At Risk for Sex Trafficking

Youth Who Run Away From Foster Care

What Do We Know From Existing Child Welfare Data? What Can Data Help Us Learn?

Risk factors for sex trafficking include:

- History of abuse, neglect, and trauma

- Low self-esteem and minimal social support

- Runaway and homeless youth[2]

More than 4,500 reported runaways from foster care on September 30, 2013.

Youth who run away from foster care are particularly vulnerable to sex trafficking and its dangerous health and mental health consequences.[1] To better address the needs of this high-risk population, the Preventing Sex Trafficking and Strengthening Families Act of 2014 (P.L. 113-183) introduced provisions for child welfare agencies to identify and provide services to victims of sex trafficking and youth at risk of becoming victims. These provisions include requirements for child welfare agencies to identify and report on youth who run away from foster care.

This snapshot examines what States and counties can learn from data in their child welfare case management systems and reported in the Adoption and Foster Care Analysis and Reporting System (AFCARS).[3,4] The snapshot can prompt conversations about youth who run away from State custody, how data can be used to learn more about this high-risk population, and how this knowledge can inform interventions.

Prevalence of Runaways From Foster Care

National AFCARS data identified 4,585 youth with a placement type of "runaway" on September 30, 2013. Runaways represented about 1 percent of all youth in care on that date and 6 percent of all 17-year-olds in care. In addition, AFCARS data indicated that about 1,100 youth exited care during Fiscal Year 2013 with "runaway" as their discharge reason.[5]

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[1] U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Administration for Children, Youth and Families. (2013). Guidance to States and services on addressing human trafficking of children and youth in the United States. Retrieved from **http://www.acf.hhs.gov/sites/default/files/cb/acyf_human_trafficking_guidance.pdf**

[2] See review of literature on risk factors in Institute of Medicine and National Research Council. (2013). Confronting commercial sexual exploitation and sex trafficking of minors in the United States. Washington, DC: The National Academies Press. Available from **http://www.nap.edu/catalog/18358/confronting-commercial-sexual-exploitation-and-sex-trafficking-of-minors-in-the-united-states**

[3] AFCARS is a national data collection and analysis system with case-level information from States on all children in foster care for whom State child welfare agencies have responsibility for placement, care, or supervision.

[4] This snapshot uses data from the Fiscal Year 2013 AFCARS file made available by the National Data Archive on Child Abuse and Neglect. These findings reflect a point-in-time count of youth in care on the last day of the most recent publicly available data set, September 30, 2013.

[5] Some duplication may exist between youth with "runaway" as a placement type and as a discharge reason.

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Other sources that look at data over longer periods of time suggest that the prevalence of runaways from foster care may actually be much higher. In one study of 17-year-olds in care in Illinois, Iowa, and Wisconsin, 46 percent stated that they had run away from care at some time. Nearly two-thirds of these youth had run away more than once.[6]

How can we continue to learn from the data?

While AFCARS data can be helpful in generating a snapshot about youth in out-of-home care, the data have limitations. As point-in-time measures, these data show runaways on a specific date. Additional data collection and analyses are needed to understand the prevalence and likelihood of running away at least one time. Trend data also can be informative for looking at changes over time.

Characteristics of Youth Who Run Away

Of the 4,585 youth identified by a placement type of runaway in AFCARS on September 30, 2013, most were older teens (62 percent were 16 to 17 years old). The data included some young adults who remained in care after the age of 18.[7] More runaways were girls (54 percent) than boys (46 percent). In addition, AFCARS data suggested that African American and Hispanic/Latino(a) youth were overrepresented among runaways compared to the rest of youth in care.

Most runaways from foster care were older teens.

