



National Runaway Switchboard

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National Runaway Switchboard 2008 Reporter's Source Book on Runaway and Homeless Youth

**A guide for media about runaway and homeless youth.
Research compiled from Federal documents, published
articles, and caller data from the National Runaway
Switchboard**

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2008 National Runaway Switchboard Reporter's Source Book

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Introduction to the 2008 Reporter's Source Book

The Reporter's Source Book (RSB) is designed to be a guide for media about runaway and homeless youth. It contains information compiled from federal reports, journal articles, issue briefs, and crisis calls to the National Runaway Switchboard. The 2008 RSB contains eight issue briefs that summarize the major issues surrounding runaway and homeless youth. The topics of these briefs are:

- The definition of a runaway
- The number of runaway/throwaways in the U.S.
- How youth survive on the run
- The demographics of a typical runaway/throwaway
- The impacts of running away on youth
- How parents can prevent their child from running away
- Why youth run away
- Trends in runaway statistics

The RSB is not a comprehensive collection of research on homeless and runaway youth. Instead, it provides a range of research results relevant to the key issues surrounding runaway and homeless youth that can help journalists obtain the information to fuel public dialogue.

Media interested in additional information or to schedule an interview with an NRS spokesperson, please contact Joel Kessel at joel@kesselcommunications.com, or (773) 209-6125.

What is the definition of a runaway? Throwaway?

The Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention (OJJDP)¹ defines a runaway/throwaway episode as:

A runaway episode is one that meets any one of the following criteria:

- A child leaves home without permission and stays away overnight.
- A child 14 years old or younger (or older and mentally incompetent) who is away from home chooses not to come home when expected to and stays away overnight.
- A child 15 years old or older who is away from home chooses not to come home and stays away two nights.

A throwaway episode is one that meets either of the following criteria:

- A child is asked or told to leave home by a parent or other household adult, no adequate alternative care is arranged for the child by a household adult, and the child is out of the household overnight.
- A child who is away from home is prevented from returning home by a parent or other household adult, no adequate alternative care is arranged for the child by a household adult, and the child is out of the household overnight.

¹ Second National Incidence Studies of Missing, Abducted, Runaway, and throwaway Children (NISMAART-2), Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention, Office of Justice Programs, U.S. Department of Justice, 2002; <http://ojjdp.ncjrs.org>.

How many runaway and throwaway youth are there in the United States?

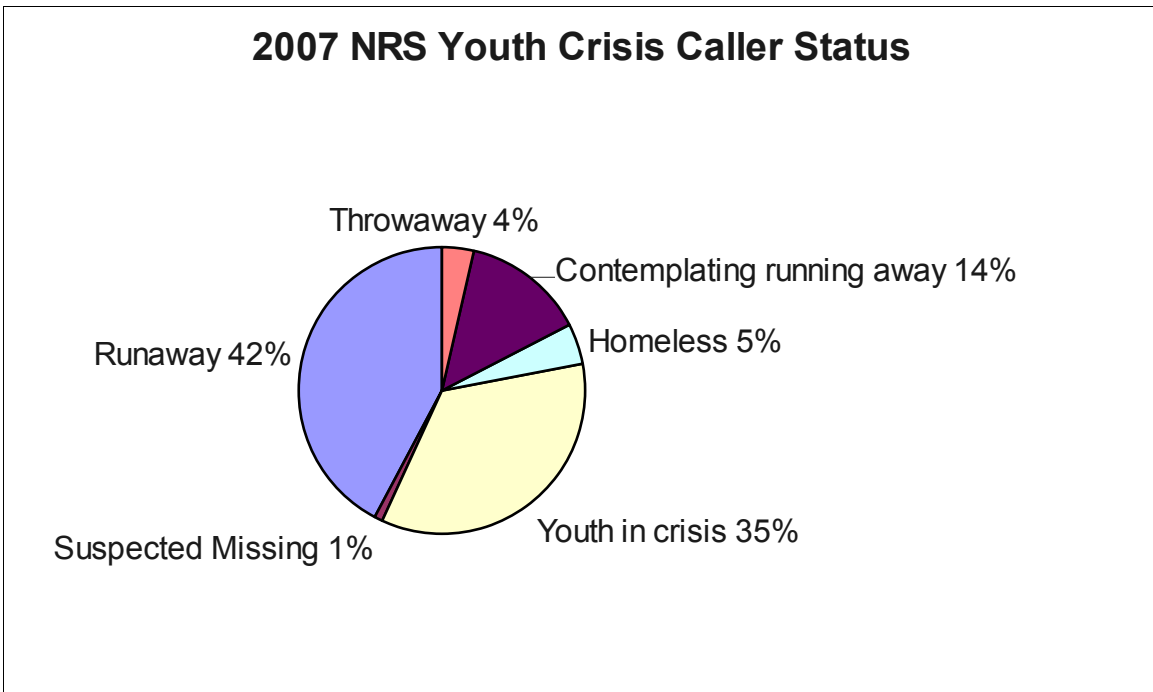
It is difficult to say exactly how many youth are classified as runaways or throwaways, because studies define and count this group in different ways. Studies vary in the age ranges included, lengths of time away from home, survey methods, and definitions of runaways, which can lead to different findings. In addition, this is a very difficult group to track with multiple sub-populations of youth staying in different areas (on the street, at a friend's home, in a shelter) which causes estimates to range in size.

