

Circumstances and Suggestions of Youth Who Run from Out-of-home Care

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Abstract

This study examined the preceding circumstances of youth that ran from out-of-home care. Youth offered suggestions for preventing future running episodes. Data was drawn from 111 case records of three county courts in southeastern Lower Michigan. Data were also drawn from four focus groups of youth living in out-of-home care (n=24). Circumstances that preceded youth running included female gender, African-American ethnicity, more restrictive placements, prior running episodes, and separations from siblings and children. Focus group youth expressed concerns about placement disruptions, rules, chores, differential treatment, loss of control, safety, and especially, feeling that “no one cares about me.” To prevent running, youth recommended caring adults, helping others, active roles in case planning, knowledge of resources, and maintaining family connections.

Introduction

Jillian, age 16, described running away from foster care to look for her nine-month-old son, Ethan. He was placed in a separate foster home because Jillian's home was not licensed for infants. Rick, age 14, reported coming home from school to learn that he was to move to a new foster care home the next morning. He angrily declared that he ran away from the foster care home that evening so that he could prevent “being moved around again.” Jillian, Ethan, and Rick are pseudonyms, but their stories are real.

In this study, youth described the circumstances that preceded their running behaviors, also known as being Absent Without Legal Permission (AWOLP). Since it is not always easy to identify the host of reasons that youth run from out-of-home placements, or the multiple reasons any particular youth becomes AWOLP, this study examines the individual and systemic circumstances that *precede* youth run-

ning episodes. The data is drawn from case files and focus groups of youth that ran from out-of-home care. Within the focus group discussions, youth offered suggestions for changes to prevent future running behaviors. The data do not include running from homes the youth shared with their parents or other kin. The focus is exclusively on AWOLP from out-of-home care, such as family foster care homes and residential placements.

Background Literature

Many youth run from out-of-home care and face many serious risk factors. Grayson (2002) reported that annually about 12,800 youth run from juvenile facilities, and 7,000 run from foster home placements. AWOLP youth comprise between 1.2 percent and 2 percent of the national foster care population (Children's Bureau, 2002, Shirk & Stangler, 2004).

Youth that become AWOLP encounter many hazardous situations. These include malnutrition, psychological disorders, HIV infection, sexual exploitation, unwanted pregnancies, drug and alcohol abuse, robbery, physical assault, attempted suicide, and becoming engaged in criminal behavior (Courtney, et al., 2005; Slavin, 2001). In addition to physical dangers, AWOLP youth are also at an increased risk of suffering from severe emotional disturbances. The rates of major depression, conduct disorder, and post-traumatic stress disorder are three times higher among runaway youth as their peers in the general population (Slavin, 2001).

AWOLP youth may acquire negative life-long consequences, such as less education toward future employment. To have any choice of career or future occupation, young people typically attend school long enough to graduate from high school or attain a GED (Bimler & Kirkland, 2001). Youth who enter care with a history of AWOLP tend to have poorer school attendance records than their fellow foster youths and

attend school less after placement (Finkelstein et al., 2004). School dropout rates for runaway youth are over 75 percent. Grayson (2002) found that youth with a chronic running history had a mean educational lifetime achievement of completing only the ninth grade. Bimler and Kirkland (2001) claimed that these youth lack the belief that school will help them.

Many youth who run from their foster care placements find themselves having to not only answer to the foster care system, but the juvenile justice system as well. The juvenile justice system has defined the acts of running and truancy as status offenses, and therefore, has classified these acts as a form of delinquency (Bimler & Kirkland, 2001; Downs, Moore, McFadden, Michaud, & Costin, 2004). Status offenses are acts that are only an offense because of the juvenile's age, and would not be offenses if committed by an adult (Downs, et al., 2004). Thirty six percent of all status offenses processed by the juvenile court were either related to truancy (20%) or running (16%) (Downs et al., 2004). More than half (59%) of all arrests involving girls are for nonviolent offenses, such as truancy, running away, and drinking (DeAngelis, 2003). DeAngelis (2003) said that delinquent youth fuel each other's acting-out behavior, yet most young people who commit crimes end up in group homes or juvenile detention centers with like peers.

