 percent of the youths saying a parent knows the youth's whereabouts and 30 percent saying a sibling knows; only 10 percent say a grandparent knows while 18 percent say another family member knows (primarily aunts and cousins). So although some youth clearly ran away to see their family, the majority did not inform their family where they were staying. Several youth noted that they didn't want a family

member to know, particularly their mother, because she would need to call DCFS or she might

get in trouble and jeopardize reunification.

Table IV-6 Who Knew Where Youth Was While Away from Care

Who knew where youth was	
no one knew	2%
parent	30%
grandparent	10%
sibling	30%
other family	18%
friends	76%
friend's family	30%
other adults	22%
"everyone"	4%

Table IV-7 shows only 23 percent of the sample youths reported having been in touch with their

caseworker while on their runaway episode and most of those youth did not contact their

caseworker right away. Contact declined with age with one-third of 14-15 year olds, 23 percent

of 16 year olds and 17 percent of 17 year olds getting in touch. Although there was no gender

difference, LGBT youth were only half as likely as heterosexual youth to contact their

caseworker. No difference was seen between youth who had run away from a foster home and

those who had run away from a group home.

Table IV-7 Youth Contacted Caseworker After Running Away

	youth contacted caseworker after running away
All youth	22.9%
Age	
14-15 yrs	33.3%
16 yrs	23.1%
17 yrs	17.4%
Gender	
male	20.0%
female	24.2%
Sexual orientation	
heterosexual	25.6%
LGBT	12.5%
Placement type	
foster home	23.1%
group home	21.1%

Youths trying to reconnect with family and friends see no need to call their caseworker. Some times other people would call; a couple of youth stated their mother would call so that she wouldn't get in trouble. Youths who called typically were trying to improve their situation, usually seeking a new placement. However, some had been trying to improve their situation before running and felt they were not getting helped, so they felt it was worthless to call their caseworker after running away. Several youths noted that they found it difficult to get in touch with their caseworker and that the caseworker did not call them back; others just didn't like their caseworker.

> *When I get to my mom's house she will call over there and let them know that I got there so they can come get me, because if I stay there then I get in trouble....As soon as I got there she'll cook me something to eat and then she'll call. But sometimes it'll take time for them to come get me so that's... I might, I*

don't feel like coming back but when they get there I'll run out the back door. (15 year old female)

Like that first, first night and she (youth's best friend) called my social worker and my social worker never called her back… (15 year old female)

Because she don't call me and I don't call her. And when I do call her she ain't never in her office. I just got a new case worker and she don't call me or come see me neither. (15 year old female)

Youths who called their caseworker generally did so when they were ready to return. Typically, they felt their caseworker was not helpful, mostly just telling them to go back to their placement and not helping facilitate any change that would make things better. A couple of youths reported that the caseworker did not care that they'd run away and didn't tell them anything.

I ain't call her until I was ready to go, because I was starting to miss school and stuff. (16 year old male)

At the end of the summer I turned myself in cause I wanted to go to school. (15 year old female)

…he didn't care. He knew where I was at too…he didn't care. (16 year old female)

Although not common, a couple of youths reported contacting and keeping in touch with other people instead of their caseworker; one kept in touch with her group home manager and another kept in touch with her counselor.

V. Knowledge and Use of Services

Key Findings

- Youth who run away from foster care mostly stay with friends and relatives; few youth ever are on the street. As a result, these youth do not seek services while they are on the run from a placement.

- Youth who run away from foster care have more knowledge of services available than found for high school aged youth in general. Youth with foster care experience generally had similar or less knowledge than other runaway youth. In particular, youth in the foster care sample had less knowledge of services that typically comes from street experience including free meals, drop-in centers, street outreach and free showers.

- A minority (38%) of youth who have run away from foster care have heard of 1-800-RUNAWAY or the National Runaway Switchboard (NRS), a percentage similar to that of the runaways we interviewed in shelters and on the street.

- The biggest barrier to foster youth seeking services while on the run is that they believe they will be turned in, either directly to DCFS or to the police.