- In 1992, approximately 2.8 million youth between the ages of 12 and 17 ran away from home.¹
- The Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention estimated that roughly 1.7 million youth (4 percent) between the ages of 7 and 17 had a runaway or throwaway experience in 1999.²
- The National Survey on Drug Use in 2002 found that about 1.6 million youth (7 percent) between the ages of 12-17 had run away from home and slept in the street in the previous year.³
- The prevalence of youth homelessness for a one-year period (measured as a percent of youth who had experienced at least one night of homelessness in the last 12 months)⁴ is higher than the prevalence of adult homelessness for a five-year period.⁵

The National Runaway Switchboard (NRS) receives calls from or about youth in a variety of situations including youth in crisis or contemplating running away, runaways, homeless, and throwaway youth. The largest proportion of calls comes from runaway youth at 42 percent⁶ (see graph 1 on the next page).

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- 1 Greene, J.M., Ringwalt, C.L., Kelly, J.E., Iachan, R., & Cohen, Z. (1995). Youth with Runaway, Throwaway, and Homeless Experiences: Prevalence, Drug Use, and Other At-Risk Behaviors: Volume I: Final report, prepared for United States Department of Health and Human Services, Administration for Children and Families, Administration on Children, Youth, and Families. The National Clearinghouse on Families and Youth: Silver Spring, MD.
 - 2 U.S. Department of Justice, Office of Justice Programs, Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention. (2002). Second National Incidence Studies of Missing, Abducted, Runaway, and throwaway Children (NISMA-2). Retrieved from <http://ojjdp.ncjrs.org>
 - 3 Office of Applied Studies (OAS), Substance Abuse & Mental Health Services Administration, & RTI International. (2004). Substance use among youths who had run away from home. Retrieved from <http://www.oas.samhsa.gov/2k4/runAways/runAways.cfm>
 - 4 Ringwalt, C.L, Greene, J.M., Robertson, M. & McPheeters, M. (1998). The prevalence of homelessness among adolescents in the United States. *American Journal of Public Health*, 88, 1907-1912.
 - 5 Link, B. G., Susser, E., Stueve, A., Phelan, J., Moore, R.E., & Streuning, E. (1994). Lifetime and five-year prevalence of homelessness in the United States [Electronic version]. *American Journal of Public Health*, 84, 1907-1912.
 - 6 National Runaway Switchboard Caller Statistics, 2007, http://www.1800runaway.org/news_events/call_stats.html.

Graph 1 – National Runaway Switchboard Crisis Caller Status



How do youth survive when they run away, or are a throwaway?

Runaway/throwaway youth sometimes turn to illegal, and dangerous, activities to survive. About 10 percent of youth in runaway/homeless youth shelters have turned to trading sex for money, food, shelter, drugs, or other subsistence needs. The numbers for those on the street are worse – as many as 28 percent of street youth have engaged in survival sex.¹ Youth who engage in survival sex are two to three times as likely to have been robbed, assaulted, or physically abused after running away. Nearly one-third (30 percent) of youth in shelters have dealt drugs to survive on the street.²

But many youth find other means of support. Nearly 75 percent of callers who provide the National Runaway Switchboard's (NRS) front line team with information about their means of survival cite friends or relatives as a source of support.³