Another concern affecting AWOLP youth is a lack of training in independent living skills. Many of the youth haven't received training in life skills because they ran before they formally aged out of the system (Shirk & Stangler, 2004). Running from foster care can lead to delinquency status that, in turn, renders youth ineligible for independent living program services until the delinquent act has been expunged from their records (Shirk & Stangler, 2004).

The act of running away in and of itself is a disruption; these interruptions are not conducive to building warm relationships (Nesmith, 2002). Youth who do not bond to a caring adult may come to believe that they are unwanted and unlovable. The result can include anger, aggression, shame, and depression (Seita & Brentro, 2002). An emotional "toughness" may ensue as compensation for feelings of powerlessness and vulnerability. When a youth runs from out-of-home care and into the streets, survival can mean gaining respect by intimidating others (Seita & Brentro, 2002).

Young people considered at risk need the same things as other children and adolescents, such as op-

portunities to learn and develop, guidance in making constructive choices, and help with specific problems or situations (Grobe et al., 2001). Foremost is the need to have the presence of caring, knowledgeable adults who will spend time with youth; these can include teachers, counselors, mentors, caseworkers, and community members (James & Jurich, 1999). Runaway youth often believe child welfare workers, the courts, teachers, administrators, and others are not interested in their well-being and success (Grobe et al., 2001).

Circumstances that precede a running episode

Recent literature highlights some circumstances that precede youth going AWOLP from their foster care placements, including youth characteristics, placement characteristics, separations, safety concerns, a lack of supportive services, and youths' perceived loss of control over placement decisions (Finkelstein et al., 2004; Slavin, 2001). Characteristics of youth who run away from out-of-home care include being between the ages of 10 and 17, and the odds of runaway behaviors increase with age (Courtney, et al., 2005; Grayson, 2002). Adolescence alone has been cited as a reason for AWOLP behavior (Finkelstein, et al., 2004). Resistance to authority, exploration of self-identity, and anxiety about one's social position all characterize the developmental process of coming into adolescence (Finkelstein, et al., 2004).

Youth of color are over-represented among youth who ran. Although minority youth make up only 32 percent of the youth population, they constitute 68 percent of youth living in long-term residential placement facilities (Downs, et al., 2004). The odds of running are three times greater for females than for males (Courtney, et al., 2005). AWOLP youth are also more likely than other foster youth to have had both of their parents' rights terminated (Courtney, et al., 2005).

Placement characteristics appear to be important. According to Nesmith (2002), there are four primary points at which running may transpire: (1) prior to the first placement, (2) at the time of removal from the biological home, (3) during placement, and (4) impending exit from a placement setting. Placement in a group home or residential program rather than a family foster home was associated with a higher likelihood of running (Courtney, et al., 2005).

Youth cited separations from friends and family as main concerns preceding running episodes. Youth in

foster care expressed particular concern about separations from siblings. *Voices* (2006) cites Aisha, 21, a foster care alumnae that stated, "We have just been removed from our parents; don't make us lose our brothers and sisters, too." (p. 3). In fact, many youth that run from out-of-home placement are not running away from home. Rather, they are running back to the homes of their family and friends.

Safety concerns can precipitate AWOLP incidents. Findings from previous studies suggest that youth who run from group homes and residential placements may be running due to exposure to victimization by their criminally active peers (Nesmith, 2002; Downs, et al., 2004). Young females who ran from placement reported that they were frequently victims of sexual abuse and may view running away as the only way to safety (Downs, et al., 2004). In large group homes, youth tend to be the same age and are surrounded by other youth with social and behavioral problems. In addition to facing problems with their peers, runaways who were placed in group home situations reported being treated with more coldness and authoritarian demeanor by the agency staff than was reported by youth who did not run away (Nesmith, 2002).

