



## Youth Who Run Away From Substitute Care in Illinois: Frequency, Case Characteristics, and Post-Run Placements

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### Highlights

- Running away declined from 27% of those age 12 to 17 who entered care in 2000 to 21% of those who entered care in 2013
- Youth who ran away were more likely to be age 15 to 17, to be African-American, and to live in Cook County
- Over two-thirds of youth who ran away were initially placed in institutions or group home
- Over half of placements in group homes and over a quarter of placements in institutions were followed by a runaway episode, compared to less than 10% of foster home placements
- After most runs, youth who stayed in care returned to the same type of placement, but 35% of runs from kinship homes led to care in institutions for those youth who stayed in care
- Running from and returning to foster care led to a change in foster parents over one third of the time

Research from several states has found that 23% to 71% of youth in substitute care run away at some point during their stay (Courtney & Zinn, 2009). Running away can be a signal of distress or of difficulties adjusting to a placement. For these reasons alone it deserves attention. It can also have serious adverse consequences. Running away from foster care disrupts the stability of foster care placements, which potentially interferes with the child's well-being and lowers the odds that the placement will end in a permanent home. Youth who run away may need to transfer to a more restrictive, less home-like setting such as a residential treatment center. Running away can also lead to risky situations and behaviors such as inadequate shelter, health problems, sexual exploitation, substance abuse, and delinquent behavior (Biehal & Wade, 1999; Crosland & Dunlap, 2014; Hammer, Finkelhor, & Sedlak, 2002). Several studies have found that when children run away from substitute care they often run to their original homes, homes of relatives, home of friends, or shelters (Courtney et al, 2005; Crosland & Dunlap, 2014; Fasulo, Cross, Mosley, & Leavey, 2002; Finkelstein, Wamsley, Currie, & Miranda, 2004). However, if children who run away return to the family from whom they were removed or other risky settings, it may place them in the same dangerous situations that led to their removal in the first place. In addition, running away from substitute care can trigger costly search efforts (Crosland & Dunlap, 2014). Developing greater knowledge about how often children run away, which chil-

dren run away, and what happens to them after they run can guide efforts to prevent running away and reduce its impact.

Courtney and colleagues used data from the Illinois Department of Children and Family Services (DCFS) to study youth who ran away from substitute care in Illinois between 1993 and 2003 (Courtney et al., 2005; Courtney & Zinn, 2009). They found a significant increase over that time period in the likelihood that youth ages 12 to 18 would run away from substitute care, from an average of .22 runs per year in 1993 to .45 in 2002. They attributed this increase to a rise in the rate at which youth who had run away once would run away again. Courtney et al. (2005) identified a number of predictors of running away, and found that while youth who ran were most likely to return to the same type of setting (e.g., kinship care), 10% to 16% who ran away from family-based foster care then went to more restrictive residential care. The Children and Family Research Center's annual report, *Conditions of Children in or at Risk of Foster Care in Illinois* (Children and Family Research Center, 2015) makes it clear that running away from substitute care remains a problem, since the percentage of youth age 12 to 17 years who ran away remained around 20% over a 20-year period through 2013. Running away was one focus of a 2015 Chicago newspaper investigative report on youth in residential care (Chicago Tribune, January 25, 2015), which described not only the frequency of running away but some of the dire consequences such as sexual exploitation that can happen while youth are on the run.

The current brief revisits many of the same questions Courtney and colleagues asked about youth who run away from substitute care in Illinois, using more recent data through FY2013. Specifically, we report on the frequency of running away from substitute care in Illinois, compare rates of running away by type of placement, examine the case characteristics that are associated with running away, and examine the types of placements that youth are placed in after returning to substitute care. This brief also breaks new ground by analyzing how often runaway youth who return to the same type of placement nevertheless change specific caregivers or congregate care settings.

