



The Juvenile Runaway Phenomenon

A Law Enforcement Agency's Unique Approach

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At some time in our lives, many of us have toyed with the idea of running away from home. For some, it has been no more than the result of a temporary flash of anger aimed at punishing our parents. Plans for leaving home, in most cases, are never executed. There are, however, thousands of youths with more serious problems who do leave home. Statistics indicate that in the United States, there are approximately 10,000 runaways daily. These figures are staggering, but what is more alarming is society's inability to deal with the problem.

Technically speaking, any youngster under the legal adult age of his State of residence who, without permission, remains away from his home for a period of 24 hours is considered to be a "runaway."

To fully understand the magnitude of the problem, one must first realize that the troubled youngster who runs away is often brutally victimized on the streets before he is apprehended by the police or some other governmental agency. At times, the experiences he is subjected to makes the youth too embarrassed to return home.

When a child leaves home, he usually has only a small amount of money which he gets either from his savings or by stealing it from parents. This money is usually enough to get him to his destination and perhaps a meal and some lodging. It is when these funds run out that the youth becomes most vulnerable. He must then find a way to satisfy his most basic

needs—food and shelter. Unfortunately, at this point, he is easily identifiable to those who make a living by victimizing children. These individuals approach troubled youths on the street and offer them a "free" meal and a place to spend the night. The unsuspecting youth will probably be allowed to stay with his "benefactor" for two or three nights. It is then that the child will have to pay the "bill." Too often, the "price" is one he will regret having paid for the rest of his life.

The "Diaper Squad"

The Port Authority Bus Terminal is located in Manhattan, N.Y. On an average day, more than 200,000 people pass through the bus terminal, the great majority of whom are on their way home or on the way to work. It is not surprising, however, that among this great number of travelers, there are youngsters who are running away from home.

The bus terminal has long been a focal point for youngsters who find the Times Square area irresistible and for runaways who use the terminal as the gateway to New York City. Buses afford the cheapest means of travel for those entering or leaving the city, and runaways come to New York from every part of the country. Youths who loiter around the huge terminal are likely to become part of the juvenile justice system since the opportunity of "hustling" for money in a variety of ways is an ever-present temptation. Runaway adolescents, incredibly naive and ill-equipped to cope with life on their own, are easy prey for those who would victimize them.

Beginning in 1972, the Port Authority Police, long aware of these problems, assigned a few officers to work full time with runaways and other

"problem" youths found in the terminal. Affectionately dubbed the "diaper squad," these dedicated officers realized that after being returned home, many runaways simply leave again. There seemed to be a need for professional counseling for these children and their families.

A proposal for an expanded runaway program, teaming experienced juvenile specialist police officers with professional social workers, was funded by the New York State Division of the Department of Criminal Justice Services and was initiated in February 1976. This unique program proved to be a successful diversion from the juvenile justice system for many young people.

The youth services unit (YSU) is close to, but separate from, the Port Authority police station. It is staffed by three teams. Each team has a plain-clothes officer, a social worker, a secretary, and a police sergeant who supervises the team. The unit operates 7 days a week, from 7:00 a.m. to 11:00 p.m. The evening hours are sometimes extended, however, to accommodate late departing buses or until a runaway's parents arrive.

Runaways are apprehended in various ways. If notified in time by parents or police departments, surprised youngsters may be removed from incoming or departing buses. The most common way of finding runaways, however, is by patrolling the terminal and stopping to question the youths in a low-pressure manner. (The New York State Family Court Act gives all law enforcement officers the right to question youths regarding age and

identity.) Youngsters who show adequate identification or who are obviously in the terminal for legitimate reasons are not detained. If suspicions are aroused, the youth is asked to go to the YSU office until parents or relatives can be contacted to verify age and confirm that permission has been given for the youth to be in the terminal. Uniformed officers also bring youngsters into the YSU office.

In 1981, the youth services unit made 2,996 contacts with juveniles inside the terminal. Of these 1,700 males and 1,296 females, 1,228 turned out to be runaways.

Assistance of all kinds was given to young people in need of help, and many truants were found, most of whom were referred to the Board of Education attendance office. A number of loiterers and disorderly youths were picked up as well; however, as with all categories of youngsters, the goal of the unit is to help children deal with their problems and keep them out of the juvenile system or the hands of those who would exploit and victimize them.

