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## THE RUNAWAY YOUTH

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### ABSTRACT

To date, few (if any) empirically based research studies have been executed in exploring the relationship between the recidivism rate of runaways and the three possible types of dispositions they may receive: (1) counseled and released at the intake level; (2) referred to another social agency; or (3) placed on probation. It is critically pertinent to examine this relationship before attempting to plan alternatives to divert the youths from the juvenile justice system. This article presents the results of an empirically based project where the findings indicate that, regardless of the type of disposition the youths received, they had approximately a 50% chance of returning to the probation department for a subsequent offense.

Since the beginning of the first juvenile court which authorized separate trials for juvenile cases, it has been the purpose of this court to deal with juveniles not as criminals, but as individuals in whose guidance and welfare the state is particularly interested.<sup>1</sup> Although this effort has recognized that certain classes of juvenile offenders were to be tried by law under different standards, the jurisdiction of this court has gone beyond youths violating the criminal law.<sup>2</sup> Thus, regardless of the nature of the offense, the juvenile law offender has become a part of that total aggregate of youngsters labeled as "juvenile delinquent."<sup>3</sup>

Practically every state has a statute defining some non-criminal behavior as delinquent. The runaway youth has traditionally fallen within the purview of the juvenile court and has therefore been

labeled "delinquent."<sup>4</sup> In 1967, the President's Commission on Law Enforcement and Administration of Justice argued that the formal sanctioning system and pronouncement of delinquency should be utilized only as a last resort. The Commission also argued that in place of the formal system, dispositional alternatives to adjudication should be developed for dealing with juveniles.<sup>5</sup>

More recently, runaways and other status offenders have become a point of national concern due to the serious legal consequences if adjudicated.<sup>6</sup> As a result, in some states, the runaway is known as a Person in Need of Supervision (PINS) or a Child Whose Conduct Is In Need of Supervision (CHINS or CINS). Hence, a new category (different from delinquent) was created within the juvenile justice system into which the runaway was placed.

The "label change" was, and is, a commendable effort toward a somewhat non-judicial approach to the treatment of runaways.<sup>7</sup> However, this approach still results in him being referred to the juvenile justice system facing one of three possible dispositions: (1) counseled and released at the intake level with no further action; (2) referred to another social agency separate from the juvenile justice system; or (3) referred to the juvenile court (through the District Attorney's Office) for adjudication and probation.

Even within the above paradigm, the number of juveniles running away from home and referred to the juvenile justice system continues to be an alarming statistic.<sup>8</sup> A number of these are habitual repeaters which is not too surprising when it has been found that the further a youngster is processed through the juvenile justice structure, the better his chances are of him making a return trip. This is especially true for the runaway who may frequently be detained with habitual offenders, which may expose him to serious law violators.<sup>9</sup>

The current national appeal to divert a runaway from the juvenile justice system is based on at least three major assumptions.<sup>10</sup> The first is that the needs of the youth are not being met by the system or are poorly met. The second is that resources actually exist elsewhere or can be developed so he may be handled in a decriminalized manner. The final assumption is that if he gets into the juvenile justice system, a bad situation may be made worse, and he may be confirmed and/or stigmatized as a career delinquent for an offense of a non-criminal nature.<sup>11</sup>

## PROBLEM

While there are grounds to support the above fears, the data has not been refined to the point that one could make a blanket statement about the efficacy of a runaway diverted from the juvenile justice system as opposed to one treated within the system.<sup>12</sup> It is critically pertinent to determine the relationship between the recidivism rate of a runaway within the disposition he received before attempting to plan alternatives to divert the runaway from the juvenile justice system. Otherwise, how could the most conducive direction for diversion of a runaway be determined?

To date, no empirically validated research has been executed in this area in relation to the runaways' type of disposition compared with his subsequent recidivism rate.<sup>13</sup> Thus, the major purpose of this study is to empirically examine the relationship of the recidivism rate for runaways in relation to the three avenues of disposition that are possible: (1) counseled and released at the intake level; (2) referred to another social agency separate from the juvenile justice system; or (3) referred to the juvenile court for adjudication and probation.

## SETTING AND SAMPLE

This study was initiated and executed in an average size county probation department (a division of the juvenile court) in the southwestern region of the country. The intake section of the department receives all cases upon initial referral by law enforcement officials, parents or relatives, or other social agencies. An intake officer could dispose of a case in one of the three avenues mentioned above with a referral to the juvenile court being a last resort.

