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Problem-Oriented Guides for Police

No. 37

Juvenile Runaways

SECOND EDITION

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Revised with content on Indigenous juvenile runaways



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The Internet references cited in this publication were valid as of the date of this publication. Given that URLs and websites are in constant flux, neither the author(s) nor the COPS Office can vouch for their current validity.

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About the Problem-Specific Guides Series

The *Problem-Specific Guides* summarize knowledge about how police can reduce the harm caused by specific crime and disorder problems. They are guides to prevention and to improving the overall response to incidents, not to investigating offenses or handling specific incidents. The guides are written for police—of whatever rank or assignment—who must address the specific problem the guides cover. The guides will be most useful to the following officers:

- **Those who understand basic problem-oriented policing principles and methods.** The guides are not primers in problem-oriented policing. They deal only briefly with the initial decision to focus on a particular problem, methods to analyze the problem, and means to assess the results of a problem-oriented policing project. They are designed to help police decide how best to analyze and address a problem they have already identified. (A companion series, *Problem Solving Tools*, has been produced to aid in various aspects of problem analysis and assessment.)
- **Those who can look at a problem in depth.** Depending on the complexity of the problem, you should be prepared to spend perhaps weeks, or even months, analyzing and responding to it. Carefully studying a problem before responding helps you design the right strategy, one that is most likely to work in your community. You should not blindly adopt the responses others have used; you must decide whether they are appropriate to your local situation. What is true in one place may not be true elsewhere; what works in one place may not work everywhere.
- **Those who are willing to consider new ways of doing police business.** The guides describe responses that other police departments have used or that researchers have tested. While not all of these responses will be appropriate to your particular problem, they should help give a broader view of the kinds of things you could do. You may think you cannot implement some of these responses in your jurisdiction, but perhaps you can. In many places, when police have discovered a more effective response, they have succeeded in having laws and policies changed, improving the response to the problem.
- **Those who understand the value and the limits of research knowledge.** For some types of problems, a lot of useful research is available to the police; for other problems, little is available. Accordingly, some guides in this series summarize existing research whereas other guides illustrate the need for more research on that particular problem. Regardless, research has not provided definitive answers to all the questions you might



have about the problem. The research may help get you started in designing your own responses, but it cannot tell you exactly what to do. This will depend greatly on the particular nature of your local problem. In the interest of keeping the guides readable, not every piece of relevant research has been cited, nor has every point been attributed to its sources. To have done so would have overwhelmed and distracted the reader. The references listed at the end of each guide are those drawn on most heavily; they are not a complete bibliography of research on the subject.

- **Those who are willing to work with others to find effective solutions to the problem.** The police alone cannot implement many of the responses discussed in the guides. They must frequently implement them in partnership with other responsible private and public entities including other government agencies, nongovernmental organizations, private businesses, public utilities, community groups, and individual community members. An effective problem solver must know how to forge genuine partnerships with others and be prepared to invest considerable effort in making these partnerships work. Each guide identifies particular entities in the community with whom police might work to improve the overall response to that problem. Thorough analysis of problems often reveals that entities other than the police are in a stronger position to address problems and that police ought to shift some greater responsibility to them to do so.

The COPS Office defines community policing as “a policing philosophy that promotes and supports organizational strategies to address the causes and reduce the fear of crime and social disorder through problem-solving tactics and police-community partnerships.” These guides emphasize *problem solving* and *police-community partnerships* in the context of addressing specific public safety problems. For the most part, the organizational strategies that can facilitate problem solving and police-community partnerships vary considerably and discussion of them is beyond the scope of these guides.

These guides have drawn on research findings and police practices in the United States, the United Kingdom, Canada, Australia, New Zealand, the Netherlands, and Scandinavia. Even though laws, customs and police practices vary from country to country, it is apparent that the police everywhere experience common problems. In a world that is becoming increasingly interconnected, it is important that police be aware of research and successful practices beyond the borders of their own countries.



The COPS Office and the authors encourage you to provide feedback on this guide and to report on your own agency's experiences dealing with a similar problem. Your agency may have effectively addressed a problem using responses not considered in these guides and your experiences and knowledge could benefit others. This information will be used to update the guides. If you wish to provide feedback and share your experiences it should be sent via email to the COPS Office response center, askCopsRC@usdoj.gov.

For more information about problem-oriented policing, visit the Center for Problem-Oriented Policing online at <https://www.popcenter.org>. This website offers free online access to the following:

- The *Problem-Specific Guides* series
- The companion *Response Guides* and *Problem-Solving Tools* series
- Instructional information about problem-oriented policing and related topics
- An interactive training exercise
- Important police research and practices



The Problem of Juvenile Runaways

This guide begins by describing the problem of juvenile runaways and reviewing its risk factors. It then identifies a series of questions to help you analyze your local runaway problem. Finally, it reviews responses to the problem and what is known about them from evaluative research and police practice.

Young people run away both from home and from substitute care placements, such as foster care or group homes. Most decide to leave on their own or choose not to return when expected, but in some cases, their parents or guardians tell them to leave or do not allow them to return (such young people are often referred to as “throwaway”). A runaway episode refers to an overnight stay away from home, except in the case of young children, who can be in danger after a much shorter time. Runaways—those who voluntarily go missing—were once believed to be youth seeking adventure or rebelling against mainstream values and the authority of their parents; more recently, runaways have been regarded as victims of dysfunctional families, schools, and social service institutions. Some experts have argued for eliminating “juvenile runaway” as an official classification because it tends to lead people to treat the occurrence as less important than a “missing person.”¹

In fact, runaways and throwaways constitute the most significant portion of missing-person cases.² As many as 1.7 million children run away from home each year, with approximately 20 percent of those cases reported to police. Most runaway episodes last only a day or two (75 percent of such young people return home within a week), and most do not leave their local area.³

What is a Juvenile Runaway?

Both “juvenile” and “youth” refer to persons old enough to voluntarily leave their caretakers and yet younger than the legal age of majority (18 years of age in most U.S. states, the United Kingdom, and some Canadian provinces and as old as 21 or as young as 16 in some jurisdictions). The term “runaway” typically refers to young people who are absent from home or care without permission. The term “throwaway” refers to young people who have been forced to leave their homes by a parent or guardian. Recognizing that the distinction between these statuses is blurred, this guide uses the term “runaway” to refer to both situations. The phrase “missing children” often includes both runaways and throwaways along with young people who have been abducted by a noncustodial parent or stranger. This latter group is not discussed in this guide.



Estimating the number of young people who run away is difficult because

- researchers do not agree on the underlying definition of “running away;”
- they tend to hide their runaway status when talking to adult authority figures;
- many do not access services and therefore are not included in service use data;
- many runaway incidents are not reported to authorities;
- some missing person cases are classified as juvenile runaways and vice versa.

These difficulties notwithstanding, a 2019 report from the Congressional Research Service found that approximately 700,000 youth ages 13 to 17 had experienced homelessness within a 12-month period because they were sleeping in places not meant for habitation, in shelters, or with others while lacking alternative living arrangements. Only about one-third of these young people were actually “missing,” meaning that their parents or caretakers did not know where they were and were concerned about their absence. Only about one-fifth of all runaway episodes were reported to police.⁴ Some parents do not report runaway episodes to police because they know where their children are or because they do not think the police are needed to resolve the issue.⁵ Others do not report runaway episodes because they want to avoid police involvement or because they had a negative experience when previously reporting to police.⁶

The precise number of homeless and runaway youth is unknown because they tend not to stay in one place for long and their status as runaways often overlaps with other classifications.⁷ Although young people from all socioeconomic statuses run away, the majority are from working-class and lower-income homes, possibly because of the family stress created by a lack of income and resources.⁸ Blended families also experience stress, which may explain why youth living in these settings are also more likely than other youth to run away.⁹ Runaway rates are similar for youth in urban, suburban, and rural settings.¹⁰

Compared to youth who do not run away, runaways have higher rates of mental health concerns such as depression, victimization by physical and sexual abuse, substance use disorders, commission of delinquent offenses, and difficulties with peers. Many runaways have been exposed to high levels of violence, either as victims or as witnesses, and some respond by engaging in violent behavior themselves.¹¹ Running away and homelessness often go hand in hand, with common risk factors such as family dynamics, substance abuse, mental illness, socioeconomic disadvantage, and lack of education present among both young people and adults.¹²



Youth in substitute care (e.g., foster care, group homes) are more likely to run away than those who live at home with a parent or guardian. The chances of youth in care running away are highest in the first few months after placement, and older children are more likely to run away than younger ones.¹³ Youth who run away from substitute care are more likely to run away repeatedly than youth who run away from home.¹⁴ Although they are only a small proportion of the total number of youth who go missing, those who run away from care consume a disproportionate amount of police time and effort.¹⁵ Those who run away from care also tend to stay away longer and travel farther away than those who run away from home.¹⁶

Police encounter runaways, whether reported missing or not, through a number of activities: while patrolling areas where runaways congregate, while investigating missing persons reports, or during criminal investigations in which juveniles were either alleged to be perpetrators or victims.¹⁷ Between 2000 (the peak year) and 2020, the number of youth held in juvenile justice facilities on a typical day fell from 108,800 to 25,000, a 77 percent decline.¹⁸ While some runaways are arrested and charged with running away itself as a delinquent act, others are charged with delinquency related to sex work and status offenses such as curfew violations, truancy, and drug and alcohol offenses. Police vary in how they handle runaway cases depending on such factors as whether the children were reported missing, the level of parental or caretaker concern, and the seriousness of the risks the young people are believed to face.