Exact figures of how long youth are gone can be difficult to track, but the Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention (OJJDP) estimates that over half of runaway youth are gone between one day and one week. The rest can be gone from as little as seven hours to longer than six months. The OJJDP estimates also suggest that most runaways don't leave the state, but rather stay within 50 miles of their homes.⁴

Duration	OJJDP Study Estimate **	OJJDP Study Data % (n=1,675,100)	NRS Crisis Call Data 2007	NRS Crisis Call Data % (n=10,245)***
Less than 1 Week	1,304,100	77%	5,792	57%
1 Week to less than 1 Month	248,000	15%	2,450	24%
1 Month to less than 6 Months	123,000	7%	1,651	16%
More than 6 Months	NA *	NA *	352	3%

*The NISMART Study does not have a category for greater than six month's runaway duration.

** The sample size is based on all participants who answered this question.

*** This data is based on all crisis calls in which the caller reports the duration of the runaway episode during the call.

- Greene, J., Ennett, S., & Ringwalt, C. (1999). Prevalence and Correlates of Survival Sex Among Runaway and Homeless Youth. *American Journal of Public Health*. Vol. 89, No. 9. Ringwalt, C. L., Greene, J. M., Robertson, M., & McPheeters, M. (1998). The prevalence of homelessness among adolescents in the United States [Electronic version]. *American Journal of Public Health*, 88, 1325-1329.
- Sedlak, A.J., Schultz, D.J., Wiener, S., & Cohen, B. (1997). National evaluation of runaway and homeless youth: Final report, prepared for United States Department of Health and Human Services, Administration for Children and Families, Administration on Children, Youth, and Families. Westat: Rockville, MD.
- National Runaway Switchboard caller statistics, 2007, http://www.1800runaway.org/news_events/call_stats.html.
- U.S. Department of Justice, Office of Justice Programs, Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention. (2002). Second National Incidence Studies of Missing, Abducted, Runaway, and throwaway Children (NISMART-2). Retrieved from <http://ojjdp.ncjrs.org>

What are the demographics of a typical runaway/throwaway?

There is no easy way to define what a runaway looks like – they can be male or female and range in age and hometown. However, some of the statistics paint a unique picture.

Females seem to make up the majority, or at the very least, are more likely to reach out for help. Call data collected by the National Runaway Switchboard (NRS) in 2006 showed that 74 percent of crisis callers under the age of 18 were female, and 26 percent were male.¹ The Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention (OJJDP) reports that the number of runaway/throwaway youth are split evenly between the genders, however females are more likely to seek help from shelters and hotlines.²

Age (years)	OJJDP Study Estimate **	OJJDP Study Data % (n=1,682,700)	NRS Crisis Call Data 2007	NRS Crisis Call Data Percent (n=8,869)***
7-11 Years	70,100	4%	158	2%
12-14 Years	463,200	28%	1,686	19%
15-17 Years	1,149,400	68%	4,655	53%
18-21 Years	Not Applicable *	Not Applicable *	2,370	27%

* The NISMART Study defines youth as under age 18.

** The sample size is based on all participants who answered this question.

*** This data is based on all crisis calls from youth who provided their age during the call.

Data from a study conducted by the OJJDP in 2002 shows that the majority of runaway youth are aged 15-17. This measurement is confirmed by the National Runaway Switchboard's 2006 crisis call data, in which 59 percent of youth crisis callers are between the ages of 15 and 17. About 40 percent of runaways were from families that received financial assistance from a government entity.³ The predominant race for runaways is White non-Hispanic (57 percent), followed by Black non-Hispanic (17 percent), Hispanic (15 percent), and Other (11 percent) according to the 2002 NISMART Study.²

Race/Ethnicity	OJJDP Study Estimate	OJJDP Study Data % (n=1,682,900)
White, non-Hispanic	963,500	57%
Black, non-Hispanic	283,300	17%
Hispanic	244,300	15%
Other	188,900	11%

1 National Runaway Switchboard caller statistics, 2007, http://www.1800runaway.org/news_events/call_stats.html.

2 U.S. Department of Justice, Office of Justice Programs, Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention. (2002). Second National Incidence Studies of Missing, Abducted, Runaway, and throwaway Children (NISMART-2).

3 Greene, J. (1995). Youth with Runaway, Throwaway, and Homeless Experiences: Prevalence, Drug Use, and Other At-Risk Behaviors Research Triangle Institute. HHS. ACF - ACYF.

