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*FINDINGS FROM A NATIONAL SURVEY
OF SHELTERS FOR RUNAWAY AND HOMELESS YOUTH*

Conducted by

THE NATIONAL ASSOCIATION OF SOCIAL WORKERS

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY OF KEY NASW SURVEY FINDINGS

To develop practice relevant information and to identify innovative practices, the National Association of Social Workers (NASW), with support from the Department of Health and Human Services, examined the needs of runaway and homeless youths and the programs available to help them. Between January and April of 1991, NASW surveyed 360 agencies that provide basic shelter and crisis intervention services and transitional living services to runaway and homeless youths. NASW also surveyed state coordinators of independent living services. The survey results provide information on the state of services and practices for runaway and homeless youths.

NASW then used a panel of experts to identify best practices based on the survey data and their knowledge about and experience with youths. The Juvenile Welfare Board of Pinellas County, Florida agreed to demonstrate the resulting comprehensive model of service delivery to test the validity of the model.

Who Are the Runaway and Homeless Youth?

There is no prototypical runaway or homeless youth. These youths come from a variety of backgrounds and environments. They include children forced out from their homes, chronic runaways from family homes, youths who runaway from juvenile institutions, youths who runaway from residential facilities or foster homes, and youths who want to escape parental control temporarily.

Despite differences in background and environment, runaway and homeless youths experience many of the same family problems. Many have experienced physical and sexual abuse, parental drug and alcohol abuse, and other violence in the family setting.

The nationwide NASW survey confirms what other smaller studies have suggested. Large numbers of these youths are not short term runaways. The NASW survey shows that more than one out of five youths who arrive at a shelter are coming directly from a foster home or group home, while 38% had been in foster care at some time during the previous year. Eleven percent arrive at a shelter from another runaway or crisis shelter. And 11% were on the street before coming to the shelter. One-half returned to their parent or guardian's home following shelter care. Thus many of the runaway and homeless youths nationwide have long-term problems that may preclude their return to a family setting. It appears that prior services have not helped the youths resolve their problems.

The problems that influenced these youths to leave their homes or legal residences are severe. The NASW survey showed that more than 60% of the youths in shelters and transitional living facilities nationwide were physically or sexually abused by parents. One out of four youths experienced violence by other family members. This is not surprising since the *1981 National Incidence Study* (National Center on Child Abuse and Neglect) showed that one out of four of the known child abuse cases concern children who are 12-17 years

old. Abuse of adolescents is often undetected until they come into contact with professionals such as child protective services workers, staff of runaway shelters, or juvenile court personnel (Straus, M., 1990).

Many parents of these youths are substance abusers. The NASW survey shows that 29 percent of the parents had problems with alcohol. Twenty-four percent of the parents were drug abusers. In fact, most of the service providers reported that parental substance abuse was a problem. Several studies suggest that parental consumption of alcohol has a direct relationship to adolescent alcohol consumption (Barnes, 1990).

The NASW data reveals other alarming national trends. These are:

- 83% of the programs surveyed receive client referrals from law enforcement and 75% receive referrals from juvenile justice;
- 27% of the clients were in trouble with the justice system.

These findings are not surprising since runaway behavior constitutes a status offense.

For almost half of the youths, the average length of shelter and aftercare is more than one month. The seriousness of the problems they faced suggest that they will need long term assistance both to overcome the problems and, for older youths, to learn to live independently.

Some of the problems of runaway and homeless youths mirror the problems of American society at large. Shelter providers report that 41% of their clients are from families with long-term economic problems. Close to half had a household with an absent father. Approximately one-third of the youths had no means of support. Consistent with generally excessive high school dropout rates, more than half of the youths had serious educational or school problems.

The above description of the factors influencing runaway and substance abusing behavior highlighted some of the most significant problems facing youths and their families. Even more revealing is the table on the next page that shows responses to the survey question about the problems youth clients experienced. The providers responding said that more than 50% of the youths had more than one of these problems.