## Method

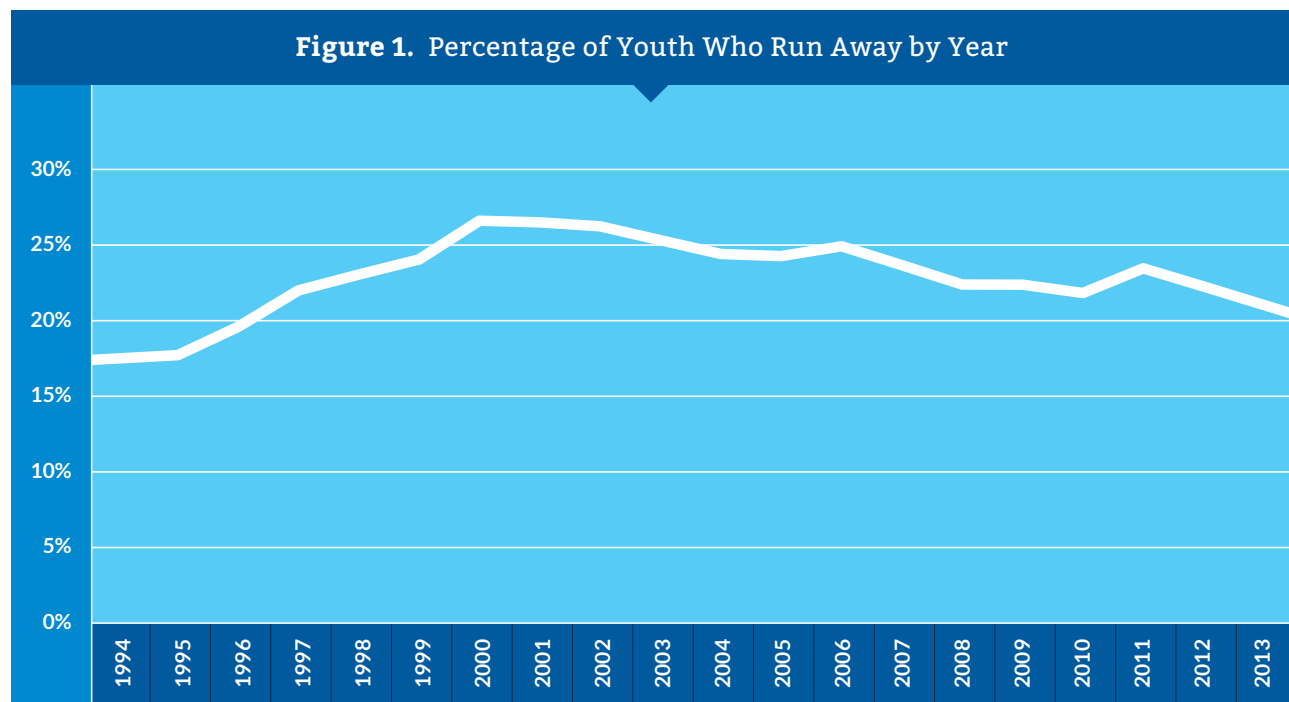
The study used data from the Illinois Department of Children and Families Services (DCFS) Integrated Database (IDB). For most analyses, the sample consisted of youth in substitute care who were between the ages of 12 and 17 years. Younger children were excluded because running away prior to age 12 is rare – only about 2% of runaway cases – and is likely to be very different from adolescent running away. Youth in substitute care ages 18 years and older, who generally stay voluntarily in loosely supervised independent living facilities, were excluded because the concept of running away does not apply in the same way to them, since they can legally decide where to live. The initial analysis examined trends in running away from 1994 to 2013. Other analyses used data on youth and placements from a single year (2012).

In the analyses, substitute care placement types included traditional foster care, kinship foster care, specialized foster care, institutions, and group homes. A placement episode was defined as any substitute care placement that lasted at least one day. Many youth had multiple placement episodes. Running away was defined as an episode in which the youth’s placement was recorded as either “whereabouts unknown” or “runaway” for at least one night.<sup>1</sup> Youth were tracked to determine if they ran away during a one year period from the start of each placement in the fiscal year studied.

Note that we cannot rule out the possibility that some runaway episodes may not be recorded in the data, if caregivers do not inform caseworkers of the runaway episode or if caseworkers do not record an episode. We caution readers therefore to interpret the exact percentages with caution. Despite this caveat, the estimates and group differences presented here are substantial enough that they increase our understanding of running away even if the exact percentages need to be considered cautiously.

## Results

As shown in Figure 1, the rate of running away from substitute care among youth age 12 to 17 years increased from 18% of youth who entered care in 1994 to 27% of those who entered care in 2000, but slowly declined since then and was 21% of youth who entered care in 2013.



<sup>1</sup> The specific placement types included in the runaway category included: Whereabouts Unknown (WCC), which is defined in the IDB as “child periodically initiates contact with his or her assigned caseworker”; Whereabouts Unknown (WUK) defined as “child’s whereabouts are unknown and the child is not known or believed abducted”; and Runaway (RNY).

## Characteristics of Youth Who Run Away

Table 1 compares the characteristics of youth who entered care during FY2012 who did and did not run away from placement. There was no difference by gender. Youth who ran away were significantly more likely to be older (ages 15 to 17, 86% of runaways) than youth who did not run away ( $\chi^2(5) = 238.7, p < .0001$ ), to be African-American (69% of runaways) ( $\chi^2(3)$

$= 58.3, p < .0001$ ) and to live in Cook County (53% of runaways) ( $\chi^2(3) = 46.8, p < .0001$ ). Youth who ran away were also significantly more likely to have initial placements in institutions or group homes ( $\chi^2(4) = 274.3, p < .0001$ ). Institutions included a variety of non-family placement types, including shelters, residential treatment facilities, and juvenile detention. Over two thirds of runaways were initially placed in institutions or group homes versus about one-third of youth who did not run away.

