

Examining the Link: Foster Care Runaway Episodes and Human Trafficking



Natasha E. Latzman & Deborah A. Gibbs, RTI International

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Children and youth who run from foster care placements are a growing concern among policymakers and practitioners.^{1,2} A large number of youth in foster care run away from their placement at least once, and many do multiple times. Running from care is associated with a range of serious negative consequences, including human trafficking victimization.

This brief summarizes and builds on a 2019 report to Congress, [The Child Welfare System Response to Sex Trafficking of Children](#).³ In this brief, we first discuss the number of youth who run from foster care, factors that place youth at risk of running from care, and the evidence around running from care and sex trafficking victimization. Where applicable, we also review the evidence around running from care and labor trafficking. We conclude with a discussion of promising efforts to reduce runaway behavior.

How Many Youth Run from Foster Care?

Estimates of the number of youth who have run from foster care vary depending on the sample populations (e.g., youth drawn from child welfare or homeless/runaway shelters), methods employed (e.g., child welfare administrative data, youth self-report), and definitions of running from care.⁴ For example, some child welfare agencies report any youth who leaves a placement without consent as missing or having run from care, whereas others report youth as missing only after they are absent from care without consent for a minimum period, such as 24 hours.^{5,6} Despite these variations, both administrative and self-report data indicate that youth in care run from placements fairly frequently—more often than their peers in the general population run from home.

Foster Care

Each year, almost half a million youth in the United States experience foster care placements, primarily in family foster care settings (nonrelative foster care, relative foster care, or pre-adoptive homes) in addition to group and residential care or other placements such as visitation or a short-term hospital stay.⁷

National data on the foster care population show that 1% of youth in foster care were reported as being on runaway status at the end of 2018.⁸ However, this figure captures only those youth who were on runaway status at the end of the report period, but not youth who ran away at some other point during the year. Indeed, sources that look at data over longer periods of time (such as the entirety of a youth's stay in foster care) suggest the

Human Trafficking Defined

- Sex trafficking is a commercial sex act (as defined by the Trafficking Victims Protection Act; TVPA) induced by force, fraud, or coercion, or in which the person induced to perform such act has not attained 18 years of age.
- Labor trafficking consists of the recruitment, harboring, transportation, provision, or obtaining of a person for labor or services through the use of force, fraud, or coercion for the purpose of subjection to involuntary servitude, peonage, debt bondage, or slavery.^a

prevalence of runaway episodes is much higher. For example, a recent analysis of child welfare administrative data from Florida found that approximately 19% of youth ran from care at least once during their stay in care.⁶ Self-report data show even higher estimates, with up to half of youth in foster care reporting running away at least once, and many youth reporting running multiple times.⁹⁻¹¹ For example, a study of 17-year-olds in foster care in Illinois, Iowa, and Wisconsin found that 46% reported having run away from a foster care placement at least once.¹⁰ Similarly, a study of youth in specialized foster care, a placement model typically used for youth with severe emotional or behavioral issues, found that 44% ran away at least once while in care.¹²

Factors Associated with Increased Runaway Behavior

Response and prevention require an understanding of the population at risk. A growing body of literature has identified risk and protective factors associated with running from foster care, and trends in these factors over the past 2 decades.

Age. Some studies have found that the likelihood of running away—and length of episodes—increases with age.^{5,13-17} In fact,

adolescence is marked by a developmental increase in risk-taking behaviors, desire for autonomy, and salience of peer and romantic relations.¹⁸

Findings from one study indicate that the risk of running away peaks in the mid-teenage years (14 to 16 years of age), with lower rates of running among those younger than 14 and older than 16.^{9,12} The proportion of youth running at younger ages appears to be increasing, however. Data from the National Center for Missing and Exploited Children (NCMEC) indicate that since 2012, reported runaways involving youth aged 12 to 14 years have increased as a percentage of all reported foster care runaway cases—even as this age group has steadily decreased as a percentage of the overall foster care population since 1995.^{3,b}

Sex. Generally, females appear more likely to run from foster care placements compared to males.^{5,13,15-17,19,20} For example, national report-level data from NCMEC show that female youth made up more than three-fifths of reported runs from foster care between 2012 and 2017.³ However, sex differences may disappear when other factors are considered, such as age at the time of placement.⁶

Race and Ethnicity. Most studies indicate an increased risk of running among minority (nonwhite) youth.^{6,13,16} The relationship between race/ethnicity and risk of running is far from settled, however, and may reflect other factors, such as geographic differences.^{12,16} Placement setting also may complicate this relationship, as African American youth are disproportionately served in residential placements, which some studies found to be a risk factor for running.¹⁶

^a Division A of the Victims of Trafficking and Violence Protection Act of 2000, Public Law 106-386, is the Trafficking Victims Protection Act (TVPA), which has been amended in reauthorizations.