What exactly it means to be “living on the street” varies: Some runaways will have no safe indoor place available to them for food, shelter, and personal hygiene, while others will have occasional access to such spaces. Relatively few runaways are homeless and fully living on the street; most stay in relative safety at a friend or family member’s home. However, some runaways lack safe living arrangements and stay on the street, in the company of a predatory adult, or in another situation lacking responsible adult supervision. Police and policymakers are most concerned about this group because of the potential for victimization and criminal activity.



The problem of runaways is particularly complex because it suggests other family problems. As a result, police may be able to affect only a segment of the problem directly. Although many things can be done to address the problem's underlying causes, police are primarily concerned about reducing the harm that comes to or is caused by runaways when they are absent from home or care. For example, some runaways are

- involved in criminal activity as perpetrators;
- victimized by criminal activity;
- exploited by predatory adults;
- engaged in risky behaviors such as drug use and unsafe sexual activity, especially that which is coerced or engaged in to acquire necessities of life (so-called “survival sex”).¹⁹

Despite their interest in protecting children's safety, police may assign a low priority to runaway cases for a number of reasons:²⁰

- Few jurisdictions have appropriate facilities for placement once runaways are taken into police custody.
- Processing paperwork and transporting runaways consume significant amounts of time.
- Police might perceive runaway cases as less serious than some other public safety threats.
- Some police believe parents and substitute care providers want police to act as disciplinarians or security guards.
- Runaway cases may be frustrating when neither the young people nor their parents want them to return.
- Young people often run away again shortly after police return them home.

Youth can be held in secure facilities only in limited situations. Unfortunately, the resources available to this population generally amount to a collection of loosely affiliated services and shelters of varied quality and quantity. As a result, police often have limited options for responding to runaways and ensuring their safety.



Runaways and the Law

The Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention Act of 1974 prohibits holding status offenders in secure facilities. The Runaway and Homeless Youth Act (RHYA), reauthorized in 1992, created alternatives to the juvenile justice system by funding community-based organizations to provide services to runaways including outreach, counseling, shelters, aftercare, and referrals to social services. The RHYA also includes the Transitional Living Program, which provides services for homeless juveniles ages 16 to 21 to increase independent living skills.

Related problems

Police encounter young people for many reasons related to their running away. Some of these problems are covered in other guides in this series. These related problems require their own analyses and responses:

- Child abandonment
- Child abduction by noncustodial parents
- Child abduction by strangers
- Child abuse and neglect
- Child sexual exploitation
- Curfew violations
- Disorderly youth in public places
- Drug dealing
- Homelessness
- Human sex trafficking
- Panhandling
- Problems relating to transient persons' personal care (e.g., sleeping, bathing, depositing human waste in public)
- Shoplifting
- Truancy
- Underage drinking



Factors contributing to juvenile runaways

Understanding the factors that contribute to the problem will help you frame your own local analysis questions, determine good effectiveness measures, recognize key intervention points, and select appropriate responses.

Why they run: Reasons and triggers

Runaways' home and family situations suggest that the stereotype of young people running away to experience a carefree and rebellious lifestyle is misguided and potentially dangerous. Runaways are usually running away from a problem they do not know how to solve, rather than running to an environment they imagine to be more relaxed and exciting. Triggers for running away from home include the following:²¹

- Recurrent arguments about parent-child issues such as autonomy, spending money, staying out late, permission to attend a parties or concerts, arguments with siblings, choice of friends, appearance, showing respect to parents, criminal behavior, alcohol or drug use, and school problems (truancy, suspension, grades)
- Physical and sexual abuse
- Tension or rejection because of personal characteristics
- Efforts to avoid a difficult encounter with parents, e.g., revealing a pregnancy, reporting failing grades
- Rigid rules or expectations that do not account for normal developmental changes, punishments perceived as excessive, or authoritarian parenting styles
- Seeking fun or adventure, to be with a romantic partner, or to do something parents will not permit
- Parents' setting poor boundaries, failing to set limits on tolerated behavior, neglecting children, abusing substances, depression, or inability to cope with their own stress
- Parents' disharmony, arguing, or domestic violence
- Tension with a stepparent or problems adjusting to a split or blended family

In general, young people run away from families that tend to retreat from rather than work through difficult situations. Lacking other coping mechanisms or communication strategies to resolve problems, young people often run away when they feel they have no other option. In particular, young people run away when the pattern of conflict escalates, the risk of physical harm increases, or family life becomes intolerable.



The triggers underlying a runaway episode from foster care or a group home may be different from those underlying a runaway episode from home. When youth in care do not have strong emotional ties to their caretakers, they often find it easier to leave.²² Young people run away from care to

- return home or to their neighborhoods to spend time with friends, romantic partners, and family;²³
- get attention or provoke a reaction—to confirm that caretakers care about them and they are wanted;²⁴
- escape crowded facilities or seek privacy;²⁵
- protest inadequate service or attention from social workers;²⁶
- protect themselves from bullying or sexual harassment by other residents;²⁷
- escape abuse by staff;²⁸
- resist imposed limits, particularly as many young people in care come from homes with few limits.²⁹

Young people in the foster care system are often shuttled among multiple placements. These disruptions can cause them to feel disempowered and detached and may lead to runaway episodes.³⁰ The substitute care placement's culture or environment may also create an incentive to run away. Placements lacking structure and activities and those with overwhelmed staff who do not exercise their authority properly have higher rates of runaways than facilities with strong leadership, staff support, and young people involved in activities and setting rules.³¹

In sum, there are usually multiple factors that determine whether a young person runs away from home or a care facility. Complex though it might be, understanding each child's personal motivations for running is important to reducing the behavior.³²

When they run: Seasonal and temporal issues

Some evidence suggests that, in some communities, young people run away more often in the summer and during the afternoon or evening, while in other communities, there are no clear patterns with regard to season, day of the week, or time of day.³³ Local practices surrounding curfew and truancy enforcement may cause police to come into contact with runaways more often on particular days of the week or times of day.



How they go: Methods of departure

Most young people leave home or care spontaneously amid emotional or physical conflict. Their departure is generally poorly planned and impulsive, and they usually do not take any food, clothing, or money to sustain them while away. Others carefully calculate the timing of their exits; leave notes announcing their departures; and take money, food, clothing, and objects of sentimental value with them.³⁴ They use many modes of transportation: walking, taking the family car, organizing a ride with friends, using public transportation, or hitchhiking. Obviously, some of these choices involve serious risks to their safety.

Discovering that a child has run away can be very emotional for parents. They may blame themselves and feel guilty, remorseful, or inadequate, or they may blame the child, feel angry, and plan to punish them.³⁵ Some parents are less affected by their child's departure, believing they went to a safe location and will return shortly.³⁶ Parents try to locate the child by calling friends and relatives, searching places the child frequents, or filing a missing persons report with the police.

