Characteristics of Children Missing from Care

Several studies (Biehal & Wade, 2002; Courtney & Wong, 1996; Fasulo et al., 2002; Florida Department of Law Enforcement, 2002; Nesmith, 2002) have examined the demographic characteristics of children missing from care. The following examples provide a foundation for further study and discussion of establishing effective prevention of and intervention in a child's running behavior or unauthorized removal from care.

Nesmith (2002) compiled data on the individual, family, and child welfare characteristics that predict running away after initial placement in foster care intake and the timing of running once in care. Nesmith used a sample of foster youth from Wisconsin and Minnesota, ages 11 to 18, with at least three months in foster care. Significant findings include:

- Considerable evidence shows that running away is a common problem among adolescents in foster care.

- Runaways from foster care are at risk of a host of short- and long-term negative outcomes regarding their physical and emotional well-being and adjustment.

- Running away increases more sharply over time for males than for females.

- Native Americans are twice as likely to run away as whites. Among males, Native Americans are five times more likely to run away than whites.

- For girls, emancipation decreased the likelihood of running.
- For boys in long-term foster care, the risk of running was twice that of reunification.
- Youth with higher Child Behavior Checklist scores on externalizing behaviors were more likely to run.
- The addition of just one risk factor on a list of factors the study identified increased the likelihood of running by 8%.

Table 1 shows the demographics of the 393 Florida children identified as missing during the state's Operation SafeKids.

Courtney and Wong (1996) analyzed data on 8,625 children who spent time in out-of-home care (including foster homes, group homes, guardianship homes, and kinship homes) and who entered care before they were 17 years of age. They found that 6% of children ages 6 through 16 who had exited care did so by running away. The authors found that being older, female, and placed in a group home were strong predictors of runaway behavior. Compared with other placement types, placement in kinship care was associated with a significant reduction in the likelihood of running away from care.

Fasulo et al. (2002) found that 44% of 147 adolescents ran away at least once during SFC, and 22% ran permanently (i.e., were absent for at least two weeks). The odds of a girl running permanently were more than three times that of a boy, despite the girls' significantly shorter lengths of stay in SFC compared with boys'. The 14-, 15-, and 16-year-olds had the three highest permanent runaway rates—24%, 19%, and 48%, respectively. Ethnicity was not a significant predictor of runaway behavior.

Biehal and Wade (1999) found running from care to be a widespread phenomenon, especially, although not exclusively, in residential care. The risks young people encountered included involvement in offending, substance misuse, sleeping on the streets, and sexual exploitation, including prostitution. Patterns of absences, however, were complex. The researchers identified two different patterns, the friends

Table 1

Demographics of Operation SafeKids' Missing Children

Runaway Children	Endangered (19), Parental Abduction (31), Involuntary (4) Children
339 of 393 missing children	54 of 393 missing children
77% were female 60% were between ages 15 and 17 35% were age 17	77% were 11 or younger
10% were habitual runaway More than 90% of runaways remained in the state	46% were 5 or younger (under school age)
77% of runaways were located in the same county they ran from	43% were taken out of Florida

profile and the runaways profile, for those who left care to be with friends or family compared with those who ran away, the latter group tending to place themselves at greater risk (see Table 2).

Those children whose absences approximated the friends profile tended to be slightly older and were more likely to be in foster placements. These young people were more likely to leave care to spend time with friends or for family-centered reasons and were less likely to leave for placement-related issues. They were more likely to go alone, to stay away for a longer period of time, and to return voluntarily. They had fewer runs from care in their past and were less likely to have committed offenses while away from care.

Children whose absences approximated the runaway profile were likely to be younger and were more likely to be in residential settings. The majority of young people involved in runaway incidents left care due to placement-related or personal difficulties and had run away more often in their past. They were likely to leave with others and stay

Table 2

Profiling Missing Children

	FRIENDS	RUNAWAYS
Age		
Older	x	—
Younger	—	x
Placement type		
More in foster care	x	—
More in residential care	—	x
Absences in past year		
Lower	x	—
Higher	—	x
Length of time away		
Longer	x	—
Less	—	x
Immediate Reasons		
Time with friends/family-centered reasons	51%	17%
Placement centered reasons/personal difficulties	36%	75%
Ran Away Alone or with Others		
More likely alone	62%	—
More likely with others	—	53%
During Absence		
Stayed with friends/family	92%	49%
Slept rough	—	30%
Committed an offense while away	27%	68%
Nature of Return		
Voluntarily	62%	48%

Source: Biehal & Wade, 2002, p. 12.

away for shorter periods of time, and were less likely to return volun-
tarily. Although many were with friends or relatives, nearly a third of
this group slept on the streets. Two-thirds of those who were consid-
ered runaways engaged in criminal activity while they were away.

Those who went missing repeatedly were at risk of increased detachment from substitute caregivers and school and were more likely to have offended in the past. Thus, such absences from care are one element of a process whereby young people's links with adult society deteriorate and they become more likely to participate in criminal activity.

The longer term risks differed significantly for those who had first run from home compared with those first missing from substitute care. Those youth who had first run away from home were less likely to be attending school, more likely to have committed past offenses, and more likely to be involved in substance misuse. Overall, these youth had a greater degree of disaffection and detachment.

