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# NATIONAL STATISTICAL SURVEY ON RUNAWAY YOUTH

PART I



Prepared under Contract HEW 105-75-2105

for the

DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH, EDUCATION, AND WELFARE

Office of Human Development

Office of Youth Development

Opinion Research Corporation

NORTH HARRISON STREET, PRINCETON, NEW JERSEY 08540

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## PREFACE

This study was authorized under Title III of the Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention Act (Public Law 93-415). Its objective is to provide a comprehensive statistical survey to define the major characteristics of the runaway youth population. This document is Part I of a two-part report.

Opinion Research Corporation would like to acknowledge the assistance and support of Stanley B. Thomas, Jr., Assistant Secretary for Human Development, James A. Hart, Commissioner for Youth Development, and members of the Intra-Departmental Committee on Runaway Youth of which Mr. Hart is the Chairman.

A feasibility study conducted during 1975 by the Behavioral Research and Evaluation Corporation of Boulder, Colorado, under the Assistant Secretary for Planning and Evaluation, provided invaluable input into the present study. Finally, we also would like to acknowledge the efforts of Dr. Catherine V. Richards, Director of Research, and Robert McGee, Project Officer, Office of Youth Development, for making this project provide all those informational needs specified by Congress.

## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Objectives

This report is Part I of a two-part report developed in order to meet the requirements of reporting to Congress by June 30, 1976. Its findings, based on a large-scale nationwide telephone screening for runaway youth, aged 10-17, cover most of the information items specified in the Runaway Youth Act. More definitive data will be presented in Part II of this report which will be based on personal interviews with runaway youths, their parents, and comparison groups of nonrunners and runaways who have not yet returned home.

Methodology

Interviews were conducted by telephone with a nationwide probability sample of 13,942 households containing youth aged 10-17 (referred to as youth households), during the period January 5 - February 23, 1976. Respondents were male or female household heads.

Because it was necessary to screen more than 60,000 households to locate sufficient runaways for subsequent study, no method other than the use of the telephone was considered to be feasible.

Definitions

For the purposes of this study, a runaway is defined as a youth between the ages of 10-17, inclusive, who has been absent from home without parental/guardian permission for at least overnight.

Runaway incidence is the proportion of youth aged 10-17 who ran during 1975 or the proportion of youth households experiencing a runaway event during 1975.

Runaway prevalence is the proportion of youth households ever having experienced a runaway event.

Findings

The runaway incidence data obtained in this nationwide study agree closely with the results of an earlier feasibility study by the Behavioral Research and Evaluation Corporation (BREC) conducted in Colorado, and with a telephone panel study conducted during 1975 by Unco, Inc.

Overnight runaway incidence was found to be --

1.7% of youth aged 10-17 or 519,500 - 635,000 youths  
3.0% of youth households or 502,000 - 613,600 households

If all reported instances of running away are included (gone two hours or more), the runaway incidence increases to 5.7% of youth households or 985,400 - 1,134,200 youth households.

Presented below are highlights of the findings:

- The incidence of runaway households tends to be higher in the West (3.8%) and North Central states (3.6%) than in the Northeast (2.2%) or South (2.7%).
- Fifteen, sixteen, and seventeen year-olds accounted for four out of five instances of running away during 1975. The modal age for runners was 16.
- Slightly more than half of all runners (53.2%) were males.
- Nine out of ten runners ran away only once during 1975.
- Rates of running for whites and blacks were not significantly different (2.9% vs. 3.2%), but the rates of running for Hispanic youth tended to be somewhat higher (4.6%).
- The rates of running for children of blue collar and white collar workers were identical (3.0%).
- Two out of ten runaway youth traveled less than one mile from home; more than half (52.5%) traveled less than ten miles.
- Four out of ten youths were gone one day or less; seven in ten returned in less than a week.
- The months February through May tended to have the lowest rates of running away; only slight differences in runaway rates occurred during June-January.
- Approximately two-thirds of all runaway households have experienced only a single runaway event (ever).

## INTRODUCTION

On September 10, 1974, the President signed into law Public Law 93-415, the Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention Act. Title III of this Act specifically deals with runaway youth and has been labeled the "Runaway Youth Act."

Part B of the Runaway Youth Act mandates that a comprehensive statistical survey be carried out to define the major characteristics of the runaway youth population and to determine the areas of the nation most affected.

Responsibility for the survey has been placed with the Office of Youth Development in the Department of Health, Education, and Welfare. Opinion Research Corporation of Princeton, New Jersey, was awarded the contract to carry out the nationwide survey. The nationwide survey was based on exploratory work conducted in Colorado by the Behavioral Research and Evaluation Corporation (BREC) of Boulder.