What are the impacts of running away or being throwaway on youth?

The incidence of runaways and throwaways with serious problems is troubling. Staff at runaway and homeless shelters report that 63 percent of the runaways that they work with are depressed, 50 percent have problems at school, 20 percent have drug and alcohol abuse problems, 17 percent have been in the juvenile justice system, and 12 percent have considered or attempted suicide.¹

Homeless and runaway adolescents are six times more likely to have two or more mental disorders* than their non-homeless peers. Homeless and runaway adolescents are between two and 17 times more likely to meet criteria for individual disorders than their non-homeless peers.²

In a study conducted by Westat, nearly half of shelter youth reported having been beaten or treated so badly, they were physically harmed. The study also found that 77 percent of shelter youth drank alcohol at some point in their lives.³ The Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention (OJJDP) found that 71 percent of runaway and throwaway youth are “endangered.” This means they are more likely to have been in or put themselves in dangerous situations, such as being substance dependent, using hard drugs, becoming victims of sexual or physical abuse or fearing such abuse if they return home, hanging out in an area where criminal activity occurs, or being 13 years old or younger.⁴

Education falls by the wayside for most runaway and homeless youth. Shelter staff report that half of shelter youth 16 and older dropped out of school, were expelled, or were suspended. When these statistics are combined with those of youth on the street, the numbers change – 37 percent of homeless youth and 23 percent of runaway youth do not attend school.¹ Interviews with youth six months after staying at a shelter indicated that more than 25 percent had serious problems such as dropping out of school, being expelled or suspended, or being in jail.³

Teen pregnancy is also prevalent among runaway and homeless youth. Nearly half of youth on the street and a third of youth in shelters report having been pregnant in the past.⁵ In fact, the pregnancy rate for runaway youth aged 15-19 is over 10 times higher the rate of at-home youth.⁶ In addition, runaway youth are six to 12 times more likely to become infected with HIV than at-home youth.⁷

1 U.S. General Accounting Office. (1989). Homelessness: Homeless and runaway youth receiving services at federally funded shelters (GAO/HRD 90-45). Washington, DC: Author.

2 Whitbeck, L., Johnson, K., Hoyt, D., & Cauce, A.M. (2004). Mental disorder and comorbidity among runaway and homeless adolescents. *Journal of Adolescent Health*. Vol. 35, 132-140.

3 Sedlak, A.J., Schultz, D.J., Wiener, S., & Cohen, B. (1997). National evaluation of runaway and homeless youth: Final report, prepared for United States Department of Health and Human Services, Administration for Children and Families, Administration on Children, Youth, and Families. Westat: Rockville, MD.

4 U.S. Department of Justice, Office of Justice Programs, Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention. (2002). Second National Incidence Studies of Missing, Abducted, Runaway, and throwaway Children (NISMART-2). Retrieved from <http://ojjdp.ncjrs.org>