PROBLEMS FACING RUNAWAY AND HOMELESS YOUTH

Problems Faced by Youth Clients	Percent of Youth Clients with Problem
Education/School Problems	53
Absence of Father	45
Family with Long-Term Economic Problems	41
Youth was in Foster Care	38
Other Abuse of Youth by Parent	38
Youth Has No Means of Support	37
Parent is an Alcoholic	29
Youth is in Trouble with Justice System	27
Youth Has Mental Health Problem	26
Violence by Other Family Members	26
Parent is a Drug Abuser	24
Sexual Abuse by Parent	23
Youth is Drug Abuser	23
Absence of Caretaker	23
Youth Has Attempted Suicide	20
Youth is an Alcoholic	19
Parent has Mental Health Problem	18

Programs Designed To Help Needy Youths

The first program that departed from traditional ways of reacting to troubled youths as delinquents was the Runaway Youth Program established by Congress in 1974. (It was later amended to include homeless youths). The program's purpose is to supplement services provided by the juvenile justice system and the child welfare system by offering short-term crisis intervention to youths who have not been placed in the shelter by a court. Congressional expectations were that the program would alleviate the problems of the youths, reunite them with their families, help them resolve intrafamily problems, strengthen family relationships and stabilize living conditions.

The Department of Health and Human Services interpreted short term care to mean no more than 15 days of care within a shelter setting. The 15 day limitation on temporary stay in the shelter maintains a focus on crisis intervention. Thus shelters provide a safe place for sleep and meals. Shelter staff contact youths' families to try to achieve family reunification.

Despite the 15 day limitation, the shelters provide an exhaustive array of services that are designed to help the youths resolve their current crises and prevent future crises. The 24 services provided by at least 3/4 of the providers responding to the NASW survey are:

<u>Service</u>	<u>% of Shelters Providing</u>
Information & Referral	98
Individual Counseling	98
Screening/Intake	96
Temporary Shelter	95
Case Management	94
Referral to Drug Abuse Program	94
Provide Meals	93
Coordinate with Juvenile Justice System	93
Family Counseling	92
Refer for Mental Health Services	90
Outreach	89
Refer for Health Care	89
Refer for Treatment for Suicidal Behavior	89
Provide Recreational Program	87
Provide Advocacy for Client	87
Refer to Program for Alcoholics	86
Refer for Other Living Arrangements	82
Refer to Educational Program/G.E.D.	82
Refer to Family Counseling	81
Refer for Individual Counseling	79
Provide AIDS/HIV Education	78
Follow-up to Referral	77
Provide Aftercare	76
Provide Transportation	75

Legislation for the Runaway Youth Program also required shelters that received Federal funds to develop an adequate plan for aftercare counseling for each youth and family. As shelter staff discovered the tremendous needs of the youths seeking their help, they not only found more providers to whom they could refer youths, they also began to provide more aftercare services themselves. The NASW survey showed that 92% of the shelter and transitional living programs now identify specific services that they provide as part of aftercare. Aftercare services provided by at least two-thirds of the providers who responded to the survey are:

<u>Aftercare Service</u>	<u>% of Shelters Providing</u>
Individual Counseling	93
Family Counseling	88
Case Management	82
Counseling for Drug Abuse	77
Group Counseling	75
Counseling for Alcoholism	74
Parent Counseling	72
Mental Health Services	69

Recognizing that older homeless youths are less likely to be reunited with their families and that runaways with serious problems need more intensive help, Congress created the Transitional Living Program for homeless youths. This program was designed to meet the broader societal and environmental needs of youths. Youths are supposed to leave the program with skills in obtaining a job, housing, and access to needed services.

Although two-thirds of all respondents to the NASW survey said that they refer youths to transitional living, only 1/3 actually provide transitional living services. However the number of providers offering transitional living services is growing. Thirty-nine providers have added transitional living services since their programs began.

Although more of the youths for whom independent/transitional living would be appropriate are moving into that type of program, unfortunately many are not. More of these youths are returning to the street. Significantly more are entering or returning to foster or group home care.

<u>Destination</u>	<u>Av % All Youth Clients</u>	<u>Av % Youth Clients Ready for Independent Living</u>
Parent's/Guardian's Home	51	32
Other Parent Figure	9	15
Relative's Home	8	15
Foster Home	12	19
Group Home	10	16
Independent/Transitional Liv.	8	29
Back to the Street	8	18

Staffing of shelters and transitional living programs reflects the providers' understanding of the serious long term problems facing youths who seek their help. The percentages of providers using professional staff is shown below.

<u>Profession</u>	<u>% of Providers Employing</u>	<u>Av % of All Employed Staff</u>
B.A. Social Work	74	17
B.A Psychology	66	18
B.A. Counseling	36	9
M.S.W.	61	12
M.A. Psychology	39	7
M.A. Counseling	54	11

Clearly providers believe that they must have some professionally trained staff in their programs.