Some claim that a lack of supportive services contributes to increased risk of youth AWOLP episodes. The youth may lack drug and alcohol treatment, mental health services, employment assistance, protection from abuse and neglect, educational supports, and information about their living and legal situations (Courtney, et al., 2005; Etheridge, 2001; Folman, 1998; Shirk & Stangler, 2004).

Historically, foster care youth had minimal control over their personal circumstances. The unintended results of state and federal child welfare policies that focus on protection leave little room for youth to make decisions regarding their placements and service plans (Casey Family Programs, 2001). Folman (2003) stated, "The loss of control and predictability resulting from not having information leads to a situation that even when youth do have control over an event, they still feel helpless." Youth in the foster care and juvenile justice systems are often left in the dark about court processes, and these young adults may believe that their attorneys do not represent their interests (Folman, 2003). *Voices* (2006) cites Rebecca, 20:

Often our moves are without any warning to us and we can't understand why. Sometimes the move is so fast we can't even say goodbye to our

friends. We change schools so many times that we often can't graduate on time. We should be included in every decision made about us. Nothing about us without us! Make sure we are present at every court hearing and agency meeting . . . we are so accustomed to not being heard that many of us have stopped trying . . . (p. 2).

Suggestions for preventing future running episodes

The literature provided several recommendations for preventing youth from running behavior. These included minimizing separations from siblings, giving older youth opportunities for leadership and responsibility, having access to supportive services, ensuring that youth are actively engaged in their case planning, and ensuring that youth have at least one stable and caring adult (De Stefanis, & Apfel, 2001; Fiske, 2002; Grayson, 2002; Folman, 2003; Laursen, 2000; Lerner, Lerner, Kurtz, Lindsey, Jarvis & Nack-erud, 2000; Seita & Brendtro, 2002).

Separations from siblings should be avoided (Courtney et al., 2005). If siblings are separated, child welfare workers or the courts may be able to provide information to youth on how siblings can contact one another (Folman, 2003). Sarah, 19, described a need for ongoing sibling contact information, "So many of us are separated from our siblings, and we are moved so many times that we can't find them even after we leave care" (*Voices*, 2006, p. 3).

Leadership and responsibility for older youth in out-of-home care are recommended. For example, older foster care youth can serve as mentors to new children entering the system so as to reduce trauma among children entering care (Folman, 2003). When a young person's self worth is validated by helping others, he may feel that he is worth caring about (Laursen, 2000). Young people who are contributing members of their communities are less likely to exhibit rebellious and delinquent behavior and are more likely to become effective in coping with their own life challenges (Laursen, 2000).

Supportive services for youth in out-of-home care may increase positive developmental outcomes and decrease AWOLP incidence. These may include drug and alcohol treatment, mental health services, employment assistance, protection from abuse and neglect, and particularly, educational stability and support (Courtney, et al., 2005; Etheridge, 2001; Fol-

man, 1998; Shirk & Stangler, 2004). Folman (1998) explained that youth may need professional services for dealing with histories of trauma and, for some, the additional trauma of being removed from their family home or moved from one foster home to another. Youth in care for delinquent behavior need access to services that help youth develop skills for transitioning to adult living (Shirk & Stangler, 2004).

Active engagement of youth in case planning is suggested. When adolescents are given the power to be part of the decision-making process, they become more motivated to work on their case plans, and continue problem-solving processes (De Stefanis & Apfel, 2001; Lerner, et al., 2001). At the very least, youth in care need timely information about what to expect throughout their placement tenure (Folman, 1998; Lerner, et al., 2001).

Finally, the literature suggests that youth in care can benefit from having at least one stable and caring adult in their lives. Laursen (2002) pointed out that authentic relationships between children and adults in service programs are more important than specific techniques or treatment modalities. According to Seita and Brendtro (2002), building resiliency includes adults that hold high expectations of youth, acknowledge youth accomplishments, provide opportunities for young people to serve others, connect them with positive peers, and particularly, believe in the youth. People are more valuable than programs, and process is more important than outcomes (Kurtz, Lindsey, Jarvis, & Nackerud, 2000).