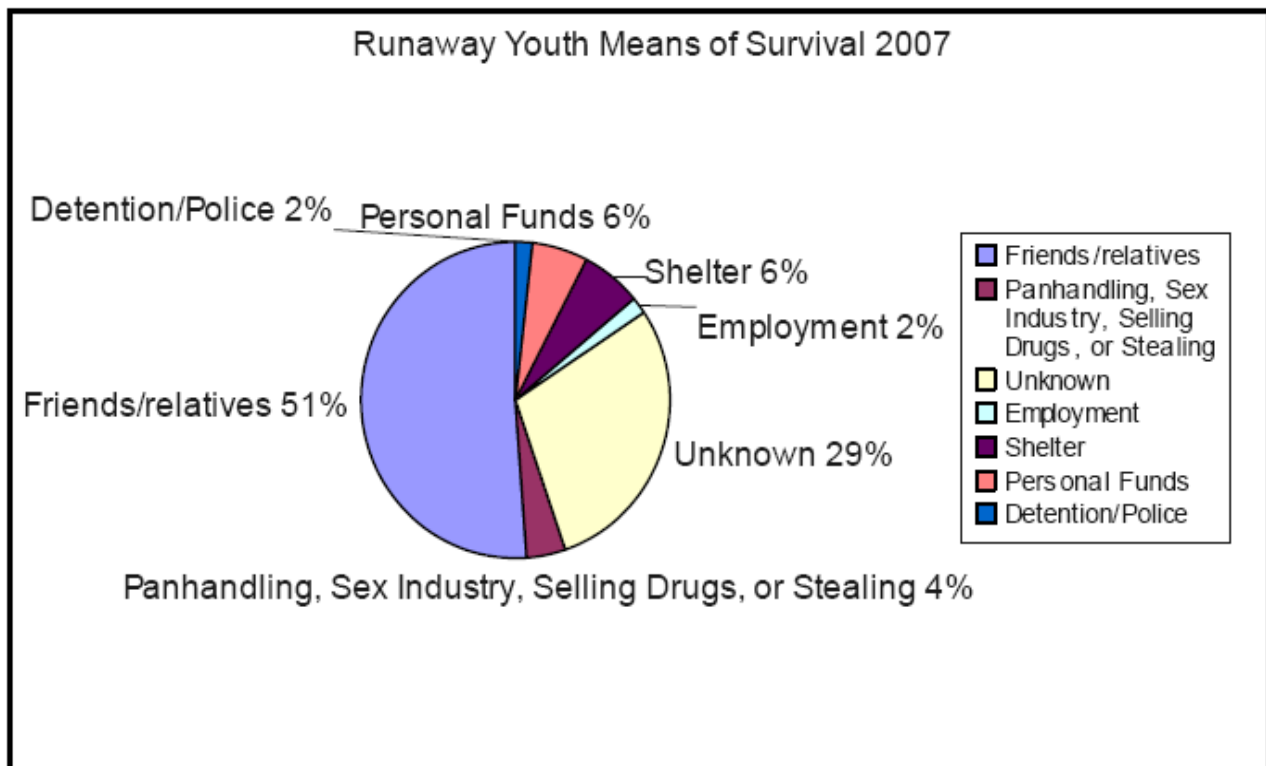
5 Greene, J., & Ringwalt, C. (1998). Pregnancy Among Three National Samples of Runaway and Homeless Youth. *Journal of Adolescent Health*. 23; 6; pp. 370-377.

6 Thompson, S., Bender, K., Lewis, C., & Watkins, R. (2008). Runaway and Pregnant: Risk Factors Associated with Pregnancy in a National Sample of Runaway/Homeless Female Adolescents. *Journal of Adolescent Health*. In press 2008.

7 Rotherman-Borus, M.J., Song, J., Gwadz, M., & Lee, M. (2003). Reductions in HIV Risk Among Runaway Youth. *Prevention Science*. Vol. 4, No. 3.

With all these challenges, some youth are left feeling suicide is the only option. One survey of youth found that 26 percent of those in shelters and 32 percent of those on the street had attempted suicide.⁸ A separate study found nearly a third of shelter youth attempted suicide at some point in their lives. Caller data from the National Runaway Switchboard suggests that youth who call have already taken steps toward ensuring their safety. Of youth who disclose how they are surviving, about 50 percent have help from friends and relatives⁹ (see graph 2 below).

Graph 2 - National Runaway Switchboard Youth Means of Survival



8 Greene, J. (1995). Youth with Runaway, Throwaway, and Homeless Experiences: Prevalence, Drug Use, and Other At-Risk Behaviors Research Triangle Institute. HHS. ACF - ACYF.

9 National Runaway Switchboard caller statistics, 2007, http://www.1800runaway.org/news_events/call_stats.html

What can a parent do to prevent their child from running away?

Runaway prevention begins long before problems arise. If a child is talking to his or her parent, it's important for the parent to pay attention to their child, as the child can tell if the parent is more focused on the TV than the conversation. As children mature into adolescence, parents are encouraged to acknowledge and support the adjustment to a new stage in life. This may mean sympathizing with the child's experiences and considering situations from his or her viewpoint. Parents should also share their feelings as a parent and make clear their expectations from the child. An open environment for sharing feelings encourages children to come to parents sooner if they have problems. In fact, positive parenting* leads to a statistically significant decrease in runaway episodes and an increase in school engagement.¹ Another study found that youth in dysfunctional families with abuse or neglect will runaway earlier and more frequently than youth in stable families.²

Sometimes actions speak louder than words. Certain behaviors can indicate a child is considering running away. These include:

- Changes in behaviors or patterns (child stops eating/overeats, sleeps all day/not at all, mood swings)
- Rebellious behavior
- Disclosure of intentions to run away
- Accumulation of money and possessions

If parents suspect their child might run away, it's important to confront the situation right away. Expressing concern that the child may run away and offering to listen if the child needs to talk are good first steps. It's important to make clear to the child that the parents don't want the child to run away.³ The National Runaway Switchboard (NRS) is also available 24 hours a day, seven days a week, as a resource for parents or children in this difficult situation. NRS can provide safe options for children considering running or already on the street.