Habitual Running Behavior

No evidence exists of a progressive pattern in which successive runs will necessarily become more protracted and riskier. Wade and Biehal (1998) found that although those who run away more often have been exposed to a greater range of risks than those who only run away once or twice, this pattern of higher risk absence tended to have been apparent from the initial run. Because running way has no developing pattern, young people may be as much at risk of harm on the first unauthorized absence as after multiple runs. What matters is why they go, where they go, and whom they are with on any given occasion (Biehal & Wade, 2002). Any one episode can be unsafe regardless of the number of departures—no increased risk of harm is found with increased number of absences.

What is significant about a pattern of running is that it may contribute to destabilization of young people's lives and have implications for their transition to adulthood. Where young people run away repeatedly, the risk of detachment is at its most acute (Biehal & Wade, 1999). A pattern of leaving care increases the probability of detachment from adult authority, disengagement from school attendance and educational attainment, engagement in criminal activity, exploitation, and homelessness. Thus, it is very important to attend to the

first incident. Like most acts of initiation, the first voluntary, unauthorized absence from care is a strong predicator of future running away (Ross, 2001).

Racial and Ethnic Characteristics

Given the overrepresentation of children of color in the child welfare system, and in particular, those children in foster care, it would be natural to expect the perpetuation of disproportionality in children who go missing from care. To date, the research does not support such a finding. As previously mentioned, Fasulo et al. (2002) found that ethnicity was not a significant predictor of runaway behavior. Although earlier research had suggested such disparities, further analysis of the issue indicates that the origin of the apparent disproportionality could be attributed to the overrepresentation of African American children in out-of-home care (Biehal & Wade, 2002).

Ross (2001) found that the racial characteristics of those children who are habitual runners, when known, did not deviate significantly from the group as a whole. This finding was previously confirmed in a study of young runaways in Great Britain. Young people from black and ethnic minority communities run at similar ages to white children and have similar rates of repeat running (SEU, 2002). Thus, with two notable exceptions—the findings by Nesmith (2002) regarding higher running rates of Native American children in care and FY 2001 Adoption and Foster Care Analysis and Reporting System (AFCARS) data (DHHS, 2003a) that indicate a disparity between the percentage of Hispanic children who exited care as runaways (18.7%) and the overall percentage of Hispanic children exiting foster care (14.5%)— recent research has highlighted the similarity in running rates across different ethnic groups (Biehal & Wade, 2002).

In addition to the comparable rates of absences across diverse populations of children, Wade and Biehal (1998) showed no difference in the historical or incident-specific patterns of going missing for black and white young people. These findings indicate further comparabil-

ity in their reasons for leaving care, ways in which this behavior is initiated in the first instance, and the behavior and activities engaged in while away, regardless of the race or ethnicity of the child.

Nearly Emancipated Youth

Running away is the first step toward independent living for a high proportion of 16- and 17-year-old children in care. Of the 393 children under the supervision of the Department of Children and Families (DCF) and unaccounted for during Florida's Operation Safekids, 121 of the children (35%) were 17 or older, and 41 youth emancipated during the course of the initiative (Florida Department of Law Enforcement [FDLE], 2002). When researchers asked a sample of these youth why they ran, one-third responded that they did not want to be in the DCF system or a DCF placement facility. The perception of DCF caseworkers that the search and recovery of these children may actually hinder the children's progress is consistent with the views expressed by youth. Workers' sentiments and perceptions about children who run are likely to influence their decisionmaking and practice. Therefore, once the location and safety of these children is affirmed, the child welfare agency may not deem their recovery a high priority.

This practice, which is by no means unique to Florida, has subsequently led to the consideration of providing early emancipation or early transition into independent living for certain older runaways who are close to the age of emancipation and have demonstrated adequate levels of self-sufficiency.

It is important to recognize that policies and practices related to children aging out of care are in an evolutionary and innovative phase. Little is known with certainty pertaining to practices that respond to rather than prepare for the transitioning of youth. What is known is that although some youth are attracted to the idea of independence and will push to leave care, moving on is influenced by a number of "push" factors, including placement breakdown, limitations in the supply of resource homes, and problems in managing challenging behavior (Wade, 2003).

> *As part of adolescent development, kids individuate from parents, but who do kids in care individuate from? The system? Running away may be individuation, rebellion, from the system.*
>
> *—Andrea Nesmith, Researcher,*
> *Chapin Hall Center for Children at the University of Chicago*

Agencies, and the communities in which they reside, need a comprehensive range of services to provide young people with a safe and supported environment and with assistance to master the challenges in their lives that may affect their chances of making a successful transition to adulthood (Mitchell et al., 2002). Evidence suggests that it helps to work in partnership with youth to plan their leaving care. Proactively, workers can make preparations to optimize the ability of the young person to build and maintain relationships with others, develop his or her self-esteem, and acquire practical and financial skills and knowledge (Wade, 2003). Young people are unlikely to manage in adversity without a network of formal and informal supports. Awareness of future sources of support and how to access them is essential to survival. Thus, it remains unclear as to how best to intervene with unauthorized absences when older children run away as an attempt to break from the system.

In understanding the characteristics of children who go missing, it is important to acknowledge that the missing status of any one particular child may not be singular or static in nature. That is to say, it is feasible that children who go missing due to running away or abduction may also, either simultaneously or sequentially, be lost in care. This raises a host of questions regarding our ability to identify the magnitude of this phenomenon, those children who are vulnerable to multiple types of missing episodes, the risks associated with this vulnerability, and the interventions that are efficacious in the prevention of this phenomenon.