- Most youth who reported needing health care while on the run sought and received it.

a. Knowledge of services

Given that nearly all of the foster youth we interviewed spent their runaway episode staying with family or friends, we would not expect them necessarily to have much knowledge of services available to runaway youth. In that sense, we might expect them to have knowledge similar to what we found in our school survey.[8] However, the foster youth we interviewed were much more likely to say they knew about the four services we asked about in the school survey (hotlines, shelters, free meals, and health care) than did the school-based youth, even among high school youth with runaway experience (see Table V-1). Clearly their experiences, either in foster care or in their original home, have introduced them to certain services.

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[8] See Pergamit and Ernst (2010b) for a description of the school survey.

Table V-1 Knowledge of Select Services: Comparison of Foster
Care Sample with High School Sample[9]

If youth runs away, knows where to find	Foster care sample	School Sample	Runaway experience (School Sample)	
			Yes	No
free meal	58.0%	13.5%	19.0%	12.1%
medical care	70.0%	8.7%	13.7%	7.7%
shelter	60.0%	8.5%	15.4%	69.0%
hotline	72.0%	3.7%	5.9%	3.2%
at least one service	66.0%	21.8%	32.0%	19.6%

We can also compare the knowledge of the foster youth sample with that of our sample of runaways interviewed on the street and in shelters (the runaway sample).[10] The first two columns of Table V-2 show the percentage of youth who either used a service or said they knew where to find the service for the foster care sample and the runaway sample, respectively. Given these are small convenience samples, one should be cautious about interpreting apparent differences. However, across the ten types of services, youth in the foster care sample generally had similar or less knowledge than youth in the runaway sample. In particular, youth in the foster care sample had less knowledge of services that typically comes from street experience including knowledge of where to find free meals, drop-in centers, street outreach and free showers.

An interesting extension of this comparison is to split the runaway sample between those with prior foster care experience (27.5%) and those who were never in foster care. Bear in mind that most of the youth with prior foster care experience had returned home before running away; only a handful were on runaway from a foster care placement. The third and fourth column of

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[9] For a description of the high school sample, see Pergamit and Ernst (2010b). Tabulations from the school survey are reproduced from Table 10 in that report.

[10] For a description of the runaway sample, see Pergamit and Ernst (2010a).

Table V-2 shows that the runaway youth with foster care experience expressed lower rates of knowledge on nine of the ten services than did runaways with no foster care experience; the one exception being mental health care.

Youth who run from foster care and do not return, eventually ending up on the streets, can benefit from knowledge about services. As we've discussed, it does not appear this is a significant percentage and their prior connection to the child welfare system may provide a last resort fall-back position for them, knowing they could call a former caseworker or other child welfare services connection for help if they want it.

Table V-2 Knowledge of Services: Comparison of Foster Care
Sample with Runaway Youth Sample[11]

If youth runs away, knows where to find	Foster care sample	Runaway Youth Sample	Runaway Youth Sample	
			with foster care experience	no foster care experience
crisis line	34.0%	32.5%	27.3%	34.5%
free meals	38.0%	62.5%	50.0%	67.2%
drop-in center	6.0%	61.3%	54.5%	63.8%
street outreach	10.0%	46.3%	40.9%	48.3%
health care	72.0%	66.3%	54.5%	70.7%
dental care	50.0%	35.0%	27.3%	37.9%
counseling	54.0%	62.5%	50.0%	67.2%
mental health care	24.0%	36.3%	40.9%	34.5%
substance abuse treatment	44.0%	41.3%	36.4%	43.1%
alcohol abuse treatment	40.0%	36.3%	31.8%	37.9%
free shower	20.0%	56.3%	50.0%	58.6%

b.   The National Runaway Switchboard / 1-800-RUNAWAY

Table V-3 shows that a minority (38%) of youth who have run away from foster care have heard of 1-800-RUNAWAY or the National Runaway Switchboard (NRS), a percentage similar to that

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[11] The tabulations for the runaway youth sample as a whole (column 2) are reproduced from Table X, column Y in Pergamit and Ernst (2010a).

of the runaways we interviewed in shelters and on the street (42%).[12] Unlike the runaway sample, the percentage for the foster care sample was not higher in Chicago, the home city of the NRS. Youth who had run from a group home were more likely to have heard of 1-800-RUNAWAY than youth who had run from a foster home.