^b NCMEC analyses reported here represent missing child reports for children in care of a social service agency but not the number or characteristics of the runaway children themselves.

Sexual Orientation and Gender Identity.

Lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and questioning (LGBTQ) youth are more likely than heterosexual youth to run from home in the general population,^{4,21} and preliminary evidence suggests a similar pattern among the foster care population.²² These findings are consistent with large scale surveys finding that youth who identify as LGBTQ are overrepresented in the homeless population.^{23,24} LGBTQ youth may leave home or foster care due to rejection or lack of acceptance related to sexual orientation or gender identity.²⁵

Substance Use. Substance-related disorders, including alcohol use disorder, are frequently identified as risk factors for running from foster care.^{5,14,16} One study of youth in a residential treatment setting found that the risk of running increased as substance use increased but decreased when substance use became severe enough to have a disabling effect, suggesting a potentially complex relationship between substance use and running from care.²⁶

Mental Health. Evidence is mixed as to whether mental health diagnoses are associated with increased risk of running from foster care. Some studies have found that diagnosed mental health conditions increase the risk of running.¹⁴ As with substance abuse, this relationship appears to be complex, and other studies have found no association¹³ or lower likelihood of runaway behavior among youth with mental health conditions and emotional disturbances.

Child Welfare Experiences. A history of multiple foster care placements is associated with running from care.^{5,6,13,15,19,27} In fact, every additional placement appears to put youth at increased risk for a runaway episode.^{6,14,16} Other factors associated with increased risk of running from foster care include prior runaway history^{11,14,22} and placements that separate sibling groups.²⁰ Placement in group and

residential care facilities rather than in family or nonfamily foster care placements¹⁴ also appears to increase risk, although this finding may be related to age—younger children are typically placed in relative or foster homes, whereas older youth are more often placed in group and residential care.¹³

Why Do Youth Run from Foster Care?

Risk factors for running from foster care may be classified as either “push” or “pull.”

➔ **Push factors** include escaping *from* unsafe, overcrowded, and highly restrictive placements, such as those with restrictions on phone calls or how to spend free time.^{28,29}

➔ **Pull factors** include gaining access *to* family, friends, and romantic partners; maintaining connection to a community-of-origin; gaining a sense of independence or normalcy.^{27,29}

Factors Associated with Decreased Runaway Behavior

Information is limited on factors that can reduce incidence of running from foster care. However, several protective factors have emerged as promising areas for further research. Placement with siblings is associated with reduced risk of runaway episodes.²⁰ This association appears to vary by placement setting, with greater risk reduction for youth in foster homes versus youth in residential facilities. Additionally, one study found that youth who experienced a change in their permanency plan during their time in foster care were 30% less likely than other youth to run from care.¹¹ Although this association may seem paradoxical, it is possible that changes in permanency plans represent child welfare agency efforts to respond to youth’s concerns, which may promote placement stability and reduce stresses that may lead to runaway behavior.¹¹ In this sense, a change in permanency plans may reflect a youth-centered approach to promoting placement stability.

What Are the Consequences of Running from Foster Care?

Running away has been associated with a variety of serious negative consequences for all youth and may be especially harmful to the already vulnerable population of youth in foster care. Compared to youth who have not run from foster care, youth who have had a runaway episode have a greater likelihood of experiencing numerous adverse outcomes, including HIV infection,³⁰ substance use,⁹ academic underperformance,^{9,31} and subsequent involvement with the juvenile justice system.^{9,17} Research also supports an association between running away from home and increased vulnerability to sexual victimization and trafficking.