Where they go: Destination

Most runaways do not go far. Only about one-quarter leave their local area, and few of these leave the state.³⁷ Young people who run away from care tend to travel farther than those who run away from home and are more likely to leave the state.³⁸ The cities of New York, San Francisco, and Los Angeles attract large numbers of out-of-state runaways.³⁹

Very few runaways identify “the street” as their initial destination when they run away from home or care. The most common intended destinations are the homes of friends or relatives. Often, parents or caretakers know where runaway children are staying.⁴⁰ Young people who stay away for longer periods of time tend to cycle through a series of temporary stays with friends and relatives, a practice called “couch surfing.” Only when these resources are exhausted do they move out to the street. Although the proportion of runaways who live outside,



Stockholm

Only about one-quarter of runaways leave their local area. Those who choose to leave tend to be attracted to larger cities such as New York, San Francisco, and Los Angeles.



in a public place, or in an abandoned building is relatively small, these young people are often in great peril and at risk of falling prey to predatory adults, drugs, and violent crime.⁴¹ Police are most likely to encounter these young people, and they are the ones who arouse the greatest concern. Runaways vary in their “street survival” skills, with the more skilled less motivated to leave street life.⁴²

How long they stay: Duration

About one-fifth of runaways return within 24 hours, and after one week, three-quarters of all runaways have returned home or to care.⁴³ Less than 1 percent of runaways never return. Even when their absences are short, runaways are still at higher than risk of harm than other young people, particularly if they are not staying in a safe location.

What happens while they are gone: Consequences

Once young people have left home or care, the variety and seriousness of harms they face depend on several factors, including

- their level of maturity;
- the availability of safe accommodations;
- their companions and associates.

Survival and safety issues are fairly minimal concerns for the large majority of young people who stay with friends or relatives.⁴⁴ Over time, friends and relatives may become less willing to provide for them, and the young people either return home or move to the street. Those living on the street face hazards endemic to their environment (such as substance use and consensual high-risk sexual activity), inflicted by others (victimization and exploitation), or motivated by their need to obtain food, shelter, and money (panhandling, prostitution, thefts, etc.).

Young people living on the street develop survival strategies. Sometimes they access shelters or emergency care facilities; other times they are forced to settle for riskier arrangements such as staying with strangers who have apartments or living in abandoned buildings or on rooftops. They may shoplift, panhandle, steal, threaten, or use violence to get money from others.⁴⁵ Although there is no consensus on whether the practice is widespread, some young people also engage in survival sex, meaning they trade sex for food, shelter, drugs, or protection.⁴⁶ Sometimes, depending on the young person’s age along with other factors, survival sex involves statutory rape, which has obvious implications for police.



Some acts of survival sex are the result of the circumstances a runaway may face; however, some runaways living on the street are exploited by predatory adults and become involved in sex work or drug dealing or are the subjects of child sexual abuse or exploitation material.⁴⁷ Young people may run away because they have experienced physical or sexual abuse at home or in care; they often experience the same types of assault while living on the street.⁴⁸

Runaways living on the street may put themselves in jeopardy by using drugs. Substance use is frequent among runaways: Two-thirds of missing and runaway children reported having used drugs at least once.⁴⁹ Illegal drugs are very accessible to those on the street, who tend to use them both as social lubricants and to self-medicate.⁵⁰ Large numbers of young people on the street also engage in unsafe sexual activity.⁵¹ These behaviors, coupled with the harms inflicted by others, create serious physical and mental health dangers. Many runaway youth have both substance use and mental health issues.⁵² Poor nutrition, poor hygiene, and exposure to the elements lead to physical illnesses.⁵³ Given their high levels of intravenous drug use, shared drug paraphernalia, and high-risk sexual behaviors, young people on the street are vulnerable to HIV and other sexually transmitted infections.⁵⁴ Finally, their stressful lives coupled with their troubled backgrounds of abuse or neglect make them susceptible to suicide and to depression, and other mental illnesses.⁵⁵

Many runaways living on the street constantly fear victimization and struggle to meet their basic survival needs. Very little is known about the experiences of runaways who do not spend time on the street. Some young people feel independent, autonomous, and free and are relieved to escape the pressures of family conflict and school. Being away from home—if one has a safe place to stay—can provide runaways time to think and try to sort out their problems. Unfortunately, running away tends not to improve juveniles' emotional lives for the long term, nor does it address the issues that made them want to leave home.⁵⁶

How or if they return

Most runaways eventually return to their homes, placements, or another safe alternative. Sometimes they return on their own; sometimes they are located by a parent, guardian, friend, or relative and convinced to return; sometimes they are apprehended by police and brought home; and other times, their return is negotiated by a shelter or other social service working on their behalf. They may return with the hope of reconciling or because they are tired of their stressful life on the street.⁵⁷



Although shelters and other social services may negotiate the young person's return, families rarely receive the comprehensive services needed to resolve the issues causing the child to flee in the first place.⁵⁸ Some runaways do not want to return home and avoid contact with services and authority figures so they are not forced to do so. Similarly, some parents blame the young people for running away and do not recognize their own contributions to the problem.⁵⁹ In these situations, automatic or immediate reunification may place the young person at risk of continued harm.

Special considerations for at-risk youth

Special considerations for at-risk youth involve several issues and variables, and the data regarding the incidence of running away vary by state and by study population. Gambon et.al. notes, "The data regarding the distribution of runaway youth from racial and ethnic minority backgrounds are inconsistent. However, more recent data from the National Runaway Safeline reveal that youth of color seem to be overrepresented among runaway youth in crisis who are connecting with the Safeline; 23 percent of those youth connecting identify as Black or African American, compared with 14 percent of the general population." Additional data on American Indian / Alaska Native youth who have run away is also limited, as the following section discusses in more detail. It is estimated that one in every 130 American Indian / Alaska Native children go missing each year. The number missing is likely to be higher, but because there is no centralized reporting system in tribal communities information on American Indian / Alaska Native youth is limited.

What is clear is that youth from racial and ethnic minority groups are at a higher risk than White youth for running away. Specific risk factors for running away are discussed in the Why they run: Reasons and triggers section of this guide.



Missing or murdered Indigenous juvenile runaways

The majority of missing Native American young people are runaways,⁶⁰ though the vast majority of those who are reported missing to the National Crime Information Center (NCIC) are located and returned home. Tribes that provide their own law enforcement are the primary responders to a report that a young person has run away from home or other residential placement in their jurisdiction. If further investigation indicates foul play, involuntary, or at-risk components to the case, tribal police might be able to get assistance from the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI), local sheriff, or city police.⁶¹

Tribal members might feel that runaway cases involving tribal youth are not treated with the same priority as others, especially when the state, rather than the Federal Government, has primary law enforcement responsibility. When a tribal youth goes missing from tribal land, it is important to know which law enforcement agency bears the primary responsibility for investigation and which other agencies are willing and able to assist in the case. Accordingly, it is critical that tribes develop their own Tribal Community Response Plans (TCRP) to enhance collaborative response to runaway cases. In the TCRP, tribes are encouraged to report all young people as missing if their whereabouts are unknown. Tribal police are encouraged to take a missing persons report on all cases involving children and youth, including individuals who have a history of running away. When tribal youth run away from the reservation or tribal lands to cities, jurisdiction becomes more complicated because tribal authority generally ends at tribal land borders unless other law enforcement agencies have cross-deputized tribal police. City police might have limited time and resources to devote to runaway or missing young people from other jurisdictions. Collaborative partnerships and agreements can help address these challenges.



Understanding Your Local Problem

The information provided in the previous section is only a generalized description of runaways and runaway episodes. You must combine the basic facts with a more specific understanding of your local problems. Analyzing the local problem carefully will help you design a more effective response strategy.

Asking the right questions

The following are some critical questions you should ask in analyzing your particular problem of runaways, even if the answers are not always readily available. Your answers to these and other questions will help you choose the most appropriate set of responses later. Most research on runaways is based on information reported by young people; very few studies examine parents' or caretakers' perspectives.⁶² Both perspectives are needed to understand the local problem's dynamics, the available resources and barriers to using them, and the types of police responses most likely to impact the problem.

Many police contacts with runaways are not recorded systematically because they do not involve criminal behavior or are considered too minor. Unfortunately, information from these contacts is needed to craft effective responses. Accordingly, you should first determine what types of records are being kept and, if necessary, develop additional procedures to capture the information needed to fully understand the interactions among police, runaways, and their parents or caretakers. Engaging social service partners in information-gathering can help to mediate any negative reaction to police questioning.

Further, many runaways never encounter police, so you will need to collaborate with local social service providers and schools to answer many of the analysis questions. Although police will be directly involved with only a segment of the runaway population, complete information is required to develop a comprehensive array of responses.



Juveniles who run away

- How many runaway episodes were reported to police in the past year? How many young people left home or care but were never reported to the police? Why were those reports not made?
- Aside from investigating missing persons reports, how do police come in contact with runaways? How many young people are contacted by each method?
- What are the characteristics of young people who run away from home and care? How old are they? (There may be important differences in maturity and independent living skills of young people ages 13 and younger, ages 14 through 16, and those ages 17 and older.) What race or ethnicity are they? What is their sex?
- What reasons do young people offer for running away?
- How many young people have run away multiple times? Have they left from multiple situations? If so, why?
- What prior contacts have police had with runaways, either as crime victims or suspects?