It is important to note that the body of literature herein represents much of the newly developing knowledge about circumstances preceding youth running behavior from out-of-home placement, particularly as perceived by the youth themselves. The phenomenon of youth who AWOLP from out-of-home care is much less studied than youth running from family homes. The voices of the youth who run from out-of-home care have only recently begun to be heard. This study is intended to help build on this formative knowledge base.

Methods

A mixed-method study design yielded data to answer two research questions. Question one asked, “*What kinds of circumstances precede youth running from out-of-home care?*” Question two asked, “*What are youth suggestions to prevent future running from out-*

of-home care?” Data about the circumstances of youth that ran from out-of-home care included quantitative court case review data and qualitative text data drawn from four focus groups of youth with at least one episode of running from out-of-home care. Data about youth suggestions for preventing future AWOLP incidents were drawn entirely from the focus groups.

Data about the circumstances preceding youth running behaviors were drawn from the court records of 111 youth with AWOLP histories. The youth case files were located within court systems of three urban and suburban counties of southeastern Lower Michigan. Case files were drawn from one month in one calendar year. The sample was intended to form a “snapshot” or point in time reference. Southeastern Lower Michigan was selected because the vast majority of Michigan AWOLP cases had been reported missing from these counties. This was a convenience sample as the selection was not randomized. However, more than 50% of the entire population of AWOLP cases in the three counties were surveyed so as to approach an entire population sample. Court records were chosen for analysis over foster care case records because court records are able to identify services and supports youth receive in both the foster care and juvenile justice systems. Many AWOLP youth are dual wards of the court.

The court records of AWOLP youth were reviewed with a case reading form developed by the primary investigator. Data recorded on the case reading form included youth age, gender, reason for placement in foster care, number of AWOLP episodes, and length of time in care before each episode of AWOLP. The case review process also collected information about whether youth were separated from their siblings, had a substance abuse history, and had a temporary or permanent placement. The data gathered from the court records were analyzed using descriptive statistics such as frequency analyses.

Qualitative data were gathered using focus groups. The youth that participated were receiving foster care services at the time of the interview. They were recruited from private providers of residential, foster care, and independent living services. Participation was voluntary. Youth had the right to answer or not answer any or all questions. A questionnaire was designed and administered to four focus groups, each containing a convenience sample of approximately six youth with AWOLP histories. Key readings from the literature helped to inform the focus group questions.

A total of 24 youth participated in the focus group discussions. The focus group facilitator asked group participants about the duration of their stay in out-of-home care, their placement types, and the number of placements they experienced. Youth participants described their perceived reasons for running. One question asked what made the place they were running to more desirable than remaining in care, and what happened when they ran. Finally, youth provided suggestions for preventing future running episodes. The structure of the focus group was flexible and flowed with the process of the group.

All of the responses from the youth were recorded using field notes. The focus group facilitator recorded responses from the youth as verbatim as possible. The responses from the focus groups were combined anonymously and analyzed into themes using an open, axial, and selective coding processes (Strauss & Corbin, 1998).

Findings

Research question one asked, “What kinds of circumstances precede youth running from out-of-home care?” Data to answer this question were drawn from case record reviews and focus group discussions.

Circumstances preceding youth running from out-of-home care

Case record data indicated that African-Americans and females run more frequently: The demographics of the case review sample make up individual circumstances. The mean age of the 111 youth was 13.5 years (SD = 5.58). Fifty-two percent were boys, but girls were more likely to run from out-of-home care (60%). African-American youth made up 40 percent of the foster care population, but represented 61 percent of all the youth who were AWOLP from foster care and residential placements.