This particular report constitutes Part I of an ultimate two-part report. Part I is designed to present runaway incidence and prevalence data based on a nationwide telephone screening of more than 60,000 households. Part II, which is to follow, will present detailed findings based upon in-depth personal interviews with runaway youth and their parents. It will explore the etiology of running away, compile data on runaway events, and it will focus on the types of services deemed necessary by runaways and their families. Moreover, by comparing runaway youth to youth who have not run away, it will be possible to explore many of the correlates of running away.

A two-part report was necessitated in order to meet the requirements of reporting to Congress by June 30, 1976. Originally, it had been anticipated that a single report would be available detailing the results of the telephone screening and the subsequent field interviewing. Unfortunately, due to delays in obtaining various clearances, this was impossible.

### Definition of Running Away

It is imperative that any study of runaway behavior utilize an operational definition of running away that (a) has content validity acceptable to most authorities, and (b), is sufficiently specific that it separates running away from other behaviors.

The literature in this field has proposed a number of definitions which are similar in many respects, yet dissimilar in others. Among the key factors which occur repeatedly are the following:

- age of the youth
- absence of parental/guardian permission
- time gone

Perhaps the age categories that one uses constitute the most arbitrary of the criteria involved. One may investigate runaway behavior among seven, eight, and nine year-olds, but such behavior tends to be infrequent and usually not of a serious nature as characterized by time gone or distance traveled. Correspondingly, runaways in the 18-22 age category might also be included. Incidence here is probably considerably higher, but it also involves young adults, and as such, is of little consequence to those primarily interested in the welfare of children.

The absence of parental or guardian permission is perhaps as close to a universal criterion as there is in defining runaway behavior. In addition to the BREC exploratory study (3), other major investigations stressing the absence of permission include those of Leventhal (5) (6), Goldmeier and Dean (4), and Bock and English (2).

The concept of time gone is one in which there is less agreement. The BREC study (3), for example, uses one of the least rigid criteria when it specifies that the child had to be away eight hours or more.

The criterion of "away overnight" appears to have received the most attention. Among those using this definition were Stierlin (14), BREC (3), Robey (9), Robey et al. (10), and Robins et al. (11).

Another frequent time period is "more than 24 hours." This has been used by Saltonstall (12) and Riemer (8).

Based upon the input of these previous investigations, an operational definition of runaway behavior was developed for this study. It utilizes an age span of greatest interest to the Office of Youth Development, as well as a time gone cutoff designed to screen out most non-serious attempts at running away. Yet at the same time, it is designed to identify those runaway incidents aborted after a short time. The definition is presented below:

A runaway is defined as a youth between the ages of 10-17, inclusive, who has been absent from home without parental/guardian permission for at least overnight.

### Runaway Incidence

Up until this time very little information about the incidence of running away from home was available. This was because of the difficulty associated with collecting data from diverse sources, and because the data available were not necessarily representative of runaway behavior in general.

Much of these data come from police records, Uniform Crime reports, reports from runaway shelters, and records of agencies such as the Travelers' Aid Society. Each of these sources offers a vignette of runaway behavior, but individually, and even collectively, they cannot offer a satisfactory picture of runaway incidence in the United States.

Among the reports offering runaway incidence estimates are those of Ambrosino (1) who estimated that in 1969 there were about 500,000 runaways under 17 in the United States. Her estimate was based upon multiple inputs from halfway houses, police records, runaway hotlines, and reports issued by the Travelers' Aid Society.

The BREC study conducted in Colorado (3) found that runaways comprised 3.6% of the youth population and 7.1% of youth households (a time gone of eight hours or longer). When a time gone of 24 or more hours was used, the estimates became 1.8% of youth and 3.8% of youth households.

In recent testimony before the House Subcommittee on Equal Opportunity in the United States, Martin Gold and David Reimer estimated that, each year, approximately 500,000 to 750,000 youth run away. Based upon surveys they conducted among youth in 1967 and 1972, the Institute for Social Research at the University of Michigan indicated that the overall proportion of youth who run away each year has remained relatively constant. However, because of rising numbers of youth in the age range of interest, the absolute number of youths running away has increased.

A very thorough review by Walker (15) provides greater detail on questions of runaway definition and incidence.

### The Present Study

Against this background the present study was designed to isolate a national probability sample of youth households, and thereupon, to determine how many of these households experienced a runaway episode within the past year (incidence). In addition, among these same youth households, the total number of times a youth ever ran away was ascertained (prevalence).

