



Runaway Situations

1736 Family Crisis Center was founded in 1972 as a single shelter for street youth. Today, distressed children, teens, and adults can draw on a widely acclaimed continuum of assistance offered at five shelters and four community service centers throughout Los Angeles. One of these programs is 1736 Family Crisis Center's Emergency Youth Shelter Program. This is a two-week program designed to help males and females ages 10 through 17 overcome the effects of violence at home and other devastating situations. 1736 Family Crisis Center provides individual, group, and family counseling at the Youth Shelter Program and helps set and address short and long term goals for the youth in crisis.

Both males and females run away, but females are the most likely to seek assistance. It is estimated that each year there are between 1.3 and 1.5 million runaway and homeless youth in the United States (Coco & Courtney, 1998; Cauce et al., 1994).

Current studies suggest that the primary cause of youth homelessness is family dysfunction in the form of parental neglect, physical or sexual abuse, family substance abuse, and family violence. Many times adolescents run away because of family conflict that can be caused by sudden and or drastic changes in the family composition such as a divorce, re-marriage, death of a parent, parental substance abuse, youth's substance abuse, and youth's sexual activity. Approximately fifty percent of runaways experience difficulties with schooling; including dropping out, expulsion, or suspension.

Here are some overall runaway statistics compiled by RunawayTeens.org from the National Incidence Studies of Missing, Abducted, Runaway and Throwing Children (NISMART) from the Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention (OJJDP):

One in seven kids between the ages of 10 and 18 will run away at some point. And there are 1 million to 3 million runaway and homeless kids living on the streets in the United States.

In 1999, an estimated 1,682,900 youth had a runaway/throwaway episode. Of these youth, 37 percent were missing from their caretakers (628,900) and 21 percent (357,600) were reported to authorities for purposes of locating them. Youth ages 15-17 made up two-thirds of the youth with runaway/throwaway episodes during the study year.

Of the total runaway/throwaway youth, an estimated 1,190,900 (71 percent) could have been endangered during their runaway/throwaway episode by virtue of factors such as substance dependency, use of hard drugs, sexual or physical abuse, presence in a place where criminal activity was occurring, or because of their extremely young age (13 years old or younger).

Most runaway/throwaway youth (68 percent) were older teens, ages 15-17. At these ages, youth are often more independent, tend to resist parental authority, are more likely to become involved in activities that bring them into conflict with their caretakers, and are often viewed by their caretakers as being capable of living on their own. All these things may increase the likelihood of runaway/throwaway episodes.



A somewhat larger number of runaway/throwaway episodes occurred during summer, a time when young people are more mobile and less constrained by weather and school activities. Approximately 23 percent of runaways/throwaways traveled a distance of 50 miles or more from home, and 9 percent left the State in the course of an episode. Most runaway/throwaway youth were gone less than 1 week (77 percent), and only 7 percent were away more than 1 month.

Runaways have sometimes been referred to as the *voluntary missing*, to distinguish them from abducted and lost children. However, this term misstates the nature and complexity of the problem. It is generally recognized that children who leave home prematurely often do so as a result of intense family conflict or even physical, sexual, or psychological abuse. Children may leave to protect themselves or because they are no longer wanted in the home. The term *voluntary* does not properly apply to such situations.

An estimated 38,600 runaways/throwaways were at risk of sexual endangerment or exploitation by one or more of the following characteristics or behaviors during the episode: the youth was sexually assaulted, there was an attempted sexual assault of the youth, the youth was in the company of someone known to be sexually abusive, or the youth engaged in sexual activity in exchange for money, drugs, food, or shelter during the episode.

Endangered Runaway Teens and the circumstances

(The numbers and percentages vary by study; these numbers are very conservative.)

- Child had been physically or sexually abused at home in the year prior to the episode or was afraid of abuse upon return: 350,400, 21%
- Child was substance dependent: 317,800, 19%
- Child was 13 years old or younger: 305,300, 18%
- Child was in the company of someone known to be abusing drugs: 302,100, 18%
- Child was using hard drugs: 292,000, 17%
- Child spent time in a place where criminal activity was known to occur: 256,900, 12%
- Child engaged in criminal activity during the course of the episode: 197,400, 11%
- Child was with a violent person: 125,400, 7%
- Child had previously attempted suicide: 70,500, 4%
- Child was physically assaulted or someone attempted to physically assault child during the course of the episode: 69,100, 4%
- Child was with a sexually exploitative person: 27,300, 2%
- Child had a serious mental illness or developmental disability at the time of the episode: 24,300, 1%
- Child was sexually assaulted or someone attempted to sexually assault child during the course of the episode: 14,900, 1%
- Child's whereabouts were unknown to the caretaker for at least 30 days (and the episode was unresolved or no information was available): 7,300, <1%
- Child engaged in sexual activity in exchange for money, drugs, food, or shelter during the episode: 1700, <1%