



Why youth run: Assessing run function to stabilize foster care placement

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ABSTRACT

Youth running away from foster care placements is a serious problem that can significantly impact health and well-being. Given the severity of the problem, it is important to identify reasons youth run away because this information could help to identify effective intervention strategies. This paper describes results from focus groups conducted with child welfare providers, educational personnel, and youth with histories of running away from foster care placements. The qualitative analysis revealed that youth's motivation for running, or the function of running away, fell into two general categories: running "to" something (friends, activities, etc.) or running "away" from something (aversive placements, etc.). Suggestions are provided for how understanding the reason for running away could help in determining successful prevention and intervention strategies that result in stable placements.

1. Introduction

Approximately 1.6 million to 2.8 million youth run away or are evicted by their caregivers each year in the United States (Greene, Ringwalt, Kelly, Iachan, & Cohen, 1995; SAMHSA, 2004). Youth in the foster care system are twice as likely to exhibit runaway behavior as youth of the same age in the general population (Sedlak, Finkelhor, Hammer, & Schultz, 2002). National foster care statistics indicate that approximately 427,910 youth were in foster care as of September 30, 2015 (United States, 2016). Youth involved in the child welfare system experience multiple risk factors and are among the most vulnerable youth in the United States. Although the foster care system is designed to ensure the safety and well-being of youth in its care, these youth often engage in challenging behaviors that place their safety and well-being at risk (Allen & Hendricks, 2013; Stoltzfus, Baumrucker, Fernandes-Alcantara, & Fernandez, 2014; Taussig, 2002), such as running away. Regional and county studies of foster care runaway behavior indicate that a sizable number of teenage youth have run away from their placement at least once and many have run away multiple times (Courtney, Dworsky, Piliavin, & Zinn, 2005; Pergamit & Johnson, 2009). For example, a 2004 multi-state study found that 46% of 17-year-olds in foster care had run away at least once (Courtney, Terao, & Bost, 2004). Relatedly, studies from Illinois and Los Angeles show that 33–36% of youth in foster care run away more than once (Courtney

et al., 2004; Pergamit & Johnson, 2009).

The negative outcomes associated with running away from foster care are many and may have grave long-term consequences for youth. Exposure to alcohol and drugs, criminal activity, sexual victimization, trafficking, and sexually transmitted diseases; as well as the risk of arrest and incarceration are among the most common outcomes (Biehal & Wade, 1999; Courtney et al., 2005; Hyde, 2005). Running away also increases school absences, interrupts links to positive community supports such as friends or church, and can disrupt foster care placement stability. Further, Courtney et al. (2005) found that over one-third of youth in foster care had not received a high school diploma nor a GED, compared to fewer than 10% of their same age peers not in foster care. Although educational statistics are not available specific to youth in foster care who run away, it could be presumed that these youth would fair much worse given they are often not attending or progressing in school when on the run. Given the severity of risk associated with runaway behavior and the prevalence of youth who engage in running away, it is important to develop a thorough understanding of why youth in foster care run away and to use that understanding in the development of solutions to help stabilize youth placement.

This paper will present focus group findings on why youth run away from foster care placements. Specifically, the paper will discuss focus group findings from a study funded by the U.S. Department of Education's Institute of Education Sciences (IES) for the purpose of

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developing an intervention model for youth in foster care who run away from placements.¹

The scope of this paper is focused on the specific findings around why youth run away, and provides an in-depth analysis of this topic from multiple stakeholder perspectives. Although the study obtained possible interventions that could respond to many of the reasons for runaway behaviors, a comprehensive discussion of these interventions themselves falls outside the focus of this article.

Focus groups were conducted with school and child welfare administrators, school and child welfare direct-care staff, and youth/young adults who had run away from foster care as youth while being placed in two counties in Florida. These counties represent both rural and urban areas. The purpose of the IES study was to develop a functional assessment based intervention aimed to reduce the number of days youth in foster care are on the run, increase placement stability, and improve youth educational outcomes. Functional assessments have been utilized since the 1970's with the purpose of systematically investigating and understanding the environmental contingencies that may be responsible for behavior, both aberrant and adaptive behavior (Carr, 1977; Iwata, Dorsey, Slifer, Bauman, & Richman, 1994). The term "function" is used to describe the reason or underlying cause of behavior. This paper will provide a function-based framework for understanding why youth run away from foster care and discuss why linking run function to interventions can help improve placement stability and youth outcomes.