**Positive Parenting is a composite variable created from three parental constructs: parental monitoring, closeness with primary caregiver, and relationship with primary caregiver – for more information on operationalization of these variables see original study.*

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- 1 Tyler, K., Johnson, K., & Brownridge, D. (2008). A Longitudinal Study of the Effects of Child Maltreatment on Later Outcomes among High-risk Adolescents. *Journal of Youth Adolescence*. Vol. 37, 506-521.
 - 2 Thrane, L., Hoyt, D., Whitbeck, L., & Yoder, K. (2006). Impact of Family Abuse on Running Away, Deviance, and Street Victimization among Homeless Rural and Urban Youth. *Child Abuse and Neglect*. Vol. 30, 1117-1128.
 - 3 National Runaway Switchboard. (n.d.). *Tips for Parents*. Retrieved from http://www.1800runaway.org/parents_adults/tips_parents.html

Why do youth run away?

The strongest predictors of running away by adolescents include contact with the juvenile justice system, failing at school, and parental alcohol abuse.¹ In addition, family conflict, physical/sexual abuse, and throwaway status may contribute to runaway behavior.

Family Dynamics

In one study, almost half of the youth interviewed said parent/guardian conflicts were a problem before they left home and landed in a runaway or homeless youth shelter.¹ Another study, conducted with shelter personnel, suggested that a problematic relationship with a parent or another adult at home led to running away 75 percent of the time.² In 2006, 29 percent of crisis callers to NRS identified family dynamics as a problem for them.³

Throwaway

Nearly half of youth in runaway or homeless youth shelters have been kicked out of the home at least once.⁴ According to the Research Triangle Institute, more than half of youth in shelters and on the street were either kicked out or told their parents they were leaving and the parents did nothing to stop them.⁵