If at all feasible, most runaways are returned directly to their families. If real abuse is suspected, Protective Services is notified, and the child is given temporary shelter while an investigation is made.

It has been estimated that due to these diversion efforts, \$1.1 million is saved by New York State yearly. Moreover, the combination of the police and social work professions intervening at the point of crisis has often proven to be dramatically effective. Counseling and support is available at the most crucial hour of need. In such crisis situations, both youngsters and their parents are suddenly more open to intervention, and new approaches to major problems can be

considered. Parents, frightened at the thought of their child's fate on New York City streets, are often able to finally face the fact that there are problems and realize that changes must be made. Referrals for long term help are made to appropriate community agencies. The YSU social workers make followup calls encouraging families to take advantage of available services.

The majority of the runaway adolescents dealt with in the YSU have not yet become street-wise, and they have families who still care about them. There is a far greater chance of success in tackling problems with these youngsters than there is with those who have already been drawn into the life of the streets and whose parents have effectively disowned them. The YSU works with many of these children, often referring them to residences such as Covenant House, a nonsecure facility operated by a Roman Catholic priest dedicated to assisting children.

Funding for the Port Authority Police's Youth Service Unit ended in September 1977. However, the project's accomplishments and achievements did not go unnoticed, and the Port Authority continues to maintain and fund the program. The Port Authority budgets approximately \$300,000 a year to continue the project.

The YSU was designed and implemented to deal with young people who become involved in the criminal justice system for acts such as incorrigibility, truancy, and running away. Prior to the implementation of the unit, the typical solution to the apprehension of the youthful offender or way-

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ward youth was either the judicial or correctional system. Even more damaging was the return of the juveniles to their environment with little or no counseling services provided. It was believed that the approach to runaway youths should be more positive in terms of direction, counseling, and referral, as opposed to the actions that were being taken.

The YSU, by combining the professional social worker and plainclothes police officer in operating teams, has provided crisis intervention, referral services, short term and

followup counseling, and general diversion outside the law enforcement structure and juvenile justice system for over 10,000 adolescents.

The implications of the police officer/social worker team effort have been far reaching. As a result of the concept, new perspectives have developed in dealing with juvenile behavior. In addition, the Port Authority's quality of service to the public, the local community, and juvenile justice and social service systems has been enhanced through the efforts of this runaway unit.

The unit has successfully demonstrated that the coupling of the two

elements has offered a new approach in handling youth problems. Their working relationship has allowed the unit to resolve situations through the expertise of one or both members of the team. The program has also served to promote a distinctive atmosphere of increased understanding between police and the juvenile.

The YSU has been successful in directing its efforts at preventing crime and delinquency. The unit has also been recognized as a "model" in delivering services and attention in such a way and at such a time that it helps



prevent the development of criminal careers.

From the outset, the unit has been successful in obtaining and achieving cooperative relationships with other community agencies throughout the United States that are charged with providing services to adolescents, such as schools, social agencies, and juvenile courts. The unit has also developed a directory of community services and resources detailing the type of assistance offered by the agencies. Through this effort, the unit's team members have been giving youngsters the chance to locate and secure jobs, seek educational opportunities, and provide help in finding basic social, medical, and legal services.

Since its inception, the program has been acclaimed by numerous groups and individuals. Staff members of the YSU have given testimony before four governmental hearing committees on juvenile problems. At least 12 newspaper articles have been written outlining the functions and successes of the unit, and staff members have been interviewed by major New York television news commentators, have appeared on television talk shows, and have participated in roundtable discussions taped for radio broadcasting. Locally, the YSU has established a relationship with approximately 60 community-based social groups. As a result of this type of cooperative effort between agencies, over 400 young people have been assisted in job and self-help programs. With national recognition, the unit has established over 100 liaison contacts in the social service and law enforcement fields. Personal contacts made with individuals outside case workers number in excess of 2,000.

The youth services unit has been continually demonstrating that its techniques in juvenile diversion are successful. As a result, approximately 15 professional researchers in the social science field have requested information on the unit's activities.

Most of the youngsters contacted are looking for someone to listen to them. We listen well, and we can be whatever we need to be to the youngsters—firm and strict in some cases, understanding and cooperative in others.