Not a single youth in our foster care sample had called the NRS, which is not surprising given they virtually all ran away to a friend's or family's home and did not spend time on the street.

Table V-3 Youth Knowledge of 1-800-RUNAWAY
or The National Runaway Switchboard

Youth has heard of 1-800-RUNAWAY or the National Runaway Switchboard?	
All	37.5%
City	
Chicago	36.0%
L.A.	39.1%
Placement	
Foster home	30.8%
Group home	47.4%

c. Reasons for Not Using Services

Youths provided a number of reasons they don't use services when on the run. Most reasons mirror those provided by other runaway youths. They felt that many youths let pride (or stubbornness) stand in the way and won't take help from anybody. Others felt it was more a matter of asserting independence and feeling they don't need help. Many youth noted that it is embarrassing to have to ask for help.

Lack of information was also seen as a barrier. They don't know where services are, how to find them, or who to ask. They also may believe that they'd have to pay or that they

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[12] Pergamit and Ernst (2010a), Table VI-1.

would need to have a parent with them. If they haven't used a service, they don't know what it would be like and worry about what might happen, or fear being rejected.

> *I don't know how they function. So I really wouldn't know.* (16 year old female)

> *…the reason I'm telling you I wouldn't trust them is that I don't know about the things. I've never been there; I've never seen the way they look or anything. So like, you said 'shelter.' I don't know what a shelter might look like; it might be one big room with one bed. So that would be really uncomfortable being in one big room with one bed* (16 year old female)

By far though, the biggest barrier to foster youths seeking services while on the run is that they believe they will be turned in, either directly to DCFS or to the police. Five out of eight (63%) sample youth stated that concerns about being turned in kept them from seeking help while on the run. Table V-4 shows some interesting patterns. Older youths (16-17 year olds) were somewhat more likely than younger youths (14-15 year olds) to have these concerns, reverse of what we saw for the runaway youth sample (Pergamit and Ernst 2010a). Females were much more likely than males to have these concerns (74% compared with 40%); LGBT youth more than heterosexual youth (78% compared with 59%); youth who had run from a foster home more than youth who had run from a group home (73% compared with 55%); and youth in L.A. more than youth in Chicago (71% compared with 56%).[13] Finally, the more total placements the youth had had, up to ten placements, the more concerns about being turned in; however, youth with more than ten placements had no more concerns than youth with only one placement.

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[13] L.A. is higher than Chicago in part because we had fewer group home youths in L.A. However, controlling for placement type in a regression, youth in L.A. still have greater concerns than youth in Chicago, although the difference does not reach conventional levels of significance (p=.14).

In our runaway youth sample, there was relatively less concern about being turned in to DCFS than being turned over to parents or the police. However, 43 percent of those in the runaway sample with foster care experience were concerned about being turned over to DCFS while only six percent of those without foster care experience had this concern. In the case of the foster care sample, parents are not a concern and concerns about being turned in to the police and being turned in to DCFS are basically redundant.

Table V-4 Youth Worries about being Turned In to Authorities

Youth worries about being turned in	
All	63.3%
Age	
14-15	50.0%
16	69.2%
17	66.7%
Gender	
Male	40.0%
Female	73.5%
Sexual orientation	
Heterosexual	59.0%
LGBT	77.8%
City	
Chicago	56.0%
Los Angeles	70.8%
Placement	
Foster home	73.1%
Group home	55.0%
Lifetime placements	
1	50.0%
2-3	62.5%
4-6	68.4%
7-10	83.3%

d. Use of Health Care While on the Run

Being away from a foster care placement can disrupt a youth's schooling and support services, therapeutic progress, and access to medications that may have been prescribed. With concerns about being turned in preventing many youth from seeking service, few youth attempt to replace these services while on the run. However, while they may feel they can forgo many services while on the run, they can still have acute or chronic health needs that require attention. Fortunately, most youth who reported needing health care while on the run sought it out and received it. Specifically, fifteen youths (30%) said they needed health care while on the run. All but two appear to have received care. Those two, both females, did not seek care; one because she was afraid of being turned in, the other because she didn't think she could go by herself. Youths generally sought care either from a hospital or from a clinic, usually a free clinic.