Detailed descriptions of the study's methodology, sample design, and sample characteristics are presented in the Technical Appendix to this report.



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PART II



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## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This is Part II of a national statistical study conducted by Opinion Research Corporation for the Office of Youth Development, Department of Health, Education, and Welfare. Part II is a descriptive analysis of the runaway phenomenon.

Objectives

Part II has three broad objectives:

- 1) Description of runaway youth and their family, school, and community environments.
- 2) A detailed description of what it is like to run away.
- 3) An assessment of services to runaway youth and their families.

Methodology

Interviews were conducted in person with --

224 youth who, during 1975, had left home without permission and stayed away overnight or longer. These were termed "Returned Runaways."

224 parents of these Returned Runaway youth.

202 youth who lived in the neighborhoods of the Returned Runaways but who had not themselves ever run away. These were termed "Comparison Youth."

202 Parents of Comparison Youth

411 youth who were still on the run, at the time of the interview, termed "Nonreturners."

Households in which Returned Runaways, and their parents, were interviewed were identified in a nationwide screening, using a probability sample of coterminal U.S. households.

The sample of Nonreturners was a purposive sample -- designed to provide breadth of geographic and city size coverage. The sample also purposely included runaways who were, at the time of the interview, receiving shelter or other services through a community facility, as well as runaways who were living "on the street." The purposive design called for an over-representation of black youth.

### Refinement of Earlier Incidence Estimates Reported in Part I

A study of possible false-negative reporting in the telephone incidence survey revealed that this false-negative reporting may have been as high as 27 percent of the youth households interviewed. If this indeed is the case, the number of youth who ran away last year may range as high as 733,000.

### Who Are the Runaways?

Approximately half of the runaways personally interviewed were male. Part I of this study, based on a telephone screening, reported that 53.2% of runaway youth were male, and, for purposes of incidence estimation, that is the figure that should be used.

In both Runaway groups, male heads of household were more likely to be absent. Male heads in Runaway households were less likely to be employed than were their counterparts in Nonrunaway households. Nonreturners were less likely to come from households in which there was a professional or managerial male head. Very few differences were observed among the three groups in a comparison of family income distribution.

Part I contains additional descriptive information on runaway youth.

### What Are the Runaways Like?

Runaways, especially Nonreturners, revealed a high degree of discouragement in the way they were treated by their parents. Comments made during the interview shed some light on this discouragement -- comments that ranged from stories of parent drunkenness to physical, sexual, and psychological child abuse.

Among the negative family dynamics (as perceived by the youth) which were correlates of runaway seriousness were the following:

- both parents say unpleasant things about the youth to other people
- both parents call the youth names he/she doesn't like
- the father drinks too much
- the youth is beaten by the father

Positive family dynamics which were correlates of not running away were:

- parents get along well with each other
- both parents are satisfied with the things the youth does
- both parents talk with the youth about things that are important to the youth

The major differences in child rearing practices between Parents of Runaways and Parents of Nonrunaways, as reported by the two parent groups, dealt with:

- the amount of assistance offered by parents
- communication with the youth
- comfort offered to the youth
- expressed happiness upon being with the youth

Parents of Nonrunaways were far more likely to be protective of their children, accompanying them when they went somewhere new and refusing to let them roam around. They were also more likely to offer help to their children, e.g. helping with schoolwork when the child failed to understand it. Parents of Nonrunaways were also more likely to feel that their children could come to them to discuss anything they wished, and they also were more willing to comfort the child when he/she experienced troubles. Parents of Nonrunaways tended to be happier when with their children than were Parents of Runaways. Parents of Nonrunaways more often said nice things about their child, enjoyed talking with him/her, and offered help with such things as hobbies and handiwork.

Parents of Runaways, surprisingly, worried more often that their child could not take care of himself/herself. These parents were also more likely to hold it up to the Runaway that other children behaved better.

In terms of family dynamics, a clear picture seems to emerge when we study the perceptions of both youth and parents. The major differences between Runaway and Nonrunaway households revolved around factors of togetherness, communication, and respect for the dignity of the child. Nonrunner households were characterized by:

- doing things together
- children were able to approach their parents to discuss problems
- there were fewer instances of child beating and name calling

It is also important to develop insight into the school situation of youth who ran away.

School enrollment was lowest among Nonreturners, highest among Comparison Youth. Youth who did not run away tended to do better than those who ran. On a 4-point scale with A=4.0, Comparison Youth reported an average grade of 2.68, Returners 2.12, and Nonreturners 2.22.

While youth in all groups blamed mainly themselves for unsatisfactory grades, significantly more Nonreturners attributed unsatisfactory grades to their parents.