Shorter durations in subsequent running episodes

Placement characteristics described circumstances preceding running episodes. Youth were more likely to become AWOLP from more restrictive out-of-home placement environments, such as a public shelter or private institution, than other forms of less restrictive placement options. (See Figure 1). The range of AWOLP occurrences were one to eight times, with the mean being 1.65. Youth AWOLP episodes increased

with the number of placements. With each AWOLP episode, the data suggested that the average time in care before a subsequent AWOLP occurrence decreased. (See Figure 2). The average time in care before the first AWOLP occurrence was 24.4 months. At episode four, the average time in care before the next AWOLP episode was just a few days (0.19 months).

Separations and substance abuse services

Separations from siblings and children were noted in the case records. Over 60 percent of the youth that became AWOLP were separated from either a sibling or their own children.

The youth appeared to need some additional supportive services. Over 80 percent of the youth were placed in foster care because they were neglected by their birth families, 40 percent were victims of abuse, and 21 percent were placed in foster care because of their own behaviors, including substance abuse issues, truancy, or delinquency behaviors. More than a third of the court records indicated that the young people had substance abuse issues. Most were not enrolled in substance abuse services.

Circumstances preceding youth running from out-of-home care—Focus group data

The 24 focus group participants also described circumstances that preceded AWOLP incidents. This included data about youth and placement characteristics. Ten males and fourteen females participated in the focus groups. They ranged from 14 to 18 years of age.

The length of time in care for focus group youth ranged from 8 months to approximately 10 years, with the average length of stay being 5 years. All of the youth reported multiple placements. The longest time that a youth indicated he or she was AWOLP was eight months. In this instance, the youth reported choosing to turn himself in. He said that he felt that he would still be truant at the time of the interview if he hadn't. Youth indicated that when they were AWOLP, they resided in a variety of placements, including their biological home, extended family member's home, boyfriend or girlfriend's home, and staying on the streets. The overwhelming majority stayed with friends. During periods of AWOLP, several of the youth stated that they had engaged in illegal behavior such as stealing and substance abuse.

Disruptions, rules, chores, and differential treatment

The types of placements the youth described experiencing included “youth home” (i.e., detention), family foster care, and residential care. Often the youth were not clear as to why they had experienced a change in placement. They appeared to be especially concerned about disrupted relative foster care placements.

One thing the youth were clear about was their discomfort with what they perceived as overly excessive and restrictive rules. A youth stated, “It feels like everyone is trying to control me [state department, private agency, court, and foster parents]. There are too many rules and restrictions.” A teen in residential treatment complained, “They make me go to bed at 8:30 p.m. when the 5-year-olds go to bed.” Another agreed:

Foster parents are overly strict, placing excessive rules on us. If you are five minutes late, the foster parents make a big deal about it and you are punished. We understand that all kids have to have rules, but the rules are much more restrictive for foster youth.

Another circumstance that was reported to precede running included unfair practices in the foster home, such as excessive chores. One said, “I ran away because I was tired of being their [foster parents] little Cinderella.”

Additionally, youth said that they were treated differently from the biological children of foster parents, i.e., “Foster youth are treated differently from ‘regular kids.’” Another youth talked about his inability to get a driver’s license when biological children were able to do so:

Foster kids aren’t allowed to get a driver’s license. The ability to get a driver’s license at the same time as your peers is important. Even if you can get your worker to agree to pay for the driver’s education class, foster parents won’t let you drive their car so that you can get your mandatory training hours in. Without getting the driving hours in, you can’t get your driver’s license.

Separation from family members and loss of control over decisions

Youth reported that they were greatly affected by separations from their siblings. One said, “I missed my siblings and I shut down; I got in trouble for being in that state [of mind].” Another worried, “I miss my

family, and not being able to see them was used as a punishment.” This meant the youth was unable to see his family as a punishment for an egregious behavior in the placement.

Several young mothers offered the most poignant examples of separation circumstances preceding AWOLP:

I have a five-year-old daughter, and when I was pregnant with my daughter, I was forced to go to [residential program for pregnant and parenting teens]. I didn’t want to go; I hated every bit of it. I ran away from there after a few months. When my daughter was born, she was taken from me because the State had no placement to place me and my daughter together at the time, so they placed me in a juvenile detention facility...I had to fight to get my daughter back in my custody.