VI. Connecting with Runaway Foster Youth

Key Findings

- Like other runaways, youths who ran away from foster care overwhelmingly prefer to contact a helpline by phone.

- Nearly two-thirds of sample youths felt that anonymity was important when calling a helpline.

- Nearly 65 percent reported having access to e-mail and 75 percent reported having a MySpace page. Most youths with e-mail access it at least weekly and 72 percent of youths with a MySpace page access it at least weekly.

a. Contacting a Helpline

Like other runaways, Figure VI-1 shows that youths who ran away from foster care overwhelmingly prefer to contact a helpline by phone (83%). Only one in six preferred text messaging and none preferred e-mail. Although we only asked this question with regard to helplines, one can surmise the same would hold true for other services.

Figure VI-1 Youth's Preferred Method to Contact Helpline

text messaging, 17%

phone, 83%
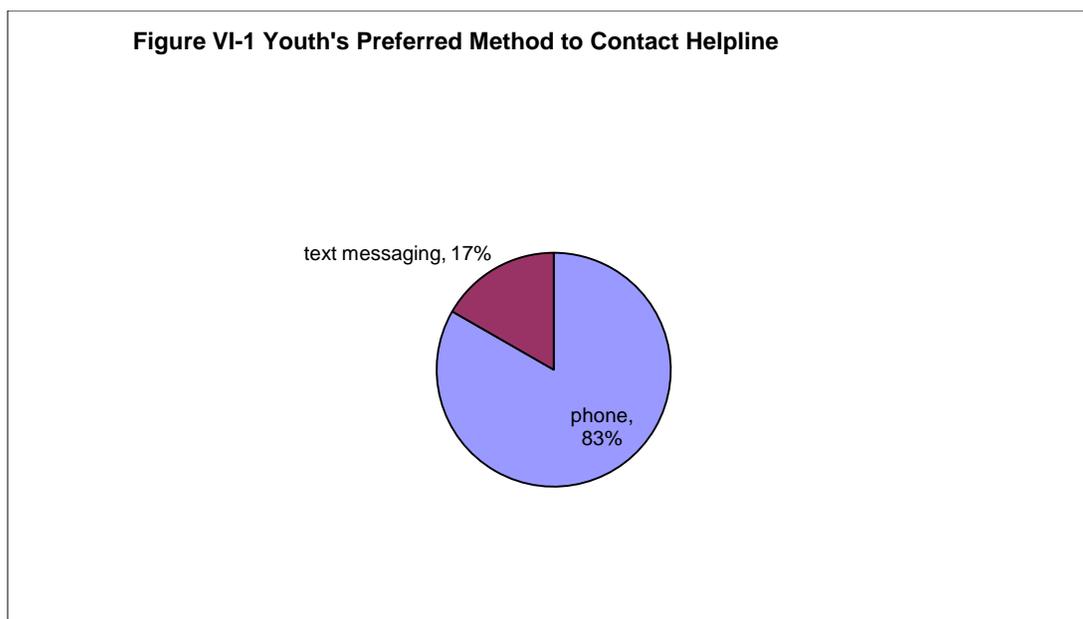
Nearly two-thirds of sample youth felt that anonymity was important when calling a helpline (Table VI-1). In the runaway sample a similar percent of runaway youth with foster care experience felt anonymity was important (73%) compared with less than half (43%) of runaways without foster care experience. For those youths who think anonymity is important, youths in

the foster care sample and youths in the runaway sample with foster care experience were more likely than other runaway youth to say it was because of concerns about being turned in.

Table VI-1 shows the importance of anonymity by subgroups. Males felt it was more important than females, the opposite of what we found for other runaways.[14] LGBT youths were nearly unanimous (89%) in their stressing the importance of anonymity, a rate higher than heterosexual youths (58%). Youths who ran away from a foster home were more likely than youths who ran away from a group home to think anonymity would be important (73% compared with 53%). This is consistent with the finding that youths who ran away from a foster home were more concerned that they'd get turned in if accessing a service than were youths who ran away from a group home.