Runaways, especially Nonreturners, were characterized as having changed schools significantly more often than youth in the Comparison group.

Majorities of youth in all three of the groups reported having won some type of award while in school. In the Runaway groups somewhat more reported the awards were for athletic achievement (33%) than did the Comparison Youth (24%). Comparison Youth, however, were twice as likely as their Runaway counterparts to have received recognition for service or citizenship.

Youth in the two Runaway groups reported many more unexcused absences than did Comparison Youth. Those reporting unexcused absences revealed that a great deal of peer activity was involved in the absences. Since youth tended to be with others who should also have been in school, it can be assumed that delinquent or pre-delinquent behavior was involved. Tending to substantiate this was the testimony of one in five of the Nonreturners who told of spending truant hours "getting high."

In exploring hypotheses concerning the school environment as it is linked with runaway behavior, the following results were obtained:

- Nonreturners felt they were most excluded by their peers in the school situation, while Comparison Youth felt the least excluded.
- Far more Runaways than Comparison Youth expected to quit school as soon as they reached legal age.
- The academic expectations and aspirations of Runaway Youth were significantly lower than was the case for youth who did not run.

In exploring community activities outside the school, the significant finding was the comparative lack of group membership in youth organizations observed among Runaways.

In their relationship to the law, youth who ran away were more likely than Comparison Youth to have been found delinquent before they ran -- 26% of the Nonreturners and 20% of the Returned Runaways, compared to 8% of their counterparts, reported this type of adjudicated delinquency.

The specific delinquent acts usually involved crimes against property.

#### What Is It Like When Youth Run Away?

Most of the Returned Runaways were gone less than one week. Among the more serious runaways, the Nonreturners, the average youth had been away more than a month, and one youth in nine in this group had been away a year or longer.

A comparison of the actual time spent away from home with the youth's intentions upon leaving indicated, in most cases, the youth planned to stay away a lot longer than actually occurred.

In most of the runaway episodes the youth traveled less than 10 miles from home.

The reasons Runaways listed for leaving home were varied and complex. In most cases there was a general or specific dissatisfaction at home. The runaway event was thereby amenable to being triggered by a rather trivial incident. According to the youth, in the majority of cases, running away was not inspired by something that happened at school or between the youth and his/her friends.

Approximately half of all running away was attributed to not getting along with parents. Among Returned Runaways, the next most frequently cited reason was the desire to seek adventure. Among the Nonreturner group, the most important secondary reasons for leaving home were physical abuse and problems related to school.

Among Returned Runaways, approximately half of all runaway events were spontaneous, involving less than one day's planning. The Nonreturners tended to be more deliberate, sometimes planning the event for six months or longer. In either group, however, fewer than two out of three youth reported they had any idea of where they might go.

Among those who had an idea of where they would go, "friends" were the destination most often cited.

In planning their run, Nonreturners were more likely to take extra clothing and money than were Returners, reflecting the more deliberate approach of this group of youth, half of whom expected never to return home.

Nonreturners were less likely, however, to take a car. One may speculate that they were less likely to have a car of their own. But it is also possible that the more serious runners realized that having a car would make them more readily traceable, whereas being traceable was exactly what many of the Returned Runaways may have had in mind, even before they ran.

Approximately four in ten Returned Runaways (compared to one in four Nonreturners) were accompanied by someone else when they left home. In each Runaway group, females were more likely to have run with a companion, and more often than not, the companion was another female.

In most instances of running away, the youth reported he/she slept at the home of a friend. Friends also were relied upon most of the time for providing food.

Where transportation was concerned, many of the youth reported they walked from one place to another. Hitchhiking and cars provided by friends and acquaintances were also favored modes of transportation.

The data indicate that the term friends had a far-reaching meaning among Runaways. The term ranged from the conventional meaning implied by most of us to some rather unconventional meanings. Consider the 16-year-old female who said: "My boyfriend has a lady who supports him. I stayed with her -- she's on dope. She gets \$100 a night and gives money to my boyfriend."

Among the Nonreturners, about one in five admitted to having supported himself/herself by stealing, engaging in sex, or panhandling. Considering a large nonresponse to this question of supporting oneself, the law-breaking could reach well beyond the one in five proportion.

Although half or more of the Runaways reported that they encountered no troubles while they were away from home, many spoke of the lack of physical comforts -- a place to sleep or bathe, or of being cold and hungry. In addition, many were constantly in fear of being picked up by the police. Other problems involved getting into fights, being taken advantage of, being beaten or raped, and the ever-present problems of being in the midst of the drug culture.