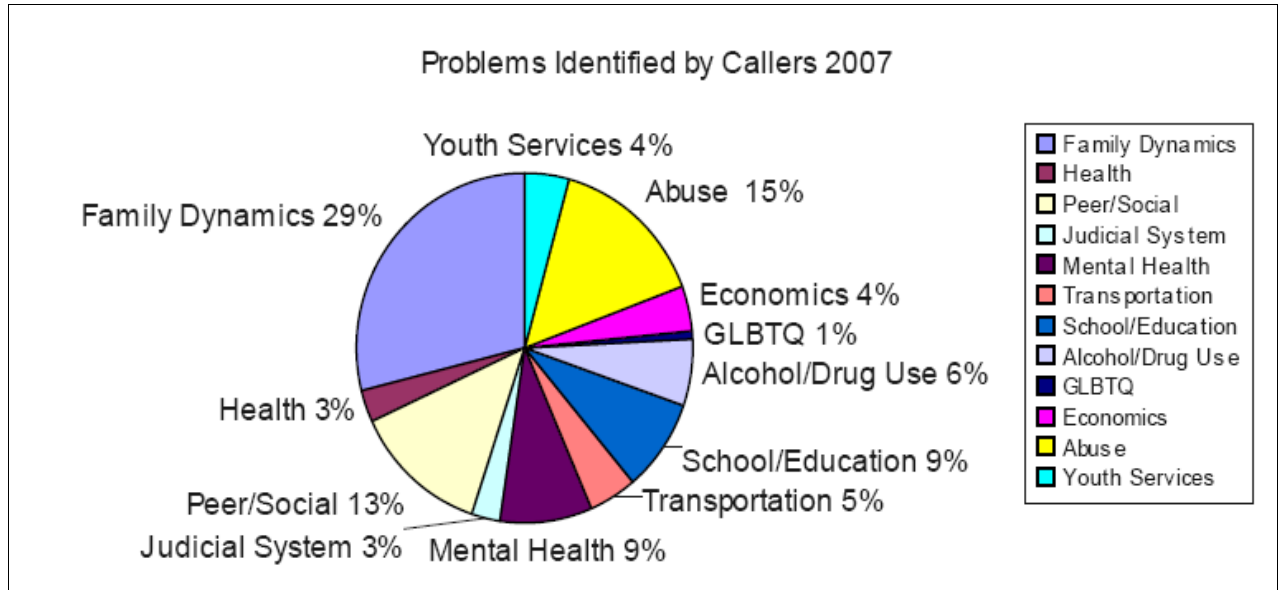
Abuse

Physical or sexual abuse drives youth onto the street – and in some cases, keeps them there for fear that returning home may mean a return to abuse. A report by the Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention found 21 percent of runaway/throwaway kids had physical or sexual abuse in their history, or were afraid of suffering abuse if they went home.⁶ A three-city study found a third of runaway youth suffered sexual abuse before leaving home, and 43 percent were victims of physical abuse.⁷

Crisis calls from or about a youth in crisis to the National Runaway Switchboard (NRS) indicate that alcohol and drug use, economics, emotional and verbal abuse, and family dynamics play a role in putting youth at risk of running away from home (see graph 3 on the next page).³

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- 1 Van Houten, T., & Golembiewski, G. (1978). Adolescent Life Stress As a Predictor of Alcohol Abuse And/or Runaway Behavior. National Youth Alternatives Project.
 - 2 U.S. General Accounting Office. (1989). Homelessness: Homeless and runaway youth receiving services at federally funded shelters (GAO/HRD 90-45). Washington, DC.
 - 3 National Runaway Switchboard caller stats, 2007, http://www.1800runaway.org/news_events/call_stats.html.
 - 4 Sedlak, A.J., Schultz, D.J., Wiener, S., & Cohen, B. (1997). National evaluation of runaway and homeless youth: Final report, prepared for United States Department of Health and Human Services, Administration for Children and Families, Administration on Children, Youth, and Families. Westat: Rockville, MD.
 - 5 Greene, J.M., Ringwalt, C.L., Kelly, J.E., Iachan, R., & Cohen, Z. (1995). Youth with Runaway, Throwaway, and Homeless Experiences: Prevalence, Drug Use, and Other At-Risk Behaviors: Volume I: Final report, prepared for United States Department of Health and Human Services, Administration for Children and Families, Administration on Children, Youth, and Families. The National Clearinghouse on Families and Youth: Silver Spring, MD.
 - 6 U.S. Department of Justice, Office of Justice Programs, Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention. (2002). Second National Incidence Studies of Missing, Abducted, Runaway, and throwaway Children (NISMAART-2). Retrieved from <http://ojjdp.ncjrs.org>
 - 7 Molnar, B., Shade, S., Kral, A., Booth, R., & Watters, J. (1998). Suicidal Behavior and Sexual / Physical Abuse Among Street Youth. *Child Abuse & Neglect*. Vol. 22, NO. 3, pp. 213-222.