Another young mother commented, “I went from foster home to foster home and to different types of programs. They [child welfare agency] should have a placement for mothers and their children.”

The youth repeatedly complained of having limited or no control over their lives. They reported a lack of freedom of movement and decision making. One youth said:

People do not trust you. I don’t care if my parents’ rights to me were terminated. I still want to see my parents. I’m not the same little girl any more, and if my mom was going to try to do something to hurt me, I would leave. The system doesn’t trust me to make good decisions and to take care of myself . . . the judge hearing my case told me that if I go to my mother’s house, she could lose custody of my younger brothers and sisters.

Safety issues

Some of the youth in residential placements made the following remarks when asked why they were running from placement: 1) “I was scared I was going to get jumped”; 2) “The girls and boys always want to fight”; 3) “Being restrained is scary and painful”; and 4) “Other residents steal your stuff.” Safety issues were brought up by youth in non-relative family foster care homes as well. One described being returned to an abusive foster home: “My foster parents abused me, so I ran the streets. When I was found, I was returned to

the same foster home.” A second youth agreed:

My foster parents had their license, but the foster home was not fit for a child. I had foster parents that were into drugs. I had foster care parents who had their own [biological] children headed down to court. They were into drugs at the age of 10. I had to run away before my caseworker would move me to my other placement [residential] where I stayed at.

“No one cares about me.”

The most frequently repeated preceding circumstance to running from out-of-home care was, “No one cares about me.” One youth said, “Workers act like they care about you, but they don’t.” A second youth echoed, “It’s hard to trust . . . when your worker changes every few months.” These youth said human services professionals were disrespectful of their need for privacy, such as, “During parent or family visits, we are not given privacy. Workers stand around listening to everything being said, and they write it all down. It’s bad enough we are not with our parents. Can’t we get some privacy?”

Many said foster parents did not care for the youth either: “My foster parents don’t care about me; they act one way when my worker visits, but when the worker leaves, they go back to ‘normal’ behavior. My foster parents don’t care what happens to me. They are going to get their money regardless.” Some mentioned they were aware that foster parents wanted “little kids.” One said this was because, “they can make the little kids do whatever they want, and older kids don’t put up with the same treatment.”

Within the theme of “no one cares about me,” youth stated that they are “stereotyped” by public welfare agencies, private agencies, courts, and foster parents. Several said that “everyone” had “low expectations” of them. One said that professionals assumed foster care youth would “lie, steal, drop out of school, use drugs, and get pregnant.” One of the youth was emphatic that she was determined to “get into college to show them that they were wrong about me.”

Suggestions of youth for preventing future running episodes

Question two asked, “What are youth suggestions to prevent future running from out-of-home care?” Many of the suggestions offered by the youth were the inverse of the preceding circumstances. Youth recommended *fewer* placement disruptions, minimizing

changes in foster care workers, and ensuring that those who work with foster care youth do NOT have low expectations of foster care children. They recommended that child welfare professionals and court advocates listen and care for them. They asked for more privacy and respect. One simple suggestion for professionals was, “Have the foster care worker interview us alone and not in front of our foster parents, so we can be truthful about the current situation.” They said foster children should be treated as well as biological siblings in family foster care. They wanted to be able to get a driver’s license.

Youth stated that they were unlikely to leave a good foster home but that a good home would include foster parents that cared about them. One youth gave a specific example: “Foster parents need to act more like parents; they should go to parent teacher conferences and treat us like we really are a part of their family. We shouldn’t have to feel like if we do anything wrong, they are going to send us away.”

However, the most intense recommendations of the focus group youth were for someone to care about them, more input into their case planning, increasing their awareness of resources for preparing for the future, and keeping them with their siblings and children.

“I want someone to care about me.”