Table VI-1 Importance of Anonymity When Calling a Crisis Line

	Important	Not Important
All youth	66.0%	34.0%
Gender		
male	73.3%	26.7%
female	62.5%	37.5%
Sexual orientation		
heterosexual	59.5%	40.5%
LGBT	88.9%	11.1%
Placement type		
foster home	76.0%	24.0%
group home	52.6%	47.4%

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[14] Pergamit and Ernst (2010a), Table VI-5.

b. Access to E-mail and Social Networking Sites

Youths who run away from foster care stay with friends and relatives and as such are staying connected to a support system of a sort. However, in this section we investigate what technology youths have access to so that caseworkers can consider ways to keep in touch with the youths.

Only 30 percent of the sample youths reported owning a cell phone, but nearly 63 percent reported having access to e-mail and 75 percent reported having a MySpace page (Table VI-2). As seen for other runaways MySpace dominates Facebook (Pergamit and Ernst 2010a); in this sample only three youths reported having a Facebook page.[15] Most youths with e-mail access it at least weekly (87%) and over 72 percent of youth with a MySpace page access it at least weekly.

Table VI-2 Access to E-mail and MySpace

Youth has e-mail	62.5%	Youth has MySpace page	75.0%
Frequency of access to e-mail		Frequency of access to MySpace	
Every day	66.7%	Every day	38.9%
A few times a week	13.3%	A few times a week	13.9%
About once a week	6.7%	About once a week	19.4%
less than once a month	10.0%	A few times a month	2.8%
unknown	3.3%	About once a month	2.8%
		less than once a month	13.9%
		rarely or never	8.3%

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[15] The social networking landscape changes rapidly. The last interviews with foster youth took place in July 2009. It is possible that these youth (and other runaways) now have FaceBook pages.

VII. Improvements – What Do Youth Suggest?

Key Findings

- Youths who were unhappy with their placements felt that a change in placement would have prevented them from running away. Youths wanted more freedom and fewer rules, reflected in more trust and more respect.

- Youths felt that they should be allowed to see their family more often and for group homes to give out passes more easily. Help should be given to facilitate visits with their family. More needs to be done to obviate the effects of being placed away from their neighborhood, family, and friends

- Youths in group homes felt there should be more to do at the group home and more activities that take them away from the group home.

- Some youths recognized their own role in the decision to run away including the need for anger management.

- In general, there was a widespread feeling among youths that they need someone to talk to, who will listen to them and help work through problems. Many felt they couldn't talk to their foster parents. Youths in group homes felt that therapists in group homes turn over too frequently.

- Youths feel that caseworkers do not provide the support they need. They feel that caseworkers should visit more often and find out how the youth is doing. Caseworkers should take time to talk to the kids to understand them and try to make things better. Youths feel they are not asked their opinion and that caseworkers rely on the foster parent or a visual inspection to determine if everything is fine. Basically youths wanted caseworkers to listen to the youth, try to understand, be reasonable, and be flexible.

- Youths suggested that if a youth or foster parent says there is a problem, or the youth says s/he doesn't like something, then they are likely to run away. Caseworkers should listen to what the youth is saying and provide options.

- Youths feel that caseworkers should try to listen and understand better why the youth ran away.

- Youths felt that too many foster parents are only in it for the money and don't respect youths. They felt that foster parents need to be more caring and loving, treating youths as they would their own children. They felt that foster parents need to remember that it isn't the youth's fault s/he is in foster care. Foster parents need to be more patient and not expect immediate changes from the youth.

- Most youths do not hate the system or blame it for having to remove them from their home; they just want it to work better.

- Nearly half of the youths wanted to live with family, about 30 percent wanting to live with their mother. Nearly one quarter of the youths wanted to live on their own.

- Youths who wanted to live with their mother split nearly equally between those who felt their mother had to do something (complete a particular program, attend classes, go through therapy, get a job) and those who felt they themselves had to do some things (go to school, stay out of trouble, change behavior, complete a program, stop running away).

- Nearly all youths who wanted to live on their own understood the need to establish their ability to support themselves. Most felt they had to finish high school and get a job.

a. What Would Have Prevented Youths from Running Away?

