

NATIONAL INSTITUTE OF MENTAL HEALTH

Caring for Youth

Essays on
Alternative
Services



56449-
56453

DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH, EDUCATION, AND WELFARE
Public Health Service
Alcohol, Drug Abuse, and Mental Health Administration

86451

runaways: Changing Perspectives and New Challenges

The percentage of teenagers who run from their homes is the same in 1977 as it was in 1969,¹ but the situations that these one-half to three-quarters of a million young people run from seem to be more desperate and the world they face once they've left home seems to be far less inviting than when I first began my work at Runaway House.

A declining economic situation and an increasingly fragmenting family life (one-sixth of all children now live in single-parent families) have put parents under a financial and emotional strain which they often transmit quite directly to their teenage children. The percentage of runaways from homes with an unemployed head of household is, for example, twice as high as from homes where a parent is working.² Increasing numbers of young people feel they have been "pushed out" of their homes and as many as 30 percent of them report serious incidents of violence directed toward them by their parents.³ At the same time, the counterculture which once attracted—fed and housed, protected and supported—so many young people has faded. There is no national movement to give the young who leave their homes purpose or direction, and opportunities for jobs and independent living have been foreclosed.

Though problems at home and on the run are common to all young people, they are intensified for young women and third-world young people. In the last few years, withdrawal of federally funded poverty programs and the disastrous economic situation in the cities' ghettos have combined to extrude many young people from their communities. Several years ago, a teenage black who could not live with his parents might have been able to seek counseling at a storefront poverty center or to stay with an aunt or grandmother in the neighborhood. Today the storefronts are closed and neither aunt nor grandmother can afford to feed and house another person. Nor can the young people make or pay their own way: More than 40 percent of them are unemployed.

¹See Ambrosino 1969; U.S. House of Representatives, Hearings on H.R. 6265 and H.R. 9298, 1974; and National Statistical Survey on Runaway Youth, 1976.

²National Statistical Survey, op. cit.

³Ibid.

In the last few years, these young people have had to come out of ghettos to seek help elsewhere, and this exodus has been reflected in the statistics of many runaway centers. Urban runaway houses which once saw no more than 10 to 15 percent third-world youth are now working with a population that is more than 50 percent third world, with a group of young people whose handicaps—material, educational, and vocational—are enormous.⁴

At the same time that the women's movement is helping them to understand the value of being themselves and of developing a social and sexual identity apart from any particular man, young women are confronting an economic situation that threatens to frustrate their ambitions and desires and parents who are made uneasy by them. Increasingly, they are responding to these contradictions by running away from home: Though only 41 percent of all runaways are female,⁵ they make up approximately 60 percent of those who come to runaway centers.⁶

Having run, they are under the most intense physical, economic, and emotional pressure to submit to men. The staggering number of runaways who have been raped (as many as two-thirds of the young women who come to some urban runaway houses)⁷ is the most obvious sign of their exploitation and vulnerability; the increase in youthful prostitution, where the control and attention of pimps often seems to provide emotional as well as financial security is another; and the self-destructive relationships which so many young women form with men who promise to take care of them are less dramatic, but hardly less damaging.

In the 4 years since I first began to write about runaways, the older runaway centers have changed greatly. The National Institute of Mental Health, which in 1974 funded some 32 runaway centers, was instrumental in this process.⁸ Its financial support provided many programs with a bridge between reaction to continuing crisis—both economic and human—and more carefully reasoned and amply staffed service, training, and planning.

Like Washington, D.C.'s Runaway House, a number of other centers began to grow beyond counterculture roots to meet the changing and expanding needs of their clients and communities. Some created family counseling programs, foster-care services, and group foster homes. Others inaugurated neighborhood outreach programs that helped young people and their families to establish supportive networks in communities that are demoralized and fragmented.

More recently a few programs have begun to devote time and energy to helping young people develop counseling and administrative skills which they can use in other settings as they grow older; and others, particularly the urban runaway houses, have addressed themselves to the problems of young

⁴Annual Reports, Special Approaches in Juvenile Assistance 1972-1976.

⁵National Statistical Survey, *op. cit.*

⁶Aggregate Client Data 1976.

⁷Gordon and Houghton 1977.

⁸*Ibid.*

women and third-world young people: A higher proportion of third-world counselors was hired, and the cultural identities and economic needs of third-world young people were addressed; special programs for young women—formal and informal shelters, consciousness raising groups, workshops in sexuality—were tentatively begun.

With the passage of Title III of the Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention Act, adequate monies became available to fund new as well as older programs for runaways. In 1975-76 some 66 programs were funded through HEW's Office of Youth Development; in 1976-77 an \$8 million appropriation was distributed to 130 programs. Meanwhile, runaway centers are also receiving monies from the Law Enforcement Assistance Administration, from Title XX of the Social Security Act, and through local social-service agencies and charities.

Still, the unmet needs, particularly for long-term and outreach services, are great, and the obstacles remain overwhelming. Many counties and cities still prefer institutionalizing young people at exorbitant costs rather than placing them in community-based facilities. Instead of funding low-cost innovative foster-care programs, many jurisdictions still confine the young to households where they are simply a commodity. Opportunities for employment, particularly for black young people, are scarce, and funds to undertake job programs or pay the young for the work they do in runaway centers are hard to come by. All the changes that runaway houses have made are dwarfed by those they must make simply to keep abreast of their clients' needs.

References

- Aggregate Client Data, Runaway Youth Program, Oct.-Dec. 1976. Office of Youth Development, DHEW.
- Ambrosino, L. *Runaways*. Boston:Beacon, 1971.
- Annual Reports. Special Approaches in Juvenile Assistance, 1972-1976.
- Gordon, J.S., and Houghton, J. A Final Report of the National Institute of Mental Health Runaway Youth Program, 1977.
- National Statistical Survey on Runaway Youth. Opinion Research Corporation, 1976.
- U.S. House of Representatives. Hearings on H.R. 6265 and H.R. 9298. Before the Subcommittee on Equal Opportunities of the House Education and Labor Committee, 93rd Congress, 2nd Session, 1974.

END