Youth said they needed to hear messages from foster parents, the courts, their child welfare workers, teachers, coaches, and other service providers that they are “cared about.” Several of the youth made comments about how the system could better connect with them to make them feel cared about. One said, “I just want to have someone who cares about me and who I can lean on . . . there just hasn’t been enough emotional support.” Another youth suggested professionals provide more positive feedback comments: “I wish the judge would compliment me instead of putting me down.” A youth in family foster care gave a positive example of a caring placement:

My foster parents that I live with now really care. I will be able to stay with them until I’m done with college. I plan to go to college and get good grades . . . and get my own place to stay.

Youth advised foster parents to be more tolerant: “We are going to make mistakes. Work with us. If your foster child acts out, it is just anger. We can’t

always control it. Give us another chance when we mess up.” A young woman dreamed of nurturing: “I’ve never been pampered . . . I just want to be pampered once.” Some youth noted that peers are important. They commented, “It’s important to have the right friends” and “I would really like to know other foster kids and just spend time with someone that I don’t have to explain my life to.” One recommended activities for foster children, citing: “Being involved in sports has helped me a lot.” A second youth gave instructions for more support and respect by all: “Freedom—treat us like we are normal.”

Several youth recommended more support and understanding from community members due to the “big stigma of being a foster kid.” A peer agreed:

I think the community should take more time to understand what kinds of problems foster children go through. The community needs to participate more. We need role models so we can get through our problems...not just bury them. I want the community to be a big family for me so I have someone to run to.

Opportunities to help others

Youth in this study expressed the desire to have the opportunity to provide support to other kids that were coming through the system.

I want to help them [other kids] keep their eye on what is ahead and not get brought down by what they are going through right now. I want to warn others that they have to face the fact that they are already stereotyped and people don’t think they are going to make it. They need to not make it worse. I need to warn them not to do things that will fulfill the belief that foster kids are losers.

One young woman said, “I’m really proud of what I’ve accomplished, and I want to share what I’ve learned with other foster kids.”

“Having an active role in my case plan”

Many of the youth stated that participation in the focus group was the first time that they had ever been asked by anyone to tell what they think. They expressed the desire to “do this more.” A focus group participant recommended having youth talk to influential decision makers: “I want to talk in front of

the big people. The ones that can actually change the system.” Another concurred, “We want to have people listen to us about what we need, and not just tell us what we need.”

The youth wanted an active role in their case planning and decision making. They talked about the need for autonomy, independence, and age-appropriate freedoms.

“I need to know about resources that I’m eligible for.”

Many of the young people said that they were not informed about available resources that they could have taken advantage of. They explained that access to resources was critical to being able to move to adult living. One was looking ahead: “I’ll have a job and work really hard to take care of myself.” In order to do so, other youth pointed out a need for information and skill development such as: 1) “I would like to know more about my rights, and what things I’m entitled to so I can advocate for myself”; 2) “We really need to know what resources are available in the community. I struggled so hard without knowing that there was someone that could have helped if I had only known”; 3) “Independent living classes can be good if they are available . . . we don’t have any independent living classes to go to”; 4) “TIP [Tuition Incentive Program] and other things like that have been helpful, but I don’t think that everyone knows about them”; 5) “I would really like to learn to budget and to cook, but I can’t afford to pay for classes; and 6) “[We need] stress education. We don’t want to slide through the cracks.

“Being able to stay connected to my family”

Youth strongly recommended connections with their biological families. One described, “Siblings are the only thing we have. Keep us together.” A youth with a sibling in the same foster care home noted, “My brother and I are in care together, and it really helps to have each other.” When siblings were not placed in the same home, a youth suggested, “Help support sibling bonds when children are separated in foster care.” A young mother said, “Teen parents love their children. Please don’t separate us from our children. We want to care for them.” Similarly, youth suggested that there be “more visitations with our parents because it’s so hard to be away from them.” One youth addressed the bigger picture. He wanted the systemic

biological versus placement family tensions to stop: “The bio family should be given a chance. Allow visits. Work with each other, instead of against each other.”