Consequences Associated with Running from Foster Care

- Poor health
- Substance use
- Academic underperformance
- Juvenile justice system involvement
- Sexual victimization, including sex trafficking

Sex Trafficking Victimization. Although limited, the growing body of research focused on running away from foster care and risk of sex trafficking is compelling. In a small sample of 44 female youth in foster care, Reid found that running from care was the most common “pathway” to sex trafficking victimization, experienced by 44% of youth.³² Similarly, analysis of child welfare and juvenile justice data from Washington state³³ found that of the 83 youth who were confirmed or strongly suspected of being victims of commercial sexual exploitation, 83% had at least one runaway episode—although it is not clear *when* the runaway episode occurred in relation to exploitation.

Based on the few analyses available, as many as one in six youth experience sex trafficking victimization *during* a foster care runaway

episode. Specifically, Texas’ annual *Foster Youth Runaway Report* indicates that over the course of a single year, approximately 4.5% (35 youth) of youth on runaway status reported experiencing sex trafficking while away from care.³⁴ Studies of child welfare administrative data from Illinois³⁵ and Florida (see text box below)⁶ found 17% and 7.4% of youth, respectively, were on runaway status at the time of the recorded trafficking allegation.

A recent study⁶ analyzed administrative data on nearly 37,000 youth aged 10 or older with at least one foster care placement in Florida between 2011 and 2017. This study found:

Approximately 7% of youth had a human trafficking allegation during a runaway episode.

➔ Over 37% of those youth ran from care more than 10 times before experiencing recorded human trafficking victimization.

➔ For 70% of those youth, the first human trafficking allegation occurred during a foster care runaway episode.

NCMEC estimates that 19% of reports of runaways from foster care (29% of reports involving girls and 3% involving boys) are assessed to be likely victims of sex trafficking. Assessment of likely sex trafficking is based on multiple physical and behavioral indicators drawn from information reported by the social service or law enforcement agency making the missing child report. The following are examples of indicators considered in assessing a youth’s risk of trafficking victimization:

- disclosure by youth of sex trafficking victimization
- arrest on prostitution charges or identification during a prostitution-related sting
- ads on “escort” websites or other commercial sex advertising platforms
- youth participation in services limited to sex trafficking survivors before running away
- recovery with a known trafficker

- tattoos implying ownership, money, or commercial sex
- possession of hotel keys, prepaid cards, and/or unusual amounts of sexual paraphernalia

Victimization of Male Youth

Although the identification of boys has increased in recent years, they remain a small percentage of youth assessed as likely victims of sex trafficking. Potential reasons for this include the following:

- Boys in the general population may be more likely than girls to be forced out of their homes by parents and therefore are less likely to be reported missing.³⁶
- Some findings suggest that male (versus female) trafficking victims are less likely to have older male traffickers or “pimps,” which is a primary means by which social services and law enforcement agencies identify likely victims.^{37,38}

Several factors may increase vulnerability to trafficking victimization among youth who run from foster care. Many researchers have theorized that youth absent from foster care are even more vulnerable to human trafficking than other runaways because they may not only lack resources for basic needs but may also have fewer social resources or family relationships to which they can turn.^{28,39} Youth in foster care are also more likely than their peers to have other key vulnerabilities for human trafficking, such as a history of child maltreatment and related experiences (e.g., exposure to domestic violence), juvenile justice system involvement, and homelessness.^{40,41} Anecdotal reports from service providers indicate that pimps and others who facilitate trafficking of youth specifically target youth in foster care by offering housing, money, drugs, and alcohol.⁴² However, this link has not yet been established in data from law enforcement or child welfare agencies.

Although evidence supports runaway behavior as a risk for sex trafficking, the reverse may

also be true. One study found that youth in foster care with a history of sex trafficking victimization were more likely to report running from care than those without such a history.⁴³ The relationship between trafficking and running from care may be bidirectional, with each factor increasing the risk of the other. In this sense, running from care may perpetuate a dangerous cycle of victimization and running.³³

Running from Foster Care and Labor Trafficking

Very little research has examined the overlap between running from foster care and labor trafficking. Here’s what we do know:

- In Texas, fewer than 1% of youth who completed surveys upon recovery from runaway status reported experiencing labor trafficking while away.³⁴
- Studies of runaway/homeless youth (not specific to foster care) have found that 6–8% report having experienced labor trafficking.^{44,45}
- Situations of forced labor reported by runaway/homeless youth include forced drug dealing as well as factory, domestic, and agricultural work.⁴⁴

What Opportunities Exist to Reduce the Risk of Youth Running from Care?