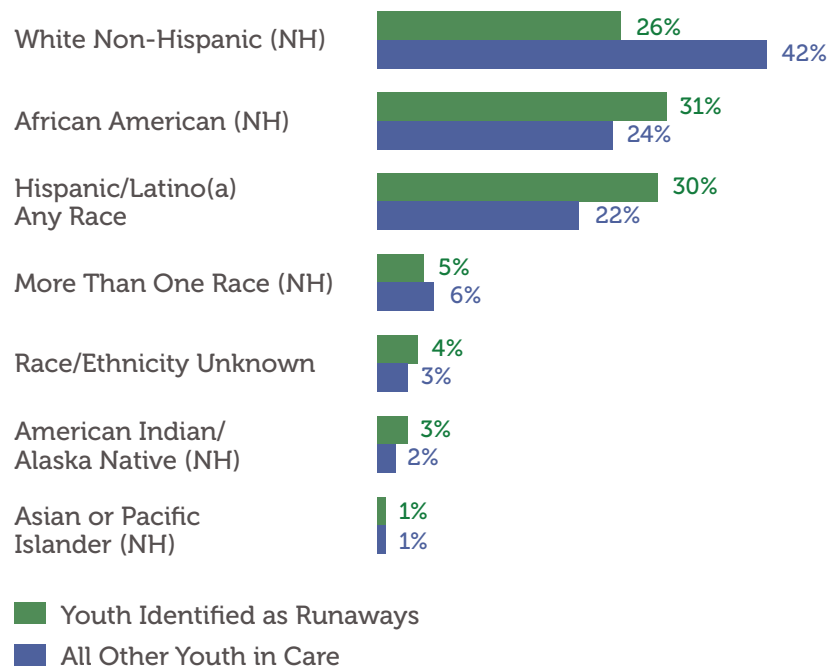| 12 and Younger	13–15 yrs	16–17 yrs	18–21 yrs
107	952	2,826	700
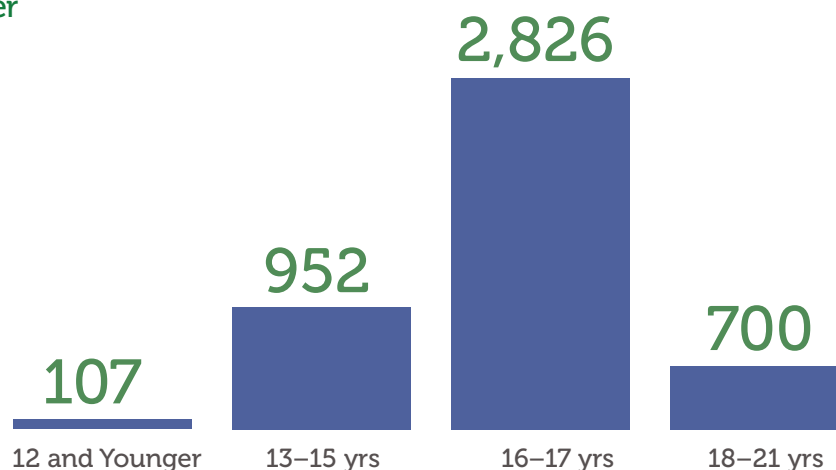
[6] Courtney, M., Terao, S., and Bost, N. (2004). Midwest evaluation of the adult functioning of former foster youth: conditions of youth preparing to leave State care, Chapin Hall at the University of Chicago. Retrieved from **http://www.chapinhall.org/sites/default/files/CS_97.pdf**

[7] Not all States report on youth older than age 18 in AFCARS. Youth who choose to extend their stay in foster care and those who age out of care are particularly vulnerable populations.

More girls than boys ran away.

Youth Identified
as Runaways   👨 46%   👩 54%

All Other Youth in Care   👨 52%   👩 48%
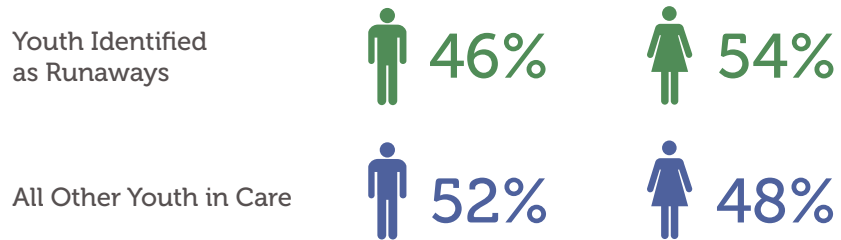
African American and Hispanic/Latino(a) youth were more often identified as runaways in AFCARS.

	Youth Identified as Runaways	All Other Youth in Care
White Non-Hispanic (NH)	26%	42%
African American (NH)	31%	24%
Hispanic/Latino(a) Any Race	30%	22%
More Than One Race (NH)	5%	6%
Race/Ethnicity Unknown	4%	3%
American Indian/ Alaska Native (NH)	3%	2%
Asian or Pacific Islander (NH)	1%	1%

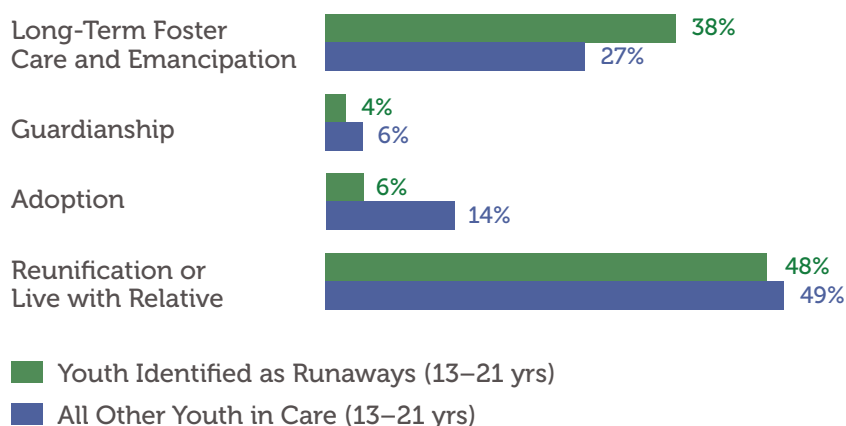🟩 Youth Identified as Runaways
🟦 All Other Youth in Care

How can we continue to learn from the data?