Parents

- What are the demographic and social characteristics of parents who report their child's runaway episode to the police?
- What types of assistance do they expect police to provide? What other types of assistance (e.g., social services) are requested?
- What strategies do parents use to locate their children?
- How many of the missing persons reports filed by particular parents are for repeat runaway episodes for either this or another their children?
- What prior contacts have police had with parents of runaways?

Foster parents / facility staff

- What proportion of runaway episodes is reported by substitute caretakers (e.g., foster parents, group home staff)?
- Are the reports evenly distributed across the various homes or facilities in the area, or do certain ones account for a larger share of runaway reports?
- What are the homes' and facilities' policies for reporting young people who go missing?
- What prior contacts related to runaways have police had with foster parents or juvenile facility staff?



Runaway episodes

- How far do runaways travel from home or care?
- Do they have an intended destination when they depart? What is it? Do they go there?
- What modes of transportation do runaways use?
- What proportion stay at the homes of friends or relatives?
- What proportion stay on the street? In what locations do they congregate? Do they try to avoid contact with adults?
- In what times of the day, days of the week, or season are runaway episodes most likely to occur? Are there any peaks in police contacts?
- What kinds of experiences do runaways have? What are the key sources of danger?
- Do traffickers or drug dealers approach young people living on the street? How? How can young people safely decline their advances?
- What proportion of runaways use illicit drugs? Which drugs? What purpose does their substance use appear to serve?
- Are runaways involved in selling drugs?
- What proportion of runaways are sexually trafficked? Do they practice safer sex? If not, why not?

Runaways who engage in delinquent activity

- What degree of involvement do runaways have in delinquent behavior? What types of offenses do they commit?
- What proportion of runaways are arrested while missing? For what types of offenses?
- What reasons do young people give for their involvement in delinquent behavior?
- What time of the day or day of the week are runaways most likely to commit delinquent acts?
- Are any businesses adversely affected by runaways?



Victimization

- To what extent are runaways victims of crime while absent from home or care? How many are victims of property crime? How many are victims of violent crime?
- Who are the perpetrators?
- When and where do these victimizations occur?
- Are the runaways alone or in groups when victimized?
- Are there any locations that young people consider to be particularly dangerous? Why?

Return of runaways

- What proportion of runaways are willing to return home or to care?
- What needs to happen for them to agree to return?
- If they do not want to return home, what kinds of alternative arrangements do they prefer?
- What proportion of parents are not willing to allow their children to return home? Why?
- For what proportion of young people is returning home a risk of harm?
- Of the young people who return home, how long were they absent?
- How did they return (e.g., returned on their own, escorted by police or other adults)? Was their return voluntary?
- What proportion of runaways report being punished upon their return?

Current responses

- What is the police department's current policy for dealing with runaways? When located, are runaways ever held in secure detention facilities?
- What are the procedures for taking reports, attempting to locate runaways, and following up upon return?
- Once located by police, are young people permitted to refuse to return home?
- Other than taking them into custody, how do police respond to runaways? Are any of these responses particularly effective?
- What social services are available to runaways? What role do police have in linking young people and families with these services?



- How many runaways use services designed to protect them from harm while on the street (e.g., outreach, shelters)? Which services? What are the barriers to access? Do young people think the services are credible?
- How many runaways use services designed to resolve the underlying family and personal conflicts that led to running away (e.g., counseling, family mediation or reunification services)? Which services? What are the barriers to access? Do young people think the services are credible?
- How satisfied are young people with the police response? What would they like police to do differently?
- How satisfied are parents with the police response? What would they like police to do differently?
- How satisfied are social service providers with the police response? What would they like police to do differently?

Measuring your effectiveness

Measurement allows you to determine to what degree your efforts have succeeded and suggests how you might modify your responses if they are not producing the intended results. You should take measures of your problem *before* you implement responses, to determine how serious the problem is, and *after* you implement them, to determine whether they have been effective. All measures should be taken in both the target area and the surrounding area. For more detailed guidance on measuring effectiveness, see the companion guide to this series, *Assessing Responses to Problems: Did It Work? An Introduction for Police Problem-Solvers, 2nd Edition* (https://popcenter.asu.edu/sites/default/files/assessing_responses_to_problems_final.pdf.)

The problem of runaways is unlike other problems confronting police because the behavior often indicates complex family troubles. Making a measurable impact on these underlying causes will require interventions that go far beyond those implemented by police. Police responses are unlikely to impact the underlying causes and instead are likely to focus on mitigating the harm that comes to or is caused by runaways while they are absent from home or care. Police are also likely to seek assistance addressing the problem from social service agencies that are better equipped to offer such assistance.



The following are potentially useful measures of the effectiveness of responses to young people who have run away from home or substitute care. You can use the following outcome measures to determine the impact of the responses on the level of the problem:

- Reduced number of young people who run away from home or care
- Reduced number of repeat runaway episodes reported by parents or caretakers
- Increased number of runaways staying in safe locations (e.g., home of a friend or relative)
- Reduced number of runaways staying in dangerous locations (e.g., streets, abandoned buildings)
- Increased number of runaways accessing crisis services designed to reduce the harms associated with living on the street (e.g., shelters)
- Decreased number of runaways who report being victimized while absent from home
- Decreased number of runaways involved in delinquent activity while absent from home
- Decreased number of runaways admitted to secure detention facilities
- Increased number of runaways successfully reunited with parents or caretakers or placed in safe alternative living arrangements

You can use the following process measures to identify the extent to which selected responses have been implemented as designed:

- Increased number of families who have participated in support or mediation to prevent runaways going missing
- Increased number of young people using hotlines and other counseling resources instead of running away
- Reduced number of runaway episodes reported to police by parents or caretakers (increased reports may be a positive indicator initially if you determine that parents have been reluctant to report episodes in which their children are at risk of harm)
- Increased likelihood that foster care homes or group homes will report runaway episodes to police
- Increased number of young people who receive follow-up services after they return



Responses to the Problem of Juvenile Runaways

Your analysis of your local problem should give you a better understanding of the factors contributing to it. Once you have analyzed your local problem and established a baseline for measuring effectiveness, you should consider possible responses to address that problem.

The following response strategies provide a foundation of ideas for addressing your particular problem. These strategies are drawn from a variety of research studies and police reports. Several of these strategies may apply to your community's problems. It is critical that you tailor responses to local circumstances and that you can justify each response based on reliable analysis. In most cases, an effective strategy will involve implementing several different responses. Law enforcement responses alone are seldom effective in reducing or solving the problem. Do not limit yourself to considering what police can do: Carefully consider whether others in your community share responsibility for helping to deal with the problem and can help police better respond to it.

General considerations for an effective response strategy

Although more likely to focus on minimizing the harms that come to or are caused by runaway youth while they are absent from home, police can also be effective advocates in efforts to address the reasons young people run away (e.g., physical and sexual abuse) and to improve the quality of services designed to respond to them upon their return (e.g., family mediation and preservation). Most researchers and practitioners agree that social service providers, rather than police, are the best suited to addressing this problem. Therefore, part of the police response may be to enlist other agencies better equipped to render services to runaways and their families.*

That said, police have a legitimate role in locating young people reported missing and in ensuring runaways' safety when they spend time on the street.⁶³ Police receive missing persons reports from parents, foster care providers, and group home staff. Further, their

* Refer to Response Guide No. 3, *Shifting and Sharing Responsibility for Public Safety Problems*, for more information.



24-hour street presence means they are the officials most likely to encounter runaways, whether reported missing or not. Police should partner with other agencies to address the problem effectively, and a variety of agency-level responses will be required.

1. **Appointing a local runaway coordinator.** Given the overlap in responsibility between the police department and social service providers, some state, local, and tribal jurisdictions have found it helpful to appoint a runaway coordinator. The coordinator convenes interagency meetings, plans and coordinates services, manages service delivery contracts, and monitors outcomes. Although they may or may not craft formal interagency protocols, the coordinators build bridges for these agreements to evolve. The Lancashire (United Kingdom) Constabulary assigned police constables as liaisons to each juvenile care facility to address chronic and repeat runaway problems.⁶⁴
2. **Collaborating with social service agencies.** Although police may locate and secure the return of juveniles who have run away, collaborating with other agencies can reduce the amount of police time spent on runaways and can ensure young people receive appropriate services. A framework should be developed for each agency's response to reported runaway episodes, along with procedures for assisting runaways who are identified through other means. Such collaborations have helped jurisdictions comply with federal guidelines regarding the secure detention of those who commit status offenses. Involving social service agencies in returning runaways to their homes or placements can also defuse potentially volatile domestic situations.