A growing body of evidence supports the relationship between running away from foster care and sex trafficking victimization. In recognition of this overlap, the 2014 Preventing Sex Trafficking and Strengthening Families Act (Public Law 113–183) requires that child welfare systems take steps to reduce runaway behaviors, to collaborate with law enforcement and other service providers to locate runaway children and youth, and to assess risks for sex trafficking after children and youth return from runaway episodes. Efforts to prevent and respond to runaway behavior represent an important opportunity to prevent sex trafficking and support children and youth who have experienced sex trafficking. The following section provides a discussion of research-informed approaches

to reducing runaway behavior, followed by promising state- and agency-level policy and programmatic approaches.

Research-Informed Programs. Although research on strategies to prevent running from care is in its infancy, several research-informed approaches and programs show promise. Such approaches include a functional, behavior-analytic approach, the Behavior Analysis Services Program (BASP)⁴⁶ and a trauma-informed, developmentally focused program, Children and Residential Experiences (CARE).⁴⁷

BASP. This intervention is designed to reduce running from placements by assessing youth’s

motivations for running, involving youth in the assessment process, and enhancing the value of placements for adolescents.⁴⁶ In a pilot test, 13 youth aged 12 to 17 years with a history of habitual runs from foster care underwent functional assessments. In these assessments, BASP behavior analysts worked closely with the youth to explore triggers and underlying reasons for their running. Behavior analysts and caseworkers then implemented tailored interventions to stabilize the youth’s placements at home and in school and to meet their current and longer-term needs. *Table 1* outlines example interventions that were considered for youth.

Table 1. Possible Research-Informed Approaches Identified for Youth in the BASP Pilot

Category	Example Interventions
Preference strategies	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Introduce more preferred activity equipment and materials (e.g., workout equipment, bicycles), activities (e.g., video games, sports, music), and extracurricular activities (e.g., attending sporting events or concerts) to increase the likelihood of youth engagement. ▪ Establish safe visitation arrangements with preferred persons (e.g., parents, siblings) to allow the youth access to them without having to run away.
Living arrangements	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Involve the youth in determining their preferred type of living situation or specific living setting. ▪ Arrange access to a preferred placement. ▪ Make available an array of “youth-preferred” living situations (e.g., supervised apartments, dorm-type settings) for older youth.
Incentive arrangements	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Establish a “behavioral contract” so the youth can earn rewards based on individual target behaviors such as requesting permission to go places, reporting their whereabouts, not running away, or completing school homework. ▪ Establish allowances for assuming responsibilities around the house. ▪ Create a flexible fund for personnel to use with youth to support incentives and activities. ▪ Support older youth in their interests in exploring and getting jobs.
Train and coach personnel	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Conduct training with caregivers, caseworkers, resource coordinators, and supervisors to enhance their ability to provide a more reinforcing approach and environment. For transition-age youth, this includes supporting goals such as getting an after-school job or a driver’s license. ▪ Provide training to caseworkers and supervisors on the Positive Parenting Tools to enhance their ability to interact with youth in ways that will more fully engage young persons. ▪ Enhance the abilities of caseworkers and supervisors to conduct functional assessments with youth regarding their reasons for running away; and identify preferences of youth that might provide information regarding preferred placements or other strategies to engage youth. ▪ Provide guidance to caseworkers and supervisors to enhance their coaching skills for assisting foster, adoptive, and birth parents in using improved interactional skills with youth.