The department compiles a statistical card for every case that is referred. A content analysis of all 3,103 statistical cards for 1974 was conducted to select those juveniles who had committed a runaway offense.<sup>14</sup> A total of 244 cases were identified for possible inclusion in this project. Five cases were inaccessible, thus reducing the total number to 239 which represents the sample for this study.

Of these subjects, 105 were male and 134 were female, while 200 were caucasian and 39 were of other ethnic origins. The average age was 14.3 years, and the average school grade was 8.2. The average annual income of the subjects' family was \$9,109.77 and the average family size totaled 5.29. Forty-nine percent of the parents were

divorced or legally separated; 39% were married and living together and 12% were deceased or their status was unknown. The average number of siblings in the family was 2.9, and 47% had as many as two siblings. Sixty-five percent of the subjects had resided in their home county for five or more years. Out of the total runaway population, 46% ran away with another person and 54% ran away alone; 83% were referred by a law enforcement agency while 13% were referred by parents and 4% were referred through other sources.

#### METHOD

Each subject was followed for one year and in January 1976, recidivism occurrences for the proceeding year were tabulated. To obtain the most accurate information possible, a comprehensive search through each case file was initiated to verify the information that was on the subject's statistical card and to tabulate the recidivism rate. Depending on the final disposition of the referral, each subject was placed into one of three mutually exclusive groups: (1) settled at intake; (2) referred to another social agency; or (3) placed on probation.

#### FINDINGS

Out of the 239 subjects, 56% were settled at intake, 38% were referred to another agency, and 6% were placed on probation. Of the total population, 54% had no subsequent offenses. Table 1 illustrates the distribution of the average recidivism rate by the three dispositional categories broken down by status and delinquent offenses. It should be noted that the total average recidivism rate was 1.101 (Table 1). Proportionately, the settled at intake group committed more subsequent delinquent offenses and less subsequent status offenses than the other two groups.

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Insert Tables 1 and 2  
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Of the subjects who had committed at least one subsequent status offense (N = 88), the data revealed that the offenses were committed by 31% of the settled at intake group, 38% of the referred group, and 73% of the probation group.

The researchers were interested in determining the relationship between the average number of prior and subsequent offenses by the type of disposition (Table 2). The probation group had an average recidivism rate of over 1.7 times the other two groups. However, a t-test revealed a statistically significant increase of subsequent offenses in the other two groups whereas the probation group had none. The probation group had over 4 times the prior offenses but only 1.7 times the subsequent offenses.

We, as a profession, must continue to execute research on the effectiveness of the various treatments offered runaways and utilize these results to qualify that treatment. Future research endeavors should also be executed on the decision making process of how a runaway is placed in a disposition group. It will only be through conscious and continuous research endeavors that the data concerning the runaway youth may be refined to the point that an empirically based, qualitative service may finally be offered to help the youth reintegrate with society.

#### NOTES AND REFERENCES

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14. Homer, op. cit., p. 474; also, for the purpose of this study "runaway" is defined as a person between the ages of ten and seventeen; referred to the juvenile probation intake department; a resident of the county in which this study was conducted; and, who was gone from home without permission for at least twenty-four hours.

TABLE 1  
AVERAGE RECIDIVISM RATE BY JUVENILE JUSTICE  
CATEGORIES AND TYPE OF DISPOSITION

	Type of Disposition			
	<u>Settled</u>	<u>Referred</u>	<u>Probation</u>	<u>Average</u>
<u>Category</u>	(N=133)	(N=91)	(N=15)	(N=239)
Delinquent	.526	.363	.667	.473
Status	.482	.604	2.066	.628
Total Average	1.008	.967	2.733	1.101

TABLE 2  
AVERAGE PRIOR AND SUBSEQUENT OFFENSES  
BY TYPE OF DISPOSITION

Type of Disposition	Prior Offenses	Subsequent Offenses	Difference	Standard Deviation	T Value	(p)
Settled	.422	1.008	0.586	1.447	4.68	.001
Referred	.505	.967	0.462	1.852	2.38	.010
Probation	<u>2.467</u>	<u>2.733</u>	<u>0.266</u>	3.882	0.27	.397
Total Average	.545	1.101	.556			