Table 1. Characteristics of Youth Who Did and Did Not Run Away (N =2,965)		Run Away (N=660)		Did Not Run Away (N=2,305)	
		N	% <sup>a</sup>	N	% <sup>a</sup>
GENDER	Boys	345	52%	1240	54%
	Girls	315	48%	1064	46%
AGE	12	10	2%	330	14%
	13	30	5%	344	15%
	14	51	8%	346	15%
	15	131	20%	408	18%
	16	187	28%	435	19%
	17	251	38%	442	19%
RACE-ETHNICITY	White	165	25%	904	39%
	African American	453	69%	1200	52%
	Hispanic	30	5%	157	7%
	Other	12	2%	44	2%
REGION	Cook	351	53%	884	39%
	Northern	103	16%	453	20%
	Central	140	21%	610	27%
	Southern	65	10%	345	15%
INITIAL PLACEMENT TYPE	Traditional Foster Care	41	6%	391	17%
	Kinship Foster Care	49	7%	605	26%
	Special Foster Home	123	19%	457	20%
	Institution	354	54%	769	33%
	Group Home	93	14%	83	4%

Note: Percentages may not sum to 100% because of rounding.

Next, we examined all placement episodes of youth ages 12 – 17 that occurred during a single year (2012) to determine which types of placements were most likely to result in a runaway episode (see Table 2). In total, there were 7,674 placement episodes among this age group in 2012, 1,679 of which preceded a runaway episode (22%). Over half of all placements in group homes were followed by a runaway episode (57%), and over a quarter of all placements in institutions preceded a runaway episode. Less than 10% of placement episodes in both traditional and kinship foster homes were followed by a runaway episode.

We were also interested in what happens to youth *after* they run away from substitute care. Table 3 shows the type of placements youth were placed in following a runaway episode. Runaway episodes in which youth did not return

to a DCFS placement are represented in the “Other” category. Almost all youth – about 90% – who ran away from institutions or group homes were placed into the same type of placement when they returned to care. However, youth that ran away from foster homes were much less likely to be placed in the same type of placement when they returned; 44% of youth that ran from a kinship foster home were placed in a kinship foster home when they returned to care and 58% of those that ran from traditional foster homes were returned to a similar placement type. Many youth who ran away from a foster home were placed in a more restrictive institutional setting (e.g., shelter, residential treatment, detention) when they returned to substitute care: 35% of runaway episodes from kinship foster care resulted in a post-run placement in an institution, as did 18% of runaway episodes from traditional foster homes.

**Table 2. Placement Types Preceding Runaway Episodes (2012)**

PLACEMENT TYPE	Total number of placement episodes	Number of placement episodes that preceded runaway episode	Percentage of placement episodes that preceded a runaway episode
Traditional Foster Home	859	65	8%
Kinship Foster Home	1,087	72	7%
Specialized Foster Home	1,441	206	14%
Institution	3,629	962	27%
Group Home	658	374	57%
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>7,674</b>	<b>1,679</b>	<b>22%</b>

Note: Youth with multiple runaway episodes are included multiple times

**Table 3. Placement Types after Running Away (2012)**

PLACEMENT BEFORE RUNNING AWAY	N	Placement After Running Away					
		Traditional Foster Home	Kinship Foster Home	Specialized Foster Home	Institution	Group Home	Other
Traditional Foster Home	65	58%	7%	5%	18%	0%	11%
Kinship Foster Home	72	6%	44%	4%	35%	0%	11%
Specialized Foster Home	206	0%	4%	64%	19%	0%	13%
Institution	962	1%	2%	0.2%	89%	0.4%	8%
Group Home	374	0.2%	0.2%	0.2%	5%	90%	3%
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>1,679</b>	<b>3%</b>	<b>4%</b>	<b>8%</b>	<b>57%</b>	<b>20%</b>	<b>7%</b>

Notes: Youth with multiple runaway episodes are included multiple times. “Other” consisted of placements in hospitals/health facilities (2.9% of the total sample), unauthorized settings (2.5%), homes of parents (0.5%), independent living placements (0.4%), deceased (1.2%), and one placement without follow-up event information.

Even if youth are placed in the same type of placement after running away, they may go to a new caregiver or a new institution or group home. Table 4 shows how often youth who ran away in 2012 were returned to the same caregivers, institutions, or group homes. Overall, 91% of the youth who returned to the same type of placement also returned to the same caregivers or facilities, but there is substantial variation across placement types. For kinship foster care,

specialized foster care, and traditional foster care, 28% to 44% of the runaway youth who returned to the same type of placement were placed with a different foster parent. However, only 7% of youth who ran away from and then returned to institutions went to a new facility, and none of the youth who ran away from and then returned to group homes went to a different group home.