These agreements should be formalized into memoranda of understanding between police and social service agencies. In addition to specific protocols for transporting youth and providing services, these agreements can also create specific protections for confidentiality and privacy, when appropriate. Special consideration should be given to minimizing the length of time it takes for police to transfer custody of the runaway youth to social workers. Formalizing these agreements will also promote sustainability so the interagency relationships and protocols are not dependent on the individuals who created them.



3. **Developing joint protocols with foster care providers and group homes.** Those providing substitute care are sometimes quick to contact police when young people have not returned to the facility by a specified time. Many times, young people are simply late rather than missing. Further, staff may not assess young people’s level of risk before identifying the event as an emergency. To avoid overwhelming police resources, some jurisdictions use protocols specifying a threshold for police contact when young people do not return to the facility as expected (e.g., call police only after midnight, only when young people have left the center without permission, or only after staff have failed to locate them). The protocol should categorize the various types of absences and state required procedures for each situation.⁶⁵ The circumstances surrounding the absences should be monitored and recategorized as necessary. Enacted in 2014, the Preventing Sex Trafficking and Strengthening Families Act mandates that state agencies “report immediately, and in no case later than 24 hours” information about each missing or abducted child both to law enforcement and to the National Center for Missing and Exploited Children (NCMEC).⁶⁶

Who Reports Runaways?

Through an analysis of calls-for-service data, the Fresno (California) Police Department found that 40 substitute care providers made a total of 1,024 calls in a single year. Five providers were responsible for 50 percent of the calls. Joint protocols and training from centers who manage young people’s absences without police contact were employed to reduce the high utilization rates of the five providers.

Source: Fresno Police Department. 1996. *Group Homes: A Multiagency Approach to a Citywide Problem*. Submission for the Herman Goldstein Award for Excellence in Problem-Oriented Policing. [https://popcenter.asu.edu/sites/default/files/library/awards/goldstein/1996/96-15\(F\).pdf](https://popcenter.asu.edu/sites/default/files/library/awards/goldstein/1996/96-15(F).pdf).

Linking foster care providers and group home staff with community police officers also has benefits:⁶⁷

- Police get to know the young people informally and may have more leverage in encouraging them to stay in their placement.
- Police develop a greater appreciation for the types of issues young people and staff face.
- Police respond to requests for assistance more consistently and follow up more meaningfully.



4. **Cross-training staff from multiple agencies.** Impacting the trajectory of what caused a youth to run away—the triggers, the departure, the potential risks, and the return—will involve coordinated interaction between police and social service providers. This interaction should rest on mutual understanding and respect for each agency’s objectives and core philosophy. Multidisciplinary training sessions help staff understand the complexity of the issue and the need for a partnership to address it. Training topics should include the following:⁶⁸
 - Reasons why young people may run away from home and substitute care
 - Police investigative techniques and available tools
 - Child abuse reporting laws
 - Policies surrounding confidentiality
 - Situations when secure detention may be required to protect the young people from harm
 - Juvenile-centered treatment philosophy and advocacy
 - Locally available resources and services
 - Procedures for interagency communication
5. **Sharing information.** Agencies must share relevant information about the young people, their precipitating factors for running away, and their associates and companions for an effective response. Interagency agreements should specify the types of information needed to ensure the safety of young people who have run away and should develop procedures for efficient interagency communication. These interagency agreements can be difficult to negotiate when agency partners have different confidentiality standards.

Parents are important partners in information sharing. They have the right to access information that agency staff may not be able to obtain. Some jurisdictions obtain parents’ written consent to access records from schools, social services, and other agencies.*

* Takas and Bass (1996) provide a sample parental consent form that features clear, simple language and specifies the types of records police may use. Police should work with local agencies to ensure the form meets their requirements for accessing information. Guidelines for approaching agency staff to request information are also provided.



6. **Assessing risk.** If the primary role of police is to reduce the harm that comes to or is caused by runaways, they need a reliable way to assess the risks facing young people who are absent from home or substitute care. Cases should not be classified solely by age or where the young person stays but rather by a set of locally defined conditions that, when met, will trigger a priority police response. Common risk factors include the following:
- *Aged 13 or younger.* Children ages 13 and younger have less sophisticated decision-making skills and cannot protect themselves from exploitation by older teenagers or adults.⁶⁹
 - *Out of safety zone.* This zone will vary depending on the young people's characteristics. Youth with cognitive impairments may have difficulty communicating their needs and providing information required to access help; they are particularly at risk of exploitation.
 - *Alcohol or drug dependent.* Substance use compromises judgment and the ability to protect oneself from harm.
 - *At risk of foul play or sexual exploitation.* The risk level will depend on the types of illegal activity occurring in the community, where the young people are believed to be staying, and the young people's past experiences and maturity level.
 - *Believed to be in life-threatening situation.* This assessment will vary depending on the places the young people frequent and their experiences during past runaway episodes.
 - *Absent more than 24 hours before reported to police.* A delay in reporting may indicate parental neglect but could simply be a misunderstanding of the law. Many parents believe missing persons reports require a waiting period.
 - *In the company of dangerous companions.* Some young people stay with adults who may exploit their vulnerability; others associate with peers who use drugs or are involved in criminal activity.
 - *Inconsistent with normal behavior patterns.* An out-of-character departure may signal acute distress or the possibility of foul play.

Classifying runaways accordingly enables police to focus their resources on those young people at highest risk of being harmed and those most likely to commit crime while absent from home or care. Agreement from local partners about the types of cases to which police will dedicate resources also helps to promote a positive police image.



7. **Encouraging prompt reporting of runaways.** Because the chances of locating a runaway and keeping them safe from harm declines with the passing of time, police agencies should actively encourage caretakers to promptly report runaways to police. The public service message should emphasize the following:
 - There is no mandatory waiting period before reporting a missing person.
 - Running away is not a criminal offense for which the young person will be punished.
 - Police and other organizations can and will assist in locating and protecting runaways.
 - Running away can put the young person at risk of serious harm.
8. **Developing Tribal Community Response Plans (TCRP).** To create a TCRP, the tribe will first need to plan the drafting process. A U.S. Department of Justice–issued guidance document, *Guide to Developing a Tribal Community Response Plan for Missing Person Cases* (<https://www.justice.gov/tribal/mmip/tribal-community-response-plans>), will give you steps to consider in drafting an implementation outline—the roadmap to developing your tribe’s plan. Remember, this is your community’s response plan, and you may choose to follow all, some, or none of the recommendations contained in these guidance documents. This guidance document covers six sections:
 - a. Inventory of a Missing Person Policy
 - b. Review of the Guidance Documents
 - c. Development and Implementation of a Working Group
 - d. Procedural Recommendations
 - e. Compiling the Final Response Plan
 - f. Post-Development Processes.

Prior to or during the development process, it is recommended that you bring together a group of tribal and community leaders, both governmental and nongovernmental, to learn about the response plan process and the four guidance documents:

- a. Developing Law Enforcement Agency Response Guidelines
- b. Developing Victim Services Response Guidelines
- c. Developing Media and Public Communications Response Guidelines
- d. Developing Community Outreach Response Guidelines⁷⁰



Specific responses to reduce runaway episodes

Before they run

9. **Providing prevention materials when responding to calls for service.** Analyzing local call-for-service data may reveal that certain families have high levels of parent-child conflict. Responding officers can provide these families with information on conflict resolution strategies and resources for additional parent and youth support.⁷¹ Referrals should include parent support services, advice and counseling programs and school-based support for young people, and family preservation and mediation services. The officer who responds to missing persons reports can provide similar information, along with guidance to help parents locate their children. Police efforts to generate awareness can be supplemented by school-based information campaigns designed to reach the larger audience of families whose children may run away but for whom police contact is not initiated.

National Runaway Safeline



Hotlines refer young people to social services to shield them from the harms involved in living on the street. If desired, they also help runaways to contact their parents. The National Runaway Safeline, <https://www.1800runaway.org>, has served as a national communications system for runaway and homeless youth for more than 50 years.