Case Histories

Recently, a young girl named Margaret, the 14-year-old daughter of a well-to-do family, was discovered sleeping on the lower level of the Port Authority, N.Y., bus station by a uniformed officer in the early morning hours. The youthful-looking blond, wearing an excessive amount of makeup and scantily attired in short pants, refused to give her true identity. The young lady offered a false birth certificate in support of her claim to be 17 years old and showed an amazing capacity to color the truth.

At 7:00 a.m., a juvenile officer arrived for duty and began questioning the youth. The officer's patience and sympathetic ear gained Margaret's confidence and convinced her to reveal her true identity. Further questioning of Margaret elicited information that she had been working for a pimp as a prostitute for the past month. The social worker on duty also established an immediate rapport with the forlorn youngster and persuaded her to talk about her problems. Margaret voiced her fears about the safety and whereabouts of Cindy, a 13-year-old friend, who had also been introduced

into prostitution. According to Margaret, Cindy was alone and hemorrhaging in her hotel room, having been abandoned by her pimp when she could no longer work the streets. Although concerned about her friend, Margaret was afraid to give the exact location because as she explained, "The pimps have a national network and will get you no matter where you live." The juvenile officer and social worker pleaded with Margaret to tell them where Cindy could be found because, if not found in time, she could very well bleed to death. The officer assured Margaret that she would be safe. Margaret stated that she did not want her friend to die and finally revealed Cindy's location.

The Port Authority Police Youth Services Unit made an investigatory visit to the hotel in question; however, Cindy was not found. After questioning several individuals in the hotel, it was learned that a young girl fitting Cindy's description had been seen in another hotel located in the same area. A visit to this dark, dank hotel proved positive. Cindy was found in her room in a weakened, disoriented state. With parental consent, both girls were taken to the hospital.

Cindy's parents came to New York immediately from a nearby State to assume custody. She has returned home to receive treatment in a diagnostic center.

The lack of space available in a secure treatment center in her home State, coupled with Margaret's history as a chronic runaway, prevented her immediate return home. The YSU social worker, Margaret's mother, and the child's local caseworker implemented a plan whereby Margaret could be temporarily placed in a New York City juvenile facility. Margaret's mother reports that Margaret is now in

a juvenile center in her home State, receiving continuous psychiatric care.

A disheveled youth—Sam—was brought into the youth services office for loitering in the bus terminal. The youth admitted to being a runaway from home and wanted to go someplace other than home but did not know where.

Sam's mother was informed of her son's whereabouts. She clearly stated that she was happy that her son was well, but under no circumstances would she take him back into the home. She was advised of the laws governing juveniles and her obligations to her child. She explained that she and the boy's father were divorced, that she had legal custody of the youth, and that they both lived with her second husband. Sam had two chronic habits—running away from home and selling stolen items. She said she could tolerate his running away from home because he would always return, but his ambition as a "salesman," she could not tolerate. His chief source of merchandise was their home. Items such as jewelry, radios, and toasters were usually marked for "clearance." The mother also stated that Sam had lived with his father for only 1 month.

When asked why he couldn't live with his father, Sam advised that he tried to sell his father's car without permission because it would have brought a fine price in the State of Ohio. Fortunately, he was intercepted by the police, and his father's car was returned.

Sam's father forgave him and helped him get a job with a construction company. While working with the construction firm, Sam observed a dumptruck loaded with bricks and decided it would make quite a sale on the open market. He took the truck and was apprehended while trying to make a sale. The charges against him were dropped, but his father, who was at wits-ends with him, asked him to leave the house.

After listening to Sam's story, he was asked what he wanted of his life. Sam stated that he would be 17 years old soon and wanted to join the Army, but his mother would have to sign for him. His mother, who was informed of her son's wishes, stated that she would be happy to sign for him, but

believed it only fair to warn the U.S. Army to keep a close inventory on their tanks and armaments for they might be put up for sale on the open market.

The youth was referred to Contact House, a temporary shelter for homeless youths where an effort is made to find a permanent place for residence, to await his 17th birth date. At last word, Sam was doing fine in the Army.

Conclusion

With the exception of a very small percentage, the youngsters the YSU is in contact with are not the type you read and hear about. They are confused, ignored, shunted aside, and never given a chance to express their ideas, their thoughts, or feelings. They are youngsters who need positive direction when confronted at a critical point in their lives.

The concept of a "team" operation consisting of both police officer and social worker brings a new dimension to the field of juvenile aid. It provides a base of professionalism and experience that is the foundation for the future of juvenile work. **FBI**