We asked youths what could have been done to prevent them from running away. As might be expected, most of these responses mirror their reasons for running away. For example, those youths who were unhappy with their placements felt that a change in placement would have prevented them from running away. Youths wanted more freedom and fewer rules, reflected in more trust and more respect.

Also consistent with their reasons for running away, youths felt that they should be allowed to see their family more often and for group homes to give out passes more easily. Furthermore, if their placement was far from their family, it can be not only difficult for the youths to get to their family's location, but their family may not have transportation to come visit them in their placement (e.g. if the youth couldn't get a pass). Youths felt that help should be given to facilitate visits with their families. Some youths broadened this to include friends, noting that it can be difficult to go places such as the mall with friends without any means of transportation and not living near their friends. They suggested more be done to obviate the effects of being placed away from their neighborhood, family, and friends.

Youths in group homes felt there should be more to do at the group home and more activities that take them away from the group home. Some felt the weekend was the time they need this most while others felt there needed to be more to do after school.

Youths also felt that group homes need more caring staff, foster homes need better foster parents, and caseworkers need to listen to youths and be more responsive. Many felt these are all contributing factors to preventing running away.

Finally, several youths recognized their own role in the decision to run away. One felt she needed to be more patient and another felt he needed to be less hard-headed. Several youth had come to realize they need anger management. In general, there was a widespread feeling among youths that they need someone to talk to, who will listen to them and help work through problems. Several youths in foster homes felt they couldn't talk to their foster parent about their problems, either because they didn't know the foster parent well enough or they didn't like them. Youths in group homes noted that they got helped by therapists, but that therapists in group homes did not stay long; the development of trust and rapport with one therapist would have to begin anew with the next therapist. A couple of youths stated their wraparound team had proved helpful but noted that not all youths have a wraparound team.

b. Improving the Foster Care System

When asked what they would suggest for improving the foster care system, many youths referred to the specific issues that had led them to run away including letting them see their family more, changing their placement, more activities in group homes, and giving out passes in group homes. Several mentioned that many rules seem arbitrary and that they should be age appropriate. They felt older teens should be allowed more freedom and more privacy.

A few youths focused on the topic of running away without necessarily focusing on their own issues. Suggestions included:

- Make other arrangements with the police besides returning runaways to their placements (from which they ran away!).

- Give youths a number to call in case they run away—don't assume everything in a placement will be perfect.

- If a youth ran away, look at the foster home and try to figure out why. Don't just punish youths and lock them away.

- After a certain age, if a runaway would keep in touch with their caseworker, then let him go to school and get services without needing to be in a foster care placement.

By far the largest set of comments involved caseworkers, their behavior and their interactions with youths. One youth suggested the foster care system hire more people with foster care experience so that they understand what the youths are going through. In general, youths felt caseworkers needed to show more empathy; to care more about the youths and not just see what they do as a job.

> *They should try to walk in our shoes.* (17 year old female)

> *I really believe that some social workers don't understand what we're going through. … Just because its court order … doesn't mean it's not going to hurt us or we're not going to be mad. We're going to express it and just for you to block it out or ignore it's not going to go away.* (16 year old female)

> *I didn't feel like my caseworker was really doing her job. Well, I felt like she was just doing what she had to do as her job. Like, she wasn't actually really wanting to help me, you know what I mean? It was just like "Oh, well I have to do this because this is what I get paid for. So I'm going to come and do my check in like 'Oh, yeah, you're okay. Well, you're living, you're breathing, so that's it.'" And I didn't like that, so I would have liked for her to be more active with me and work out a service plan with me together, and be more…in contact with me and just understand how I feel more and try to help me out more other than just do her job and try to get her job done for the day.* (17 year old female)

Several comments elaborated on this theme:

- Caseworkers should visit more often and find out how the youth is doing. Ask their opinion.

- Ask the youth how things are going with specific questions such as how often do you get fed, how often do you get to use the phone, etc. Don't rely on the foster parent or even a visual inspection—things aren't always what they seem.

- Caseworkers need to be more dedicated to what they do, interact more with the kids. They need to know better what is going on in the youth's life and how she feels. Don't label kids; work with them to find a suitable placement.

- Take time and sit down and talk to the kids to understand them and try to make things better.

- Listen to the youth, try to understand, be reasonable, and be flexible.