10. **Using respite care.** Runaway episodes may be triggered by escalating conflict at home that could be resolved if the family members were temporarily separated. If available, police could transport young people to a respite care facility (e.g., a host home or small respite center).⁷² During a short stay (a few days to a few weeks), young people and their parents participate in counseling to begin to resolve the source of conflict and prevent future crises. Because of the short length of stay, respite care is considerably more cost effective than placement in other juvenile institutions.⁷³



When they run

11. **Using “Missing from Care” forms.** When laws* and local protocols dictate that young people’s absences from care be reported to police (see response 3 on page 24), substitute-care staff can provide police with information designed to help locate the young people and to highlight relevant risk factors. Relevant information includes the following:⁷⁴
 - Physical description
 - Recent photograph
 - Distinguishing scars, marks, tattoos, or piercings
 - Date and time last seen
 - Suspected location, destination, and companions (perhaps from the youth’s social media postings)
 - Address of family and other known contacts
 - Pertinent details from previous times they have gone missing
 - Other relevant risk factors
12. **Enlisting the public in locating runaways.** As is the case with all missing persons, advertising that they are missing increases the chances that strangers will see them and notify authorities of their whereabouts. Especially in cases where it is believed the young person has left their home area, creative approaches are needed to extend the advertising more widely. The Washington State Patrol developed a partnership with commercial trucking firms to advertise select missing young people on the sides of trucks, thereby reaching viewers across the nation.⁷⁵
13. **Determining whether absences are voluntary or involuntary.** Sometimes it is not clear whether young people’s departures from home or care were voluntary, whether they were abducted, or whether an injury or accident prevented them from returning home when expected. Some departments require police to assume young people are in jeopardy until they can confirm significant facts to the contrary.⁷⁶ A variety of

* Federal law in the United States (42 U.S.C. 671(a)(35)(B)) requires state child welfare agencies to report within 24 hours to law enforcement agencies and to NCMEC a child who has run away from a care facility. You should consult legal counsel for other relevant local, state, and federal laws governing reporting runaways.



investigation techniques can be used to determine whether voluntary departures are consistent with children's behavioral patterns.* This classification allows police to respond to cases with an appropriate level of urgency.

14. **Diverting cases to a community-based organization.** Following a missing persons report, police can refer parents to a program that provides support during runaway episodes and that negotiates the young people's return when appropriate. Using contact information provided by police, program staff initiate contact with parents. Twenty-four-hour availability and free services may encourage parents to use the resource.⁷⁷ Similarly, when runaways are located, police can escort them to the program facility and notify the parents. Program staff receive the young people, await the parents' arrival, and negotiate the return and follow-up care, allowing police to return to duty.

While they are absent from home or care

15. **Referring young people to appropriate social service providers.** Police encounter young people who have run away from home or care under many conditions. Those living on the street are at particular risk of harm and should be encouraged to access a variety of services to address their immediate and long-term needs. Outreach efforts should inform young people about the range of available services, which should include the following:
 - Short-term shelter programs that provide safe overnight accommodations
 - Drop-in services that provide food, clothing, crisis counseling, and medical attention
 - Services that help young people contact their parents, if desired
 - Counseling services for issues such as pregnancy, substance abuse,⁷⁸ mental illness, and other special circumstances
 - Long-term counseling for family mediation and reunification
 - Independent living programs for young people who cannot or do not want to return home

* See Simons and Willie 2000 and Steidel 2000 for detailed discussions of investigation techniques useful for making this determination.



Young people who have run away from home or care often do not trust adults and authority figures and may be easily deterred from seeking the services they need. Therefore, program credibility is essential and can be enhanced by⁷⁹

- involving young people in the design and operation of programs;
 - ensuring staff honor their commitments to young people;
 - making young people aware of the risks of running away and challenging them to take greater responsibility for avoiding those risks;
 - ensuring confidentiality;
 - avoiding labeling and blaming young people.
16. **Implementing specialized patrol.** Runaways who spend time on the streets are generally at higher risk than their peers of victimization and criminal involvement. Increasing the visibility of patrol in locations where young people congregate may deter criminal activity and also create an opportunity for police to contact and refer them to services as needed. Specialized runaway units can also handle runaways contacted by other officers who lack the training or resources to intervene effectively.⁸⁰ Further, specialized officers can coordinate with other units investigating those who seek to exploit runaways.
17. **Providing safe locations for young people.** Local agencies and businesses (such as fire departments, libraries, community centers, convenience stores, and restaurants) can provide a temporary safe location for runaways who want to escape the street and other dangerous situations. A quiet and secure place to make contact with local services can mitigate the harms young people face while on their own.

National Safe Place

The National Safe Place is a national network of businesses and agencies committed to providing a comfortable and secure place for young people to make contact with runaway service providers. They walk into a location displaying the “Safe Place” logo and are immediately put in contact with Safe Place volunteers who come to the location or send a text and get help planning their next steps, provide for their immediate needs, and provide them safety information and guidance in alternatives to running away. Nearly 20,000 Safe Place locations nationwide have provided services to juveniles since 1983. See <https://www.nationalsafeplace.org/> for more information.

Source: Walsh, Sara M., and Robin E. Donaldson. 2010. “Invited Commentary: National Safe Place: Meeting the Immediate Needs of Runaway and Homeless Youth.” *Journal of Youth and Adolescence* 39: 437–445.



18. **Using secure placement when appropriate.** In a limited number of circumstances, secure placement may be needed to protect young people at immediate risk of serious harm. Suicidal young people or those engaging in high-risk behaviors (e.g., sex work, drug use) may benefit from short-term secure placements until appropriate long-term services can be mobilized. Secure placements can be found in the juvenile justice (e.g., juvenile detention center) and mental health (e.g., hospital) systems and should be extremely time limited.

When or if they return

19. **Using transportation aides and free transportation services.** Police can conserve valuable time and resources by using civilian volunteers to transport young people to runaway shelters and other services. These resources are most useful when volunteers are on call 24 hours a day and when multiple volunteers located throughout the jurisdiction are on call at any given time.⁸¹ A few national airlines and bus companies offer free tickets to runaways from out of state who want to return home but cannot afford to do so.*
20. **Referring to aftercare services as needed.** Despite the likelihood that family problems triggered the runaway episode, most young people and families do not access any services upon the young people's return home.⁸² When police transport runaways home or back to care, active referrals for follow-up services can help to resolve family problems and prevent subsequent runaway episodes. Rather than depending on the families to initiate contact, police can submit families' names to a local service provider who makes contact with families and offers services.[†] Parents who receive such contacts often express relief and gratitude for the offer of help.⁸³

* Greyhound's Home Free program operates in partnership with the National Runaway Safeline. Homeless and runaway youth access the services by calling the toll-free switchboard, where staff coordinate issuing the ticket. See <https://www.1800runaway.org/youth-teens/home-free> for more information.

† The Alternative Solutions to Running Away (ASTRA) program operates in partnership with Gloucestershire (United Kingdom) Constabulary, who refer families who made missing persons reports to the local program provider. The program's goal is to reduce the incidence of repeat runaway episodes, which is accomplished by providing confidential, individual support to young people upon their return home and creating an action plan to help resolve the underlying problems (Great Britain, Office of the Deputy Prime Minister 2002).



21. **Interviewing juveniles upon return.** Interviews with runaways upon their return can reveal important information for addressing family problems and preventing subsequent runaway episodes. Providing young people opportunities to talk and to have their feelings taken seriously sets an important example for parents about including them in making decisions. Most practitioners agree that police should not conduct these interviews.⁸⁴ Young people often do not trust authority figures, may be reluctant to disclose important facts, and are unlikely to feel that police can be impartial. Staff from local runaway programs or child welfare agencies are ideally suited to fill this role.

Functional Assessment Interview for Runaways

The Functional Assessment Interview for Runaways (FAIR) is designed to explore the runaway's motivations for running away from foster care to inform preventive interventions tailored to that individual juvenile. Much of it would be relevant to non-foster care runaway episodes. It gathers information in the following categories:

1. Health
2. Experience running away
3. Placement
4. Family
5. Friends
6. Other connections
7. School
8. Action plan and interventions

Source: Crosland, Kimberly, Rocky Haynes, and Shelley Clarke. 2020. "The Functional Assessment Interview for Runaways (FAIR): An Assessment Tool to Assist with Behavioral Support Plan Development to Reduce Runaway Behavior." *Childhood and Adolescent Social Work Journal* 37(1): 73–82. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10560-019-00626-7>.