While national descriptive data can offer a picture of runaways across the country, similar data at State and local levels can be useful in developing targeted interventions and pointing to areas for further analysis. For example, data can be used to examine why certain groups are more heavily represented among youth who run away and understand specific service needs of those groups.
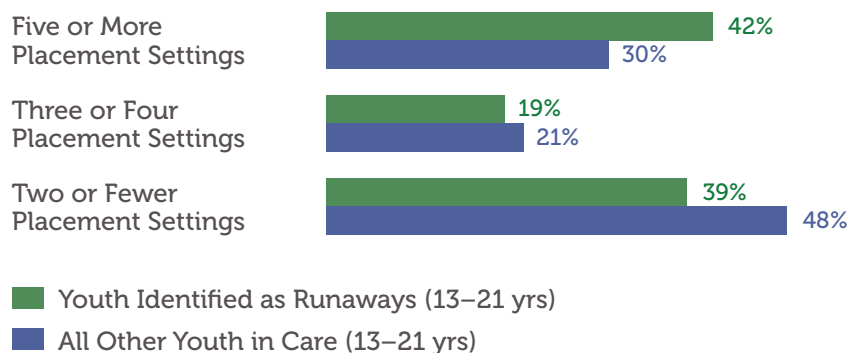
Placement Experiences of Youth Who Run Away

Compared with other youth in care ages 13 to 21, youth identified as runaways were less likely to have a case plan goal of adoption and more likely to have goals associated with "aging out" (emancipation and long-term foster care.[8]) The largest number of youth in both groups, however, had a case plan goal of reunification or living with a relative.

Nearly 40 percent of youth who ran away were expected to age out of care.

Case Plan Goal	Youth Identified as Runaways (13–21 yrs)	All Other Youth in Care (13–21 yrs)
Long-Term Foster Care and Emancipation	38%	27%
Guardianship	4%	6%
Adoption	6%	14%
Reunification or Live with Relative	48%	49%

■ Youth Identified as Runaways (13–21 yrs)
■ All Other Youth in Care (13–21 yrs)

Youth identified as runaways also differed from other youth in care in the number of placement settings in their current episode in care. Among 13- to 21-year-olds on September 30, 2013, 42 percent of youth identified as runaways had 5 or more placement settings compared to 30 percent of other youth in care.

Four out of 10 youth who ran away had five or more placement settings.

Placement Settings	Youth Identified as Runaways (13–21 yrs)	All Other Youth in Care (13–21 yrs)
Five or More Placement Settings	42%	30%
Three or Four Placement Settings	19%	21%
Two or Fewer Placement Settings	39%	48%

■ Youth Identified as Runaways (13–21 yrs)
■ All Other Youth in Care (13–21 yrs)

[8] AFCARS does not include a code for another/other permanent planned living arrangement. States map these goals to the existing categories of emancipation or long-term foster care.

How can we continue to learn from the data?

These data provide information on how older youth who run away are different from other older youth in care, and suggest relationships among permanency, stability, and running away from foster care. States may consider implementing more sophisticated statistical analyses and longitudinal studies that could be used to predict the likelihood of youth running away. Predictive models could then be used to support proactive intervention. Beyond looking at prior placement experiences and case goals, States and counties will want to know more about contributing factors, placement types with high prevalence of runaways, the runaway experience, and services that are most effective in addressing needs. Data-sharing agreements between child welfare agencies and other youth-serving agencies are instrumental for learning more about these populations.

Summary

Information collected by child welfare agencies and data reported in AFCARS may be useful for raising awareness at national, State, and local levels about the vulnerable population that runs away from out-of-home care. The data also can be used as a starting point for conversations about the characteristics and needs of this and other high-risk groups (e.g., youth who emancipate from care). Such conversations can be enriched by bringing together stakeholders (including youth, front-line workers, caregivers, and service providers) to interpret the data from their perspectives and explore in more depth what the numbers suggest.

Advancing the child welfare response to sex trafficking will require more sophisticated data and analysis. Using data at multiple levels can support both timely responses to youth who have run away and the development of long-term, proactive strategies for reducing runaways and preventing sex trafficking. For example, real-time local case data can be used for monitoring, tracking, and outreach. Longitudinal data analyses can support models that inform prevention initiatives.

In addition, use of multiple data sources[9] and data sharing between State and local partners will help better identify and assist vulnerable youth. For example, guidance from the Children's Bureau and the Family and Youth Services Bureau describes how child welfare agencies can work with runaway and homeless youth programs to identify and provide coordinated services to youth who have run away from foster care.[10] Data exchange agreements with local school districts and with juvenile and criminal justice systems can help States identify youth who are truant or charged with certain crimes that may indicate involvement in sex trafficking. Future products and services from the Child Welfare Capacity Building Collaborative will highlight how States and counties are using and sharing data in different ways to address sex trafficking and other important child welfare issues.

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[9] Other sources of information may include the Children's Bureau National Youth in Transition Database and the Family and Youth Services Bureau's runaway and homeless youth data.

[10] See ACYF-CB/FYSB-IM-14-1 at **http://www.acf.hhs.gov/programs/cb/resource/fysb-im1401**