Source: Clark et al., 2008⁴⁶

Youth who participated in the BASP pilot were matched to a comparison group of youth in foster care with a similar percentage of time on runaway status, but who received typical foster care services. A year later, the BASP group had fewer runaway episodes and placement changes than the comparison group. This evidence supports the role that behavior-analytic assessments and interventions can play in reducing the percentage of days on runaway and the frequency of runs and in improving the stability of placements for youth who have a history of running away from foster care.⁴⁶ Helping youth identify their preferred living situations—and then stabilizing them in such settings through individualized approaches—can be a first step toward developing positive foundations and social networks that will promote success.⁴⁸

CARE. The CARE program aims to help group and residential care agencies use research-informed principles to guide programming and enrich the relational dynamics through targeted staff development. In an evaluation of the CARE program, 11 agencies received 3 years of training and technical assistance from trained CARE consultants, who supported them in developing programming that was relationship based, trauma informed, and ecologically oriented (i.e., enriching the physical and social environment to create a therapeutic setting).⁴⁷ Agency leadership and key staff also participated in a 5-day training program on CARE principles. Across the first cohort of agencies, decreases in runaway behavior were observed, with an average decrease in runaway incidence rates of 4% per month. Significant decreases were also seen in incidents of aggression toward staff and property destruction.⁴⁷

Promising Approaches. In addition to the research-informed approaches described above, several policy and programmatic approaches—informed by the best available evidence on supporting youth—focus on

reducing runaway behaviors. Policy approaches include maintaining educational stability when youth move between foster homes (as required by the Subtitle VII-B of the McKinney-Vento Homeless Assistance Act of 1987) and allowing foster parents greater flexibility in making decisions about youth’s activities (as required by the “reasonable and prudent parenting standard” provisions of the Preventing Sex Trafficking and Strengthening Families Act).

Programmatic approaches that show promise in the reduction of runaway behavior include, for example, treatment foster care, which is designed to “provide safe and nurturing care to a youth in a more structured home environment than typical foster care;”⁴⁹ and CHANCE, a Florida-based program that provides a continuum of comprehensive services, including foster care placements specific to commercial sexual exploitation.⁵⁰ Consistent with established child welfare practice, agencies can address youth’s dissatisfaction with their placements by using family-based placements rather than group and residential care, placing youth in their own communities, and involving youth in placement decisions.³ Assessment of youth’s experience while absent from care may offer an opportunity for youth disclosure, particularly if the assessment or interview takes a trauma-informed, victim-centered approach. One approach used within Florida’s child welfare agency is a missing teen debriefing form that not only includes questions about experiencing abuse and obtaining food and shelter while away, but also elicits youth perspective (e.g., *What can we do to help improve the situation so that you don’t feel like you need to run in the future?*).⁶

Many state child welfare agencies are using the best available evidence to prevent repeat runaway episodes and to mitigate the risks that youth experience during episodes. Opportunities to reduce runaway behavior

include counseling and therapy, enhanced activities to alleviate boredom, and strengthening relationships with caring adults, which is consistent with emerging work indicating that the presence of a supportive adult is protective against trafficking.⁵¹ Similarly, qualitative work indicates that child welfare initiatives focused on increasing affirming providers and placements for LGBTQ youth increase youth confidence and

improve relationships;⁵² future work is needed to examine the impact on runaway episodes.

Other strategies include providing youth with information about the risks of trafficking involvement and options for staying safe, instructing service providers to welcome youth back without judgment after they return, and strengthening family and community social networks. Additional examples of state practices are included in *Table 2*.

Table 2. Selected State Practices around Youth in Foster Care with Prior Runs

State Agency	Example Policy/Resource
Missouri Department of Social Services ⁵³	Protocol suggests (but does not mandate) that youth with multiple runs from care be referred to the Child Advocacy Center for a forensic interview to assess possible trafficking victimization.
Hawaii Department of Human Services ⁵⁴	Protocols for youth with prior runs from care include providing youth with information about risks of being absent from care, steps they can take to stay safe during their absence, and a Safety Card that includes contact information for resources such as the child welfare services hotline, 24/7 suicide crisis hotline, 24/7 National Runaway Safeline, and Planned Parenthood.
New York State Office of Children and Family Services ⁵⁵	Suggestions for service providers who work with youth at high risk of running from care include obtaining youth input in placement planning, providing factual information about possible consequences of leaving without consent, safety planning, and welcoming youth back warmly. Administrative directive requires identifying any needed rehabilitative services, identifying reasons for leaving and addressing what supports and actions are needed to help prevent future running.

In summary, emerging evidence continues to support the relationship between running away from foster care and sex trafficking victimization. Accordingly, federal policy outlines steps that child welfare agencies can

take to prevent and respond to runaway episodes. These measures represent an important opportunity to prevent sex trafficking and support children and youth who have experienced sex trafficking.

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