**Table 4. Change in Caregiver or Agency After Runaway Episode (2012)**

	N	SAME CAREGIVER/AGENCY	DIFFERENT CAREGIVER/AGENCY
Traditional Foster Home	36	56%	44%
Kinship Foster Home	32	72%	28%
Specialized Foster Home	131	66%	34%
Institution	721	93%	7%
Group Home	337	100%	0%
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>1,257</b>	<b>91%</b>	<b>9%</b>

## Discussion

In the past decade, approximately one fifth to one quarter of youth age 12 to 17 placed in substitute in Illinois have run away every year, which disrupts their care and places them at risk. Running away is a significant problem that requires substantial attention in policy and practice. The good news, however, is that the percentage of youth between 12 and 17 years old who run away from foster care has declined since the early 2000s. This suggests a reversal in the increasing rates of running away from substitute care that occurred in Illinois from 1993 to 2003 (Courtney et al., 2005; Courtney & Zinn, 2009), yet the consistently high rate found still underlines the need for more attention to running away.

The current analyses found greater risks of running away for older adolescents, African American youth, and youth in institutions and group homes, which is consistent with earlier findings. Note that the racial, geographic and placement type differences in running away in the current sample cannot easily be disentangled, since African American youth are disproportionately from Cook County and disproportionately in institutions and group homes (see Children and Family Research Center, 2015). The contribution of racial dynamics to running away from substitute care needs to be explored further, particularly as it relates

to the interaction of staff in institutions and group homes with African American youth.

Since the majority of youth run away from institutions and group homes, progress on this issue clearly depends on better understanding of the youth in these settings and their experience of placement. Particularly concerning is the finding that more than half of placements in group homes led to running away. Such a high rate raises questions about whether group homes are meeting youth's needs, and whether running away may have a disruptive effect on the functioning of group homes that affects all youth served in these settings. The rate of running away from institutions is also high enough to warrant similar concern and attention. To what extent can these high rates be explained by youth emotional and behavioral factors that may have contributed to the need for placement, versus problems with the settings themselves?

Courtney et al. (2005) interviewed Cook County youth in care who had run away from placements. A number of these youth had experienced trauma and adverse events in substitute care as well as the maltreatment and/or other life stresses that precipitated their placement. Many were neglected in a way that led them to "grow up fast" and devel-

oped a premature sense of independence that they could not reconcile with the restrictions of substitute care. Some were running home in an attempt to achieve a connection with their families on better terms than prior to their placement; and many were motivated to achieve a degree of normalcy, independence and contact with friends that is characteristic of most teen-agers but out of their reach in substitute care. A number were attempting to stitch together a sense of family, friends and community out of often fragmented relationships in their neighborhoods. Despite their running away, many youth longed for parental structure and looked to caseworkers and foster families to help provide that, but were sometimes disappointed. Previous research suggests that lack of social and emotional support is an important cause of running away from foster care (Crossland & Dunlap, 2014). We lack qualitative data in the current study, but suspect that many of the factors found by Courtney and colleagues apply to our sample as well. At the same time, recent investigative journalism in Illinois suggests that the management of residential care in Illinois also contributes to the runaway problem (Chicago Tribune, January 25, 2015), and raises questions about the management of residential care that should be explored in future research.

Although the research literature suggests benefits of kinship care compared to traditional care (Chamberlain et al., 2006; Rubin et al., 2008), only a minority of youth in our sample who ran from kin homes returned to kin homes, and more than one third of them were placed in institutional care after they ran away. This is concerning given that institutional care likely involves either a shelter or detention facility with a negative effect on youth's quality of life and care, or residential care that is more restrictive than the placement from which they ran. More study is needed of the factors that lead youth to run from kin homes and what obstacles make it difficult for them to return to a kin placement. Even when runaways from kinship or traditional foster care returned to the same type of placement, it was often with a different caregiver. It would be valuable to study how often the change in caregiver or institution was a necessary change and helped foster greater support for youth or simply represented another temporary, disconnected relationship. It would also be worthwhile to study the impact of running away on achieving the ultimate goal of permanency and its relationship to youths' well-being once they exit the child welfare system.

Running away represents a real problem with substantial risks, but it is useful to see it as youths' attempt, however misguided, to seek connections to others, and lead better, more normal lives (Courtney et al., 2005). These aspirations should inspire us to understand better the needs underlying running away and work to seek improvements that will reduce youths' motivation to run.

## Recommended Citation

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