Considering the myriad reasons, expressed and unexpressed, for running away, it is to be expected that when asked about the good things that happened on the run, Runaways elicited a variety of responses. Following are responses, arranged in descending order of mention by Nonreturners. Answers of Returned Runaways tended to be concentrated in the first four categories:

- Met a lot of nice people
- Being free, on my own
- Learned a lot, grew up
- Had fun
- Free from fights, yelling, beating
- Behavior improved
- Earned money, got a job
- Had a place to stay
- Developed a relationship with the opposite sex

When the youth were asked to sum up their experiences while running, there tended to be some ambivalence, although in the balance, the experiences were rated as favorable by slightly more than half of each Runaway group.

More than half of the Returned Runaways stated that it was their own decision to return. Those who said someone else was involved in the decision mentioned friends, parents, or the police as the person(s) involved. None of the Returned Runaways named the Switchboard or runaway house personnel.

It is significant that the youth themselves did not feel that the Hot Line or runaway house personnel were instrumental in their decision to return. We know that counseling to return home, if the circumstances are agreeable, is one of the services of these agencies. It is not the belief of the research team that the agencies failed to provide this service, but, rather that, although most were operating at a near full capacity most of the time, they simply made contact with too few of the total number of runaways out there at any given time.

It was also true that runaway houses were more likely to make contact with repeat runners than they were with the single time runners who constituted 38 percent of the Returned Runaway sample. Only 23% of the Nonreturners were first-time runners.

Parents, in discussing their youth's return, corroborated that, in over half the cases, it was the youth's own decision to come home. A few of the parents did say that a runaway house worker accompanied the youth upon his/her return home.

When asked for their reactions to the youth's return, in 45 percent of the episodes parents said they disciplined the youth, mostly "grounding" or denying privileges; in only three percent of the episodes did parents say they physically punished the child. Among parents who did not discipline the returning youth, their reasoning reflected a range of feelings from futility to sympathy.

#### Parents' View of the Runaway Event

In a majority of cases the parent had no idea where the youth had gone. Also, a majority of parents did not report the youth as missing -- those who did, usually reported the event to the police. Two parents in three stated they had discussed problems of the youth with other people prior to the runaway event. Persons most often consulted were family, friends, school staff, relatives, and social service agencies. Relatives and school staff were regarded as least helpful.

#### Psychosocial Characteristics of Runaways and Nonrunaways

The most striking differences related to seriousness of the run were obtained on the interpersonal relations dimensions of self image. Comparison Youth were far more likely than the Runaway groups to perceive themselves as having more friends and being better liked by teachers.

On individual scales measuring locus of control:

- Nonreturners were more fate-directed than Returned Runaways and Comparison Youth.
- Nonreturners were more other-directed than Returned Runaways who, in turn, were more other-directed than Comparison Youth.
- There were no differences among the three groups on self-directedness.



On physical and verbal nonconformity scores:

- Nonreturners were found to be more physically nonconforming than Returned Runaways and Comparison Youth. Nonreturners were not significantly different from Comparison Youth.
- There were no differences among the groups on verbal nonconformity.

Psychosocial Characteristics of the Parents of Runaways and Nonrunaways

On self image scores:

- On overall self image, Parents of Nonrunaways had significantly more positive scores than did Parents of Runaways.
- Parents of Runaways, especially mothers of Runaways, were more likely to feel they were failures.
- Parents of Nonrunaways were more likely to be satisfied with themselves.

On locus of control scores, the only difference between the two groups of parents was that Parents of Runaways tended to be significantly more other-directed than Parents of youth who did not run.

The Throwaways

Throwaways were defined as those youth in the Nonreturner sample who said that at the time they left home they thought their parents really wanted them to leave.

No significant differences were observed between the Throwaway and Nonthrowaway groups, by race or sex.

Throwaways were no more likely than Nonthrowaways to have been found delinquent before running away for the first time.

Significantly more of the Throwaway youth (31%) gave physical abuse as their reason for running -- among Nonthrowaways the proportion was 13%.

Nonthrowaways were more likely to have had an intended destination when they left home than were the Throwaways.

Nonthrowaways were more likely to return home on their own than were Throwaways. The most frequently named persuaders involved in the return of Throwaways were friends and the police.

### Services for Runaways

- Prior to running

According to the youth themselves, in more than half the instances, Returned Runaways consulted no one about their problem prior to running. Among those who did discuss the problem with someone, friends were most frequently mentioned.

Interestingly enough, Nonreturners, who tended to run more often, were more likely to make use of agencies such as runaway house, police, and social service agencies prior to their most recent run. This suggests that they may learn about these services only after they run away. If this is the case, it would support the need for greater communication of the services available for resolution of family problems.