In terms of running away:

- Look for clues. If a youth or foster parent says there is a problem, or the youth says she doesn't like something, then they are likely to run. Listen to what the youth is saying and provide options.

- Try to listen and understand better why the youth ran away (e.g. not getting passes or trouble with other kids stealing their stuff).

In terms of general improvement:

- Caseworkers should be accessible. Currently they only provide an office number and they aren't in their offices; they should provide a cell number.

- Make things happen faster.

- Return calls; show up when promised.

Calling, showing up on time, showing up at all, getting me back home, returning my phone calls, the list goes on and on, send out my bus pass, pay my mom's rent… (17-year old female)

While youths who had suggestions for group homes focused on specific issues such as activities and passes, they did not focus on staff. On the other hand, several youths in foster homes felt that better foster parents are needed. Youths felt that too many foster parents are only in it for the money and don't respect youths. They felt that foster parents need to be more caring and loving, treating youths as they would their own children. They felt that foster parents need to remember that it isn't the youth's fault s/he is in foster care. Foster parents need to be more patient and not expect immediate changes from youths. One youth suggested letting a youth get to know a foster parent before being put into the placement. They could get a sense of whether it would be a good match and could develop some rapport.

A few other suggestions are worth mentioning. One youth noted that changes in the youth's life need to be minimized. The youth goes through the initial removal from their home, several placement changes, school changes, and lives with many different people along the way, making it difficult to adjust. Another youth noted that when they change placements, possessions (particularly clothes) are frequently left behind and more money is needed to allow youths to refurnish their environment and to replenish their wardrobe.

Finally, it should be noted that most youth did not hate the system or blame it for having to remove them from their home; they just wanted it to work better.

> *It's not DCFS that's making the kids run away. It's the placements that's making the kids run away.* (17 year old male)

> *…there's nothing wrong with the system…they give you food, shelter, school; you get a certain age you get your own house. There's nothing bad about the system but they keep you away from your family. I say keep the system the same if any change should be made…have them see their family more.* (17 year old male)

> *Wraparound, it's a very helpful service that just…well my wraparound is three women and they help me out with anything that I need like taking me to court or trying to put me into activities or trying to help me with school. Just very helpful service with trying to get you with everything else which I don't have at home, you know, just a very helpful type of team…just there to help you.* (16 year old female)

c. Who Would Youths Like to Live With?

We asked youths with whom they would like to live if they had a choice. Not surprisingly, nearly half wanted to live with family, about 30 percent wanting to live with their mother.[16] The next largest group (23%) wanted to live on their own. Nearly one in five wanted to live with their boyfriend or girlfriend; some of them had children together. Finally, some youths were happy in

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[16] Includes one youth who wanted to live with both his parents.

foster care with approximately 12 percent happy with their current placement (although one youth wanted to switch from a group home to a foster home).

We asked what the youths thought would have to happen for them to be able to live with the person they identified. Youths who wanted to live with their mother split nearly equally between those who felt their mother had to do something (complete a particular program, attend classes, go through therapy, get a job) and those who felt they themselves had to do some things (go to school, stay out of trouble, change behavior, complete a program, stop running away). One youth felt both she and her mother had to "keep doing right" while two youths recognized that their mother's parental rights had been terminated and no reunification was possible.

Youths who wanted to live with other family such as aunts and siblings generally believed it was up to the youth to go to school and behave to effect such a living situation. Similarly, youths who were happy with their current foster care placement believed that they had to go to school and exhibit good behavior to maintain their situation. Youths who wanted to live with a boyfriend or girlfriend also believed it was up to them to do the right things, although some thought they could achieve independence by getting married.

Finally, 80 percent of the youths who wanted to live on their own understood the need to establish their ability to support themselves. Most felt they had to finish high school and get a job. Some noted the need for life skills (especially handling finances), "following the right path," and showing responsibility. Only one youth thought that money alone would be what he needed while another youth thought that independence could be achieved by joining the military or getting married.

It would take hard work, finishing high school, looking for a good place to live and not just anywhere. It would take hard work, getting a job, saving up…going to high school then going to college, make sure I'm well put, you know, things like that. (17 year old female)

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