



What makes youth run or stay? A review of the literature on absconding



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ABSTRACT

This literature review focuses on why youth abscond from out-of-home care. It found that absconding behavior is common in out-of-home care settings, moreover the risk and harm associated with absconding behavior is considerable to both the absconder and society. Second, it is important to consider individual, familial and contextual factors that surround a young person when attempting to understand absconding behavior. What's more, none of these factors should be considered in isolation, as each factor continually exerts influence on each young person. Thus, in order to most effectively understand the factors at play when young people abscond, it is recommended that multiple avenues of their environment should be considered. Understanding absconding behavior is a key first step in order to reduce rates of absconding, and ultimately to prevent its occurrence. There is a need for international research to explore absconding, its causes and possible solutions.

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1. Introduction

The purpose of this literature review is to provide an in-depth overview of the most recent literature on the reasons why young people (children and adolescents) abscond from out-of-home care. For the purpose of this review ‘absconding’ refers to the behavior in which young people run away from out-of-home care, and out-of-home care is used to encompass several different types of care including, individual and group foster care, residential care and residential treatment settings (see [Appendix A](#) for a full definition of these different settings). These broad definitions were selected in an attempt to appropriately capture the variety of absconding populations evident in existing literature. Over the past decade absconding has commonly been referred to as ‘elopement’; ‘running away’; ‘going missing’; and ‘Absence Without Leave (AWOL)’ ([Burford, 2006](#); [Eisengart, Martinovich, & Lyons, 2007](#); [Finkelstein, Wamsley, Currie, & Miranda, 2004](#); [McIntosh, Lyons, Weiner, & Jordan, 2010](#)); these terms will be used throughout this review interchangeably.

There is strong evidence to corroborate the multitude of problems that result when young people abscond from out-of-home care. Firstly, it is important to acknowledge that there are high costs directly associated to youth who abscond from care. For example, there is a risk of harm to the absconder not only at the time of their absconding episode but also in the future, as they are likely to have poorer outcomes than non-absconders. In addition, there is a direct cost and negative impact to staff members, family and other carers who surround this group of young people ([Finkelstein et al., 2004](#)). Secondly, there are considerable economic costs for society alongside additional costs such as time and resources spent when youth abscond ([Blissett et al., 2009](#)). As a result of these high costs youth who abscond from out-of-home care are considered a high need group. Thirdly, it is important to note that existing literature on absconding behavior is diverse, and has been approached in a number of different ways. As a result, one weakness in the current literature is a lack of a thorough, systematic and consistent evidenced-based approach that explores why young people abscond from out-of-home care. Thus, in order to reduce and ultimately prevent absconding behavior, it is first necessary to seek to understand what makes these young individuals abscond from out-of-home care and what makes them stay. Following on from this, it is then possible for interventions to be tailored in order to reduce the rates of absconding behavior. The fundamental purpose of this review is to develop an understanding of the factors involved when considering why youth abscond from out-of-home care. Ultimately, the overarching goal of this research is to reduce rates of absconding and to improve overall outcomes for young people in out-of-home care, as they constitute a high risk and high need group.

This review will first provide an overview of the prevalence of absconding behavior and the impact of this behavior on young people.

Secondly, an overview of the reasons why youth abscond from care will be explored, with particular focus on the risk and protective factors found to lead to, or alternatively reduce and prevent absconding behavior. Where relevant, this review will consider any methodological limitations of the studies discussed, and will provide clinical implications and directions for future research. The literature included in this review is from the past 20 years, except where a study is considered to be especially important. The following databases were used to find literature: Eric, Google Scholar, ProQuest, PsycEXTRA, PsycINFO, PubMed and Scopus.

2. Absconding

2.1. Prevalence

There is evidence to suggest that youth within the care system are significantly more likely to abscond than youth who are not; moreover, youth who have been in the care system are overrepresented in populations of absconders ([Attar-Schwartz, 2013](#); [Biehal & Wade, 1999](#); [Mitchell, Rees, & Wade, 2002](#)). For the purposes of this review, youth who comprise the care system include all young persons who are temporarily residing in one of the following: individual family foster care, family foster care with treatment, specialized foster care, residential/group settings, residential/group treatment settings (with and without a family structure) and residential/group treatment setting/placements.

A common experience for youth who have been within a care system is disruption of their living arrangements, which is often the result of reported neglect or abuse, or a chaotic family environment. Considering the circumstances that youth within the care system experience, it is not surprising that they have higher rates of absconding than general populations of youth ([Courtney & Zinn, 2009](#)). There are two alternative paths that are usually taken when attempting to measure the presence of absconding behavior. Firstly, studies locate young people in homeless shelters and measure the percentage of these youth who have previously absconded from out-of-home care. Such measures generally reveal that a small to medium number of young people in shelters have absconded from care ([Courtney et al., 2005](#)). Second, studies use populations of youth in existing residential settings and measure the percentage of youth who abscond, which typically result in greater percentages of absconding being identified ([Courtney et al., 2005](#)). Both sources of information are useful and should be considered. However, researchers tend to utilize populations of youth from homeless shelters, as there are fewer barriers to contacting these youth than those in out-of-home care (e.g., ethical applications and permission from government bodies).

Although some studies insinuate that as few as three percent of absconders are from out-of-home care ([Thompson, Pollio, & Bitner, 2000](#); [Zimet et al., 1995](#)), the majority stipulate otherwise. For example, in the

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