For those services for which there was sufficient utilization on which to base conclusions, the following order emerged in terms of helpfulness.

- Friends
- Relatives
- School staff
- Family

Among Parents of Returned Runaways one out of three said they talked to no one; and, among those who sought assistance, family, friends, school staff, relatives, and social service agencies were most likely to have been utilized. The most helpful were social service agencies, friends, and family. Somewhat less help was obtained from school staff and relatives.

Although the methodology differed, the data indicate that Comparison Youth may be more likely than their Returned Runaway counterparts to discuss problems with both the immediate and extended family, as well as with their friends. This may indicate that one of the major differences between these two groups of youth was that the Comparison Youth had (or else felt they had) far more outlets with people in whom they could confide.

Another interesting aspect of the data, especially among the Runaway groups are the sizable proportions of youth who felt no one would be helpful. It is not that runaway youth regarded themselves as overly self-sufficient, as the locus of control scores on inner-directedness substantiate. Rather, it appears that these youths simply did not know what kind of services or assistance would be helpful. It is also our feeling that these youths, possibly through lack of trust, might have been very hesitant about accepting certain services. Certainly, the issue merits further investigation.

- During the run

As during the time prior to the runaway event, both groups of Runaways and their Parents continued to seek help from family and friends. Runaway houses and the local and National Runaway Switchboard were used very little by Returned Runaways and their Parents.

Almost four in ten Parents utilized the services of the police, and this was mainly in connection with the Parents' desire to locate their missing children. However, Parents were not as satisfied with the assistance received from the police as they were with the help received from friends, relatives, and neighbors.

Nonreturners who had extensive experience with runaway houses gave these organizations the highest rating. Friends, relatives, and neighbors, as well as social service agencies, were regarded by all groups as being helpful during the time the youths were away. Experience with the National Runaway Switchboard as well as with local hot lines was not as great as we would have liked for basing reliable conclusions, but those youth who did have contact with these services rated them highly in terms of helpfulness.

The kinds of help Runaway youth and their Parents felt they needed were quite different. The needs of Runaways concentrated around the necessities which would sustain their run, while parents' needs revolved about locating the missing youth. It would appear that these needs could be appropriately mitigated by the concept which runaway houses advance.

- After the run

Even upon returning home, the most frequent assistance, and rated among the most helpful, continued to be provided by the nuclear and extended family, as well as by friends and neighbors. One of the major discrepancies in terms of satisfaction among groups of users of services was in the utilization of the police. Parents of Returned Runaways were far more satisfied with help obtained from the police than were the Returned Runaways themselves.

When asked about what other services they would like to have had available when the youth came home, three out of ten Parents of Returned Runaways felt that counseling would have been helpful. A large proportion (46%) stated that no additional help was needed.

The youth involved also were strongly in favor of counseling, although they often used more explicit terms such as someone to talk to, the services of a runaway house, or just a rap line.

### Implications for Services to Runaways

The implications for delivery of services were discussed in terms of prevention and treatment. Prevention was defined as dealing in a positive manner with those aberrations in the family situation which ultimately can lead to runaway behavior. This sphere of services remains virtually untouched by the current generation of runaway services.

Runaway houses, hot lines, and the National Runaway Switchboard appear to be doing very satisfactory jobs in the treatment of running away, but they tend more often to serve repeat runners rather than those who run for the first time. It was suggested that perhaps this might be changed by greater dissemination of information on services currently available.

It is important to differentiate, within the population of runaways, between those who are in need of services and those who are not. Those who require services are throwaways, victims of neglect, and victims of physical, sexual, and psychological abuse. There is also an important role for runaway houses as an ombudsman in dealing with youthful and/or parental problems in those situations in which the affected individual does not know where else to seek counsel.

Services are not required by those who run for a short time to nearby locations where they are sheltered by extended family members or friends. The community itself tends to deal with these problems and applies its own sanctions, if necessary, to bring about resolution of the family problem responsible for the episode.

The relationship of running away to other social problems such as drug abuse and child abuse and neglect should be studied further in efforts to develop approaches for dealing with these problems in an integrated manner.

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## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Part III of the National Statistical Survey on Runaway Youth is designed to develop a classification system for runaway youth that can be used in enhancing the delivery of services to these youth.

Initially, all runaways from the probability sample were divided into those who required services (92%), referred to as serious runners, and those who did not need runaway services (8%), referred to as nonserious runners.

Serious runaways were subsequently divided into delinquent (38%) and nondelinquent (54%) categories. All percentages in the Classification system are based on the original base of all runaways in the probability sample (N=224).