2. Background

2.1. What we know

Studies of runaway behavior often group youth who run away from foster care together with youth in the general population who run away from home, are asked to leave their homes (i.e., thrown away youth), or are homeless (Fernandes-Alcantara, 2013). Additionally, there is a paucity of standardized definitions of runaway behavior and of standardized methodology for counting youth who run away (Fernandes-Alcantara, 2013). Within the literature on youth runaway behavior there are three general themes that emerge: (a) papers focused on descriptive and demographic characteristics of youth who run away (Hammer, Finkelhor, & Sedlak, 2002; Sanchez, Waller, & Greene, 2006), (b) papers that describe negative outcomes associated with youth runaway behavior (Biehal & Wade, 1999; Courtney et al., 2005; Hyde, 2005), and (c) papers that describe predictors of youth runaway behavior (De Man, 2000; Hammer et al., 2002; Thompson & Pollio, 2006). However, it appears that the literature is limited in two main ways. First, there is a lack of research on the function or specific reason for youth runaway behavior and second, there is also currently little research that focuses on interventions to prevent or reduce runaway behavior for youth in foster care. Research on run function or reasons why youth run away could provide information that would greatly assist in the development of interventions to address runaway behavior.

2.2. Defining running away

The Congressional Research Service notes the lack of standardized definitions for runaway behavior (Fernandes-Alcantara, 2013). For the purpose of this paper, running away is specific to foster care and is defined as an event in which a youth, who is in the custody of a social services agency licensed by the state, disappears, voluntarily or involuntarily, without the consent of the caregiver in whose care the youth has been placed (Administration for Children's Services, 1992).

¹ Development of an intervention model to improve educational outcomes of youth in foster care by decreasing runaway behavior. Grant # R324A110180, Institute of Education Sciences. Kimberly Crosland, PI.

This definition is intended to include youth placed in kinship care, foster homes, therapeutic foster care, group homes, independent living facilities, and other residential placement by a social service agency.

2.3. Theoretical framework

The existing literature suggests that there is not a clear theoretical framework for understanding runaway behavior. This paper will propose functional assessment as a useful theoretical framework for understanding characteristics, negative outcomes, and predictors of runaway behavior and will provide a strong basis for intervention. This theoretical perspective is derived from behavior analytic principles, including operant learning theory (Cooper, Heron, & Heward, 2007; Skinner, 1953).

Applied behavior analysis involves determining the functional relations between socially significant behavior and its controlling variable (s), an approach that can contribute to the development of an effective technology of behavior change (Baer, Wolf, & Risley, 1968; Cooper et al., 2007). The functional approach to behavior analysis first calls for a functional behavior assessment, which refers to a range of strategies used to identify the environmental variables (i.e., antecedents and consequences) that control and maintain a specified behavior (Horner, 1994; Iwata et al., 1994; Repp & Horner, 1999). A functional approach then uses the information obtained via the functional behavior assessment to develop an intervention plan tailored to meet the needs of the individual and address the environmental conditions surrounding the behavior. Two of the primary outcomes of a functional assessment for runaway behavior would be: (a) identifying the factors that maintain the runaway behavior, which leads to inferences about the function of the behavior; and (b) identifying the antecedent conditions (events, situations) that help predict when runaway behavior is more or less likely to occur. The current study aimed to gather information via focus groups related to these two outcomes in order to develop a more thorough understanding of runaway behavior exhibited by youth in foster care.

3. Methods

3.1. Participants

A total of 81 individuals participated in 14 different focus groups. These groups included perspectives from child welfare service providers, educational service providers, and youth in the child welfare system. Table 1 provides a breakdown of these groups and participants.

3.2. Screening and recruitment

Having the most appropriate participants involved in the focus groups was a top priority. For the administrative/supervisory and frontline/direct care staff focus groups, agency and school liaisons used screening forms to identify individuals who met criteria for inclusion in each specific group. The two inclusion criteria for these groups were that a participant had specific knowledge or direct involvement/experience (past or present) in working with youth in the child welfare system or school system who had a history of runaway behavior, and/or had indirect involvement with youth in the child welfare system or school system who had runaway. For the youth focus groups, partner child welfare agencies used screening forms that were designed collaboratively with the research team to screen youth for inclusion into the various focus groups. The inclusion criteria for youth focus groups were that youth were willing to participate, had engaged in at least one or more run episodes within the past year, and were in one of the designated age group categories. To ensure that a representative sample of different types of youth with a history of running were included in the study, additional efforts were made to select youth for each of the age groups who were diverse in terms of the number of run episodes,

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