Responses with limited effectiveness

22. **Handling cases over the telephone.** An accurate assessment of the risks involved in young people's absences is required for a sound response. This assessment is best made in person, where access to their parents, siblings, and personal effects can help police discover the nuances of each situation.
23. **Confining runaways in secure detention facilities.** The Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention Act of 1974 prohibits the secure confinement of those who engage in status offense behaviors, unless that behavior is found to be in violation of a prior order from the court that was directed at the young person, except in extreme circumstances to ensure their safety. Not only is the routine confinement of runaways for those who commit status offenses prohibited but it also does not address the underlying issues and can inflame tensions between the young people and their families.⁸⁵ Secure detention is expensive, and bed space is limited.
24. **Forcing young people to return home.** Given the serious family dysfunction underlying many runaway episodes, forcing young people to return home may place them at further risk of harm and subsequent runaway episodes. Professionals agree that reunification is realistic for only a portion of runaways.⁸⁶ Blanket policies requiring young people to be returned to their homes can be dangerous.* Their absence from home is not necessarily their most serious or important problem, and an exclusive focus on reunification may conceal their real needs.⁸⁷
25. **Restricting privileges upon return.** Responding to a runaway episode with harsh restrictions and punishment is likely to exacerbate the problem, particularly among those who run away from substitute care placements.⁸⁸ Instead, foster care parents and group home staff should negotiate new boundaries and privileges (e.g., additional weekend home passes) that address the issues underlying the runaway episode (e.g., desire to maintain ties with biological parents).

* U.S. states laws vary on police obligations regarding the return of runaways to care facilities or to their parents' custody (National Law Center on Homelessness and Poverty 2019).



Appendix. Summary of Responses to Juvenile Runaways

Table A-1 summarizes the responses to runaways, the mechanism by which they are intended to work, the conditions under which they ought to work best, and some factors you should consider before implementing a particular response. It is critical that you tailor responses to local circumstances and that you can justify each response based on reliable analysis. In most cases, an effective strategy will involve implementing several different responses. Law enforcement responses alone are seldom effective in reducing or solving the problem.

Table A1. Summary of Responses to Juvenile Runaways

Response No.	Response	How It Works	Works Best If . . .	Considerations
General Considerations for an Effective Response Strategy: Agency-level				
1	Appointing a local runaway coordinator	Fortifies interagency connections, ensures action plans are implemented	. . . the coordinator has contacts at each agency and specific expertise in runaway issues	Building relationships and establishing credibility takes time; doing so may not reflect current staffing priorities
2	Collaborating with social service agencies	Attends to immediate safety issues as well as more complex issues underlying runaway behavior	. . . social service agencies take responsibility for negotiating runaways' return; agency confidentiality policies are compatible	Crafting formalized agreements takes time; protocols lose their effectiveness if they are not supported by a range of follow-up services; differing treatment philosophies among agencies make consensus difficult to achieve; most programs have limited service capacities that may not be able to absorb increased referrals



Response No.	Response	How It Works	Works Best If . . .	Considerations
3	Developing joint protocols with foster care providers and group homes	Classifies absences according to severity; determines appropriate threshold for police involvement; conserves police resources	. . . substitute care providers and police agree on the appropriate priority level for each type of absence; inexperienced staff and officers are trained to classify cases accurately; a risk assessment protocol is used	If absences are misclassified as a low priority, may fail to protect runaways from harm and may create a liability issue; protocols require consistency across a potentially large number of partners
4	Cross-training staff from multiple agencies	Increases quality of interaction with runaways and families; encourages mutual respect for differing agency objectives and mandates	. . . the training curriculum is jointly developed by representatives from agencies involved	Training is not effective as a stand-alone strategy
5	Sharing information	Improves ability to serve runaways and families appropriately	. . . agencies balance need for information with respect for confidentiality	Staff and officers must have a strategy for dealing with a potentially large volume of information; agreements to share information may deter some runaways from revealing important information
6	Assessing risk	Classifies runaways according to risk of harm and deploys limited police resources accordingly	. . . police obtain interagency agreement on the types of cases to which resources will be dedicated; responding officers are trained in risk assessment procedures	Runaways who do not meet the threshold for police intervention may also be in jeopardy or may also threaten public safety



Response No.	Response	How It Works	Works Best If . . .	Considerations
7	Encouraging prompt reporting of runaways	Improves chances of locating and protecting runaways	. . . caretakers understand the importance of prompt reporting	Caretakers often have misconceptions about reporting requirements and the risks to runaways
8	Tribal Community Response Plans	Develops a collaborative response to missing person cases involving runaways	. . . you bring together a group of tribal and community leaders, both governmental and nongovernmental, to learn about the response plan process	There is no one plan or set of guidelines to respond to missing persons in American Indian / Alaska Native (AI/AN) communities that will fit the needs of every tribe; however, the TCRP guidance document (https://www.justice.gov/media/1267536/dl?inline) is designed to help a tribal law enforcement agency establish its own guidelines
Specific Responses to Juvenile Runaways				
<i>Before They Run</i>				
9	Providing prevention materials when responding to calls for service	Offers assistance to families and youth who are at risk of a runaway episode	. . . a sufficient array of resources is available to support parents and runaways	Family engagement with services is not guaranteed; information does not reach families in need who do not come in contact with police
10	Using respite care	Gives family members a break from one another so immediate crisis can be resolved without a runaway episode	. . . professional counselors help family develop coping strategies to avert future crises and there is political support for placement alternatives to juvenile confinement	Respite care must have 24-hour availability; family reunification is not always safe or desirable



Response No.	Response	How It Works	Works Best If . . .	Considerations
<i>When They Run</i>				
11	Using “Missing From Care” forms	Improves quality of police investigation by highlighting relevant facts	. . . the form is promptly submitted to correct police department representative	Staff time spent completing form may be unnecessary if runaways return shortly after departure
12	Enlisting the public in locating runaways	Helps locate missing young people locally and nationally through partnerships with transportation firms, media outlets, and other private sector and nonprofit organizations.	. . . information is shared with the public in a way that gains attention.	Large social media platforms like Instagram, Twitter (now known as X), and Facebook have millions or billions of visitors each day, making them fruitful places for generating leads.
13	Determining whether absences are voluntary or involuntary	Ensures time-sensitive responses to abduction are implemented when necessary	. . . police are well-trained in investigating missing persons reports and parents or staff are able to provide sufficient information about runaways’ disappearances	If absences are misclassified, may fail to protect runaways and may create liability issues
14	Diverting cases to a community-based organization	Transfers responsibility for family services to an agency better equipped to provide them; addresses underlying causes of problem	. . . program staff are available 24 hours a day; services are free; program staff handle all processing and paperwork	Staffing 24-hour programs can be difficult and expensive



Response No.	Response	How It Works	Works Best If . . .	Considerations
<i>While They Are Absent From Home or Care</i>				
15	Referring runaways to appropriate social service providers	Transfers responsibility for runaways and family services to an agency better equipped to provide them; addresses underlying causes of problem	. . . full array of services is available; services are credible and easily accessible; confidentiality is maintained	Adequate funding for services is difficult to ensure; police involvement may deter runaways from using services
16	Implementing specialized patrol	Increases likelihood of detection for runaways involved in criminal activity; may deter those wishing to exploit them; provides opportunity to refer to services that can address underlying problem	. . . police approach in nonthreatening manner or allow social service workers to take the lead; runaways are easily identifiable and tend to cluster in certain locations; sufficient resources are available to divert from juvenile justice involvement	Specialized patrols consume police staff power that could be used to address more serious threats to public safety; police involvement may deter runaways from using services
17	Providing safe locations for runaways	Removes runaways from dangerous locations; encourages contact with services that can address underlying problems	. . . program is well publicized and service staff respond immediately	Services will reach only runaways who actively seek help, and many do not; must include follow-up services with families for meaningful change to occur
18	Using secure placement when appropriate	Removes runaways from dangerous locations or situations	. . . the placement is not within the juvenile justice system; stabilization is achieved quickly so runaways can be released to long-term care	Secure placements are expensive; overly broad use of secure confinement violates federal status offender deinstitutionalization mandates



Response No.	Response	How It Works	Works Best If . . .	Considerations
<i>When or If They Return</i>				
19	Using transportation aides and free transportation services	Transports runaways home without consuming police resources	. . . services are easily accessible to police; program staff respond promptly	Workload is sporadic; recruiting volunteers can be difficult; process to secure free transportation can be cumbersome
20	Referring to aftercare services as needed	Transfers responsibility for youth and family services to an agency better equipped to provide them; addresses underlying causes of problem	. . . police have range of referral options; multiple efforts are made to engage family in treatment; and both and parents have advocates working on their behalf	Parents who are not particularly concerned about their children's absence are not likely to engage with services
21	Interviewing upon return	Gathers information that can be helpful when responding to situations in which youth leave home or care; gives an opportunity to voice concerns	. . . interviews are not conducted by police; interviewer takes time to establish rapport; runaways are interviewed shortly after their return; multiple interviewers are available so runaways can select someone with whom they are comfortable	May not disclose relevant information; information revealed must be acted upon for process to remain credible