Discussion and Summary

Case record and focus group data answered the research questions of this study. Circumstances that preceded youth running included female gender, African-American ethnicity, more restrictive placements, prior running episodes, those who had their parents' rights terminated, and separations from siblings and children. Focus group youth expressed concerns about preceding circumstances of placement disruptions, excessive rules, chores, differential treatment, loss of control over decisions, safety risks in out-of-home care settings, and especially, feeling that “no one cares about me.” To prevent running, the youth recommended caring adults, helping others, engaging actively in case planning, increasing their knowledge of resources and supports, and maintaining family connections.

The quantitative and qualitative data of the study largely supported each other. The qualitative data was particularly rich in providing a sense of youth perspectives of out-of-home placements. The findings aligned well with the newly emerging literature of youth AWOLP behaviors. However, it is noted that youth made no mention of educational supports and little mention of behavioral health services other than “stress education.”

The findings appear to demonstrate the value of having the same foster care worker follow a youth to the extent possible. There is a critical need for keeping youth connected with mentors, extended families, and others that are important to them. Licensing processes need to be reconfigured to keep youth with their siblings and especially, with their young children. Concerns about physical safety in out-of-home care should be addressed immediately. Youth living in out-of-home care should be interviewed privately and listened to. They should receive positive feedback for tasks well done. Clearly, youth need to have access to adult transition programs, including those served by

the juvenile justice system. Programs for foster care youth should also be available to youth in the juvenile justice system. More enduring out-of-home placements mean investing time and fiscal resources in well trained and compensated foster care parents, residential staff, and other family and community services.

Components of the child welfare system need to be more seamless and youth-focused. Youth could help set goals and the plan to achieve those goals. Positive assets, skills, strengths, and competencies of youth should be built into the assessment and planning. As the youth suggested, there needs to be more coordination and cooperation among biological families and foster families. Other child support services, such as substance abuse treatment, should be similarly coordinated and available. For youth that run from out-of-home care, more coordination among juvenile justice and child protection services systems is recommended.

It is important to note that this study has a number of limitations. These include a non-randomized sampling process, geographic limitations, and self-report data subject to some verification for youth court case data and no verification for focus group data. However, it is also important to also recognize that more than 50% of the sample for three entire counties was reviewed, and four iterative focus groups of youth may be an acceptable sample size for qualitative data collection. It is likely that the data is fairly representative for the three counties of southeastern Lower Michigan. It is not possible to generalize the data to the entire population of all youth that ran from out-of-home placement. Certainly, more research is recommended with larger samples and rigorous designs.

Given the extent of emphases in the literature, human growth and development, and these findings, it *is* likely that helping youth in out-of-home placement acquire stable, supportive networks of caring adults appears to be of utmost importance. Perhaps then youth in out-of-home placement can spend more time developing their positive potential and less time running away. Perhaps their voices will begin to be heard and their input solicited. For Jillian, Ethan, and Rick, this could make all the difference. ©

Figure 1. Types of placements of youth prior to an AWOLP episode (N= 111)

Location of Incident	Number of Occurrences	Percent of Occurrences
Own home	3	2%
Relative placement	26	12%
Other legal guardian	3	2%
Adoptive home	1	.5%
Foster Home	20	9%
Semi-independent Living	10	4%
Public shelter*	55	26%
Detention	2	1%
Jail	1	.5%
Private institution	71	33%
AWOLP before placement	20	9%

Current Michigan shelter policies mandate that youth need permission from a custodial parent to utilize shelter resources. A custodian of a foster youth is the state appointed child welfare agency. This can cause a delay in the process or result in permission being denied to enter the shelter (Scott, 2004). This may account for the reason why so many foster youth ran from this type of placement.

Figure 2. Length of Time in out-of-home care before each AWOLP incident (n= 111)

Episode	Mean (months)	Standard Deviation
1	24.4	32.94
2	4.64	16.11
3	2.81	14.12
4	.19	1.66

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