Within the delinquent and nondelinquent categories, the data were subsequently categorized on the basis of sex and age. For the delinquent runners, 22 percent were male and 16 percent female. For the nondelinquent group, 25 percent were male and 29 percent were female.

Seventeen percent of the delinquent runners were younger runaways (aged 16 and younger), and 21 percent were older. Among the nondelinquent runaway group, 33 percent were younger and 21 percent were older runaways.

Delinquent runaways, when compared to their nondelinquent counterparts, tended to:

- Run away more often
- Break school rules more often
- Change schools more often
- Have lower grades in school
- Be more directed by fate or chance
- Display higher impulsivity

There were numerous differences between male runners and female runners, with most of the differences being noted irrespective of whether the youth was classified as delinquent or not. Male runners were characterized as having their greatest difficulty (when compared to females) in the school situation. Male runners, however, did not appear to have as many difficulties in dealing with their peers, so this did not appear to contribute to school problems.

Female runners, on the other hand, by comparison, expressed severe difficulties in the home situation. These difficulties were more pronounced among delinquent females. Female runners also reported having fewer friends of their own age when compared to male runners.

For the females, this constituted a severe form of alienation constantly reinforced at home, without the pressure release afforded by being able to discuss these problems with friends.

Using background data, principally dealing with parent-youth relationships, it was possible to classify correctly approximately 43 percent of all runaways into one of four categories on the basis of delinquency and sex of youth.

Younger runaways differed from older runaways on a number of dimensions. Younger runaways reported a greater dislike for school, as well as greater problems in dealing with parents.

This report constitutes Part III of a three-part report on the National Statistical Study of Runaway Youth, mandated by the Runaway Youth Act of 1974. Parts I and II present background information and detailed methodology.

The purpose of this report is to develop a classification system for runaway youth that can be used in enhancing the delivery of services to these youth. In its preparation, a basic question initially advanced was, "What proportion of all runaway youth (according to the developed operational definition of runaway behavior) are serious runners and in need of services?" Another major consideration dealt with the topic of delinquency, and within these categories, breakdowns by sex of runner or age of runner.

The data in Figure 1 are based on weighted estimates from the national probability sample of 224 runaway youth who returned home. Subsequent analyses are based on total runaway youth (618), including those who returned home, as well as the sample of youth who were interviewed at runaway projects and on the street.

In addition, the appendix contains data by which single parent households can be compared to other households, data broken out by family income, and data reported in terms of urbanicity.<sup>1/</sup> Other data breaks may provide data equally as interesting, but such analyses go beyond the scope of the present contract.

Voluminous amounts of data have resulted from this investigation. In fact, we anticipate that these data will be analyzed by researchers for years to come. As such, a magnetic tape together with programmer documentation has been delivered to OYD.

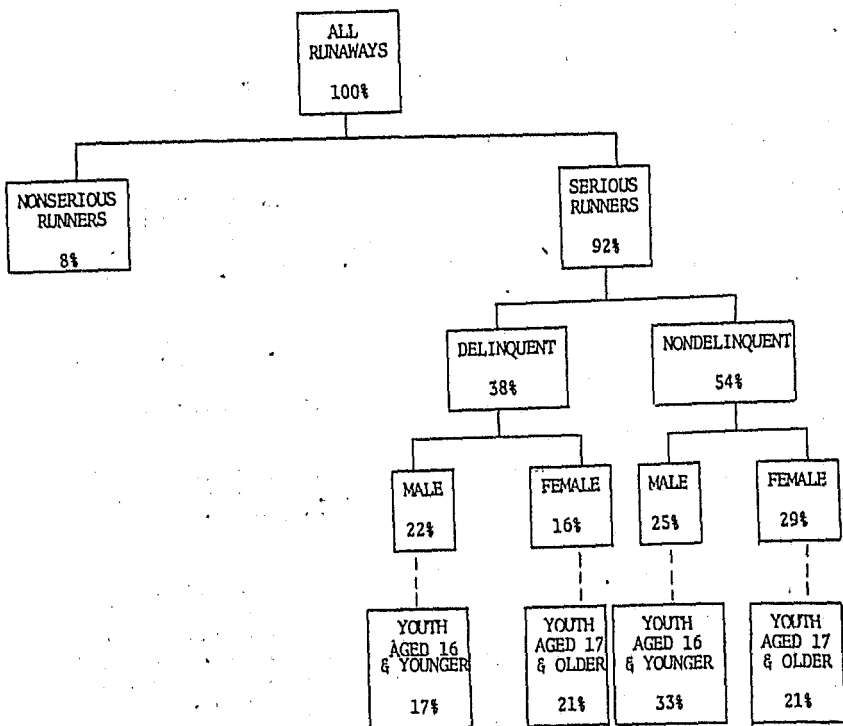
The detailed analyses reported in the body of this report focus on variables which have theoretical significance in the runaway literature or else have important implications for service delivery. An algorithm was developed for selecting group mean differences and differential proportions for significance testing. It is entirely possible that some group differences, significant at the  $p < .05$  level, were not tested. However, sufficient data are reported in the appendix so that the interested reader may test mean differences (t-test) and multi-cell tables (Chi-square test) for statistical significance.