Response No.	Response	How It Works	Works Best If . . .	Considerations
Responses With Limited Effectiveness				
22	Handling cases over the telephone	Assumes quality investigation can be accomplished without personal contact	N/A	Information may lack important details required for accurate risk assessment; suggests to parents that case is not being taken seriously
23	Confining runaways in secure detention facilities	Assumes all runaways are a danger to themselves or public safety	N/A	Most are not a threat to themselves or others; secure detention bed space is limited and expensive; does not address underlying issues; can inflame family tensions
24	Forcing runaways to return home	Assumes reunification is safe and appropriate for all and that all parents will welcome their children home	N/A	Returning runaways home may place them at further risk of harm; may increase the likelihood of subsequent runaway episodes
25	Restricting runaways' privileges upon return	Assumes runaways will obey new rules	N/A	Punitive responses can exacerbate the problem and trigger subsequent episodes; may reinforce runaways' perception that parents or caretakers do not take their concerns seriously; does not address underlying issues



Endnotes

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2. Sedlak, Finkelhor, and Brick 2017; Hammer, Finkelhor, and Sedlak 2002.
3. Hammer, Finkelhor, and Sedlak 2002.
4. Petrocelli 2009.
5. Hammer, Finkelhor, and Sedlak 2002.
6. Smeaton and Rees 2004.
7. CRS 2019.
8. Posner 2000.
9. McRee 2008.
10. J. Petrocelli 2009.
11. Crawford, Whitbeck, and Hoyt 2011; Morewitz 2016; Gambon and Gewirtz O'Brien 2020.
12. Thompson, Zittel-Palamara, and Maccio 2004; Slesnick and Prestopnik 2005; Shelton et al., 2009; Fedina et al. 2019.
13. Kaplan 2004.
14. Wade and Biehal 1998; Lancashire Constabulary 2004.
15. Finkelhor, Hotaling, and Sedlak 1990; Hammer, Finkelhor, and Sedlak 2002.
16. Wade and Biehal 1998.
17. Thrane et al. 2008; Morewitz 2016.
18. Rovner 2023.
19. Morewitz 2016; Johnson, Fox, and Muniz 2021.
20. Posner 1992; Newiss 1999; National Law Center on Homelessness and Poverty 2019; Morewitz 2016.
21. Brennan, Huizinga, and Elliott 1978; Abrahams and Mungall 1992; Wade and Biehal 1998; Schaffner 1999; Posner 2000; Rees 2001; Mitchell 2003; Hammer et al. 2004; Riley et al. 2004; Slesnick 2004; Smeaton and Rees 2004; Kim et al. 2009; Gambon and Gewirtz O'Brien 2020; Bucher, Manasse, and Rebellon 2023.



22. Fasulo et al. 2002.
23. Abrahams and Mungall 1992; Wade and Biehal 1998; Rees 2001; Fasulo et al. 2002; Finkelstein et al. 2004; Kaplan 2004.
24. Abrahams and Mungall 1992; Wade and Biehal 1998.
25. Abrahams and Mungall 1992.
26. Abrahams and Mungall 1992; Posner 1992; Kaplan 2004.
27. Abrahams and Mungall 1992; Posner 1992; Wade and Biehal 1998; Gibbs and Sinclair 2000; Mitchell 2003; Finkelstein et al. 2004.
28. Abrahams and Mungall 1992; Posner 1992.
29. Posner 1992; Finkelstein et al. 2004; Kaplan 2004; Wade and Biehal 1998.
30. Posner 1992; Slesnick 2004.
31. Finkelstein et al. 2004; Kaplan 2004.
32. Jeanis, Fox, and Muniz 2019; Jeanis et al. 2020.
33. Finkelhor, Hotaling, and Sedlak 1990; Hammer, Finkelhor, and Sedlak 2002.
34. Schaffner 1999.
35. Brennan, Huizinga, and Elliott 1978.
36. Brennan, Huizinga, and Elliott 1978; Hammer, Finkelhor, and Sedlak 2002.
37. Posner 1992; Biehal and Wade 2002; Hammer, Finkelhor, and Sedlak 2002.
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39. Finkelhor, Hotaling, and Sedlak 1990.
40. Hammer, Finkelhor, and Sedlak 2002.
41. Posner 1992; Hammer, Finkelhor, and Sedlak 2002.
42. Greene 2012.
43. Hammer, Finkelhor, and Sedlak 2002.
44. Brennan, Huizinga, and Elliott 1978; Finkelstein et al. 2004.
45. Brennan, Huizinga, and Elliott 1978; Kipke et al. 1997; Flowers 2001; Safyer et al. 2004; Morewitz 2016.



46. Van Leeuwen et al. 2004.
47. Mayers 2001; Safyer et al. 2004; Pullmann et al. 2020.
48. Kipke et al. 1997; Wade and Biehal 1998.
49. NCMEC 2021.
50. Posner 2000; Mayers 2001; Office of Applied Studies 2004; Van Leeuwen et al. 2004.
51. Posner 2000; Mayers 2001; Van Leeuwen et al. 2004.
52. Slesnick and Prestopnik 2005.
53. Posner 2000; Slesnick 2004.
54. Booth, Zhang, and Kwiatkowski 1999; Flowers 2001; Mayers 2001; Slesnick 2004.
55. Mayers 2001; Moskowitz, Stein, and Lightfoot 2013.
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63. Kaplan 2004.
64. Lancashire Constabulary 2004.
65. Kaplan 2004; Newiss 1999; Lancashire Constabulary 2004.
66. Preventing Sex Trafficking and Strengthening Families Act 2014.
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69. Unger et al. 1998.
70. DOJ 2022.



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79. O'Conner and MacDonald 1999; Kurtz et al. 2000.
80. Posner 1994; Smith 2015.
81. Posner 1994.
82. NCMEC 2000.
83. Rees 2001.
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About the COPS Office

The **Office of Community Oriented Policing Services (COPS Office)** is the component of the U.S. Department of Justice responsible for advancing the practice of community policing by the nation's state, local, territorial, and tribal law enforcement agencies through information and grant resources.

Community policing begins with a commitment to building trust and mutual respect between police and communities. It supports public safety by encouraging all stakeholders to work together to address our nation's crime challenges. When law enforcement and communities collaborate, they more effectively address underlying issues, change negative behavioral patterns, and allocate resources.

Rather than simply responding to crime, community policing focuses on preventing it through strategic problem-solving approaches based on collaboration. The COPS Office awards grants to hire community policing officers and support the development and testing of innovative policing strategies. COPS Office funding also provides training and technical assistance to community members and local government leaders, as well as all levels of law enforcement.

Since 1994, the COPS Office has been appropriated more than \$20 billion to add community policing officers to the nation's streets, enhance crime fighting technology, support crime prevention initiatives, and provide training and technical assistance to help advance community policing. Other achievements include the following:

- To date, the COPS Office has funded the hiring of approximately 138,000 additional officers by more than 13,000 of the nation's 18,000 law enforcement agencies in both small and large jurisdictions.
- More than 800,000 law enforcement personnel, community members, and government leaders have been trained through COPS Office-funded training organizations and the COPS Training Portal.
- More than 1,000 agencies have received customized advice and peer-led technical assistance through the COPS Office Collaborative Reform Initiative Technical Assistance Center.
- To date, the COPS Office has distributed more than nine million topic-specific publications, training curricula, white papers, and resource CDs and flash drives.

The COPS Office also sponsors conferences, roundtables, and other forums focused on issues critical to law enforcement. COPS Office information resources, covering a wide range of community policing topics such as school and campus safety, violent crime, and officer safety and wellness, can be downloaded via the COPS Office's home page, <https://cops.usdoj.gov>.

Juvenile Runaways, part of the Problem-Oriented Guides for Police series, provides an overview of the problem of juvenile runaways, reviews risk factors, and poses a series of questions to help law enforcement agencies analyze their local juvenile runaway problem. Finally, it reviews responses to the problem from evaluative research and police practice. This second edition has been revised with additional information about Indigenous runaways.



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