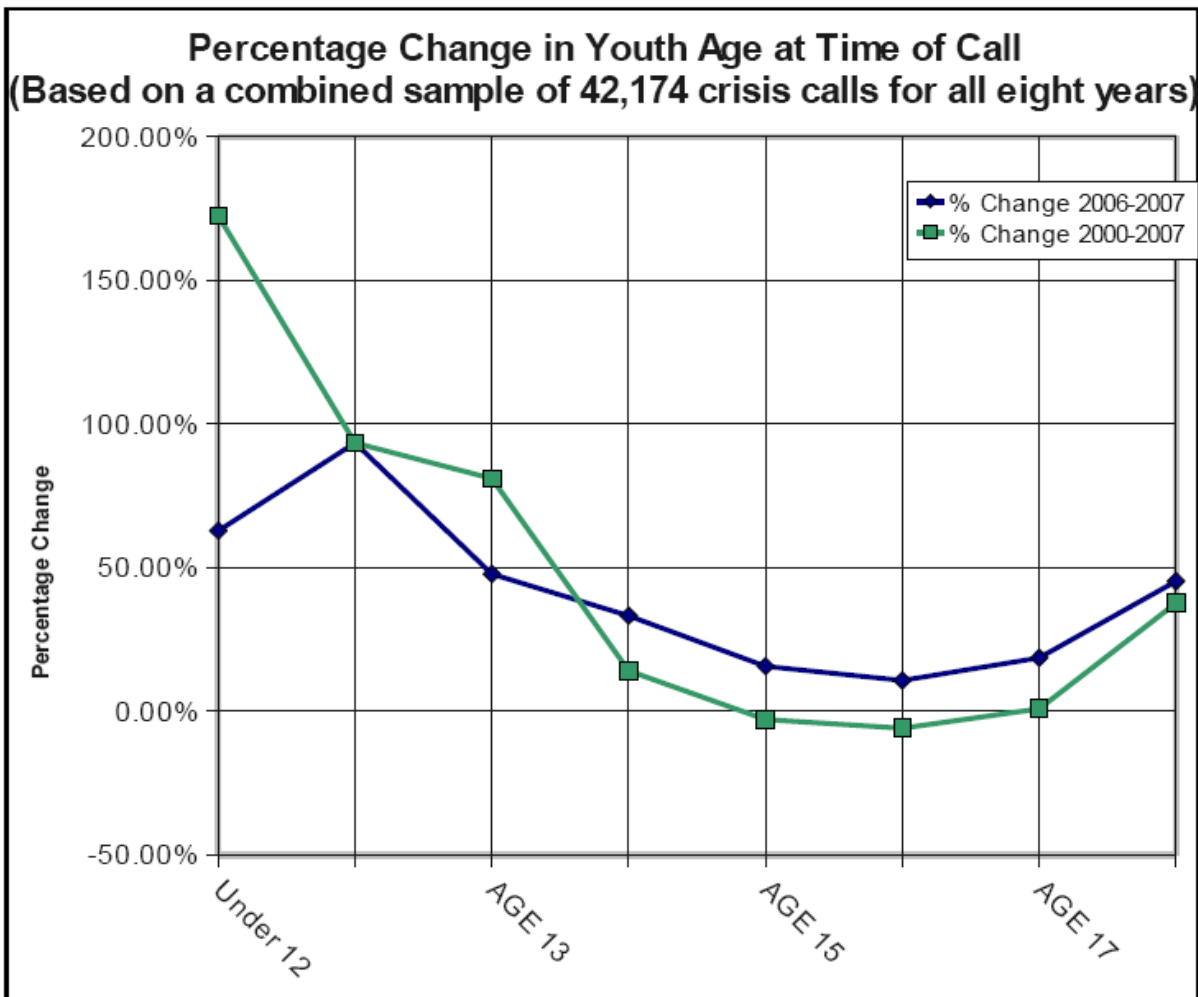
Graph 3 - National Runaway Switchboard Caller Data 2007



Trends in Runaway Youth Statistics

The National Runaway Switchboard (NRS) is serving more youth who are thinking about running away, but are still at home, than in the past. The number of youth contemplating running or in crisis is up and the number of youth calling from home is up over the past eight years. The number of crisis calls from very young (less than 14) and older (18 and over) youth is much higher than in the past. NRS receives most of its calls from females, but male calls are rising at a faster rate. The problems of abuse, transportation, mental or physical health, and school are on the rise as issues identified by callers. The number of youth calling NRS one to three days after running, one to four weeks after running, and two to six months after running is increasing rapidly. Calls from relatives or other non-parent adults, and youths' friends are increasing rapidly while calls from parents and police are less frequent than in the past (see graph 4 below).¹

Graph 4 – National Runaway Switchboard Trend Analysis 2000-2007



¹ NRS Trend Analysis 2000-2007. Full Trend Report Available at http://www.1800runaway.org/news_events/research.html

About the National Runaway Switchboard

The National Runaway Switchboard, established in 1971, serves as the federally-designated national communication system for homeless and runaway youth. Recognized as the oldest hotline of its kind in the world, NRS, with the support of more than 150 volunteers, handles an average of 100,000 calls annually – more than 3 million calls since the organization’s inception. NRS provides crisis intervention, referrals to local resources, and education and prevention services to youth, families and community members throughout the country 24 hours a day, 365 days a year. Over 13,000 youth have been reunited with their families through the NRS Home Free program done in collaboration with Greyhound Lines, Inc. The NRS crisis hotline is 1-800-RUNAWAY. For more information, visit www.1800RUNAWAY.org.

Media interested in additional information or to schedule an interview with an NRS spokesperson, please contact Joel Kessel at joel@kesselcommunications.com, or (773) 209-6125.