Finally, it should be kept in mind that data reported herein are suggestive, not definitive. While it is unlikely that conclusions reported herein will be reversed with subsequent investigation (which focuses on specific phenomena), such investigation is needed in order to explore more fully the behavioral and social complexities which contribute to youth running away.

<sup>1/</sup> The definitions for urbanicity correspond closely to those of the Census. See question 80, Form E for the Nonreturners, for an example of the categories. In the case of Returned Runaways, interviewers classified the type of area, using the categories listed in question 80.



Figure 1  
A Classification System for Youthful Runaways



The operational definitions devised for the classification system presented in Figure 1 are as follows:

#### Serious versus Nonserious Runners

To be classified as a serious runner, at least one of the following conditions had to be met:

- The youth was away from home, without permission, for more than 48 hours.
- The youth's parent(s) reported him/her missing.
- The youth had no idea of where he/she would go.
- The youth traveled ten miles or more away from home.

On the other hand, youth who met none of the above conditions were defined as nonserious runners.

#### Delinquent versus Nondelinquent Serious Runners

To be classified as delinquent, a serious runner had to meet at least one of the following conditions:

- The youth had been adjudicated delinquent or guilty of breaking the law before he/she ever ran away from home.
- The youth was adjudicated delinquent or guilty of breaking the law during a runaway episode.
- The youth reported his/her own delinquent behavior as a reason for wanting to run away.
- The youth reported 51 or more days of absence from school in the most recent year, some of which were unexcused, and in addition demonstrated, from his testimony at different times during the interview, a propensity toward delinquent acts.

The classification system developed in Figure 1 revealed that the vast majority of youth (92%) between the ages of 10-17 who ran away without parental/guardian permission and stayed away overnight or longer were indeed serious about what they were doing. They were intent upon running away, and as such, are legitimate candidates for services such as those currently provided by OYD-funded projects.

Among those runaways who were classified as serious, the majority must be labeled nondelinquent. This contradicts some of the earlier published literature in this area.

Continuing with the classification system, within those categories, we have labeled delinquent and nondelinquent, we find the following. Almost three out of five of the delinquent group were male, and a slight majority of these delinquent runaways were older youth. Among the nondelinquent runaway group we found that almost five in nine were female, and more than six in ten were younger youth. Thus we have the basis for a characteristic stereotype: delinquent runaways tended to be older and males, with the nondelinquent runaways characterized as younger and females.

On the pages that follow, we will explore the characteristics which appeared to distinguish between each of the groups in the classification system. To begin with, delinquent runaways were compared to their nondelinquent counterparts. Note that in this analysis nonreturner runners are combined with returners, following the criteria described above.

Figure 2

Characteristics Which Differentiate Delinquent  
from Nondelinquent Runaways

Compared to nondelinquent runaways, delinquent runaways were --

more likely to:

be fate-directed \*\*  
be other-directed \*\*  
have poor school grades \*\*  
be regarded as breaking rules by teachers \*\*  
be regarded as losing temper by teachers \*  
be regarded as impulsive by teachers \*  
have many absences from school \*\*  
have changed schools often \*\*  
have repeated grades \*\*  
want to quit school as soon as possible \*  
say parents wished he/she'd leave \*  
be reported missing \*\*  
run away more often \*\*

less likely to:

be regarded as "cooperative" by teachers \*\*  
be regarded as "good" by teachers \*  
be regarded as "polite" by teachers \*  
be regarded as "bright" by teachers \*\*  
like father \*  
return home within a week\*

\* p<.05

\*\* p<.01

NOTE - All data above were youth perceptions as reported in the youth's questionnaire.

The differences reported in Figure 2 appear to be consonant with those differences which differentiate, in general, delinquents from nondelinquents. The nondelinquent youth who ran away resembled, by contrast, well-behaved children who normally are not considered children who run away from home. Yet, they constituted the majority of serious runners!

Figure 3 continues the examination of differentiating characteristics in the classification system. It considers delinquent runners who are male versus female.



**END**