

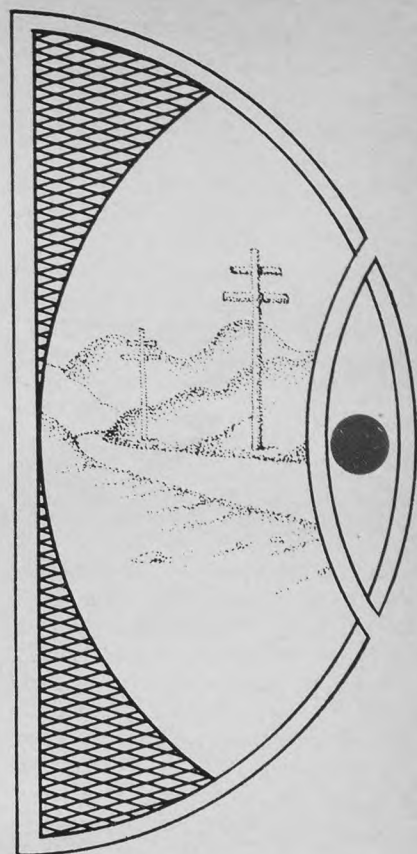
Runaways:

A Growing Social and Family Problem

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The problem of the juvenile runaway is one of increasing magnitude, and it is causing considerable alarm among lay and professional people. As the age of the runaway becomes younger and the harmful consequences of being away from home increase, public attention has focused on the problem.

Family physicians are in a unique position to provide both preventive and remedial help to runaways and their families. Some of the ways in which physicians may play a significant role in this serious problem include individual and family counseling to anticipate and prevent such episodes and counseling to strengthen the adolescent-parent relationship following a running away episode.



Scope of the Problem

A runaway is usually defined as a young person, 17 years of age or younger, who breaks the law by being away from home for longer than an evening without parental consent. The number of runaways is growing in the United States and is a cause of rising concern to parents, police, and professionals working with young people. The Senate Juvenile Delinquency Subcommittee recently estimated that approximately one million young people run away from home each year. Undoubtedly the actual figure is much larger, since the majority of runaways are never reported to the police or juvenile authorities.

Although the number of juvenile runaways has grown steadily over the past ten years, there has been a

marked increase since 1970, not only because of the considerably larger population under 17, but also because young people are leaving home at a greater rate. Nowadays more than half of the runaways are girls, in contradistinction to the great preponderance of boys only a few years ago. Moreover, the average age of runaways is declining steadily; nationwide it is now 15, but in some cities it may be lower. In a recent study in New York, 43 percent of the runaways were in the 11 to 14 age bracket.

The problem of the juvenile runaway has been dramatically brought to public attention recently by the tragic murders in Texas of more than two dozen boys, many of whom were runaways. As a result, anxiety has increased among many parents over the fate of their runaway children, and some governmental agencies and members of Congress have begun to recognize the severity of the runaway problem.

At present, there are so many runaways that police are seldom able to provide much assistance in finding a missing child. Children who are long

absent become part of a pending file at the police department and may be forgotten by everyone except parents. Parents themselves may, at times, show limited interest in having their missing child returned.

A great number of juveniles run away from home for one to three nights and then return. Frequently, these absences are not even reported to the police and are never included in figures for runaways. The usual young person who runs away does not plan a great deal prior to leaving and seldom has financial resources for more than a few days. Sometimes, running out of money is the primary reason for returning home.

Running away from home is an important issue because there are a number of serious consequences. Often, runaways have no place to find shelter or assistance and wander about the streets of larger cities. Frequently, they take refuge in any "crash pad" or facility which will offer them shelter. There they may find themselves in the company of addicts, sex criminals, or others who have a detrimental influence on adolescents.

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Social and Historical Background

It is apparent that many changes in society contribute to the mobility of young people. In a paper presented before the Biannual Conference of Travelers Aid International Social Service in September, 1972, Myrtle Reul observed that we are a "nation of nomads," and pointed to the US census data which indicates that each year one family in five moves. She also noted,

In America from the very beginning migration was interpreted as a combination of two concepts: geographical movements, and change in social class. Saying this another way — the American dream has always included territorial migration, moving from place to place; and social mobility, the struggle to change social status. These two thrusts of mobility have been exemplified by two famous phrases which are part of an early conditioning of every American child. Territorial migration is expressed in Horace Greeley's famous exhortation, "Go West, young man, go West," and the philosophy of social movement is implied in Ralph Waldo Emerson's equally popular phrase, "Hitch your wagon to a star."

In a study of wandering youth in Seattle,¹ a questionnaire was developed and sent to 72 drop-in centers, clinics, and other community agencies where runaways were likely to go. In addition, interviews were held with more than 20 workers from a variety of youth agencies. More than 80 questionnaires were completed by individual young people, most of whom were present or past runaways. In reply to a question about reasons for leaving home, a third of the respondents cited conflict with parents. This and the response "to prove that I can be independent" comprised the majority of answers to this question. When asked to list supportive services most needed, the runaways mentioned food and housing first, followed by clothing, employment, and medical care.

The phenomenon of the runaway is not a new one. Young people have been leaving home for a long time. The far smaller percent who left home 20 or 30 years ago, however, had reasons which are quite different from today. Frequently, they were in search of jobs and hoped to better themselves by leaving home. Today, looking for a job is seldom the reason young people run away. Through newspapers, television, and other sources, young

people hear of cities where a different, more attractive life-style may exist. This is particularly appealing to young people who are having problems at home, especially with their parents.

In addition to middle-class youngsters who run away, there is another group of young people: those who did not live at home initially. These are children who live in foster homes, state institutions, group housing arrangements, or some other situation which differs from home with parents. These young people often have limited ties to their living situations. While again, some argument or frustration may be the specific reason for leaving, ties have always been loose and it takes very little to start these young people off.

Several years ago we did a study of young male prostitutes in San Francisco and Seattle.² We found that many were runaway adolescents in the 17 to 20 age group who came from backgrounds which offered little to them. Frequently, there was a history of foster homes, group living arrangements, or mistreatment by one or both parents. Often, the young person had had no close ties with home, or for that matter with any individual, and had simply drifted or wandered away, sometimes as early as age 12 or 13. They, as well as many other young people, had arrived in the city with no resources, or only enough to last a short time. When searching for a way to make money, the possibility of prostitution was raised and, for some of these boys, this seemed an easy and quick way to earn enough money to survive.

It has sometimes been thought that many of the young people who run away eventually join communal living arrangements. However, young runaways do not, in fact, constitute a large proportion of the young people adopting the communal life-style. In a study we conducted this year of child-rearing in communal settings in the Northwest, we found very few people under 18.³ It seems that communal life is something that attracts the young adult, but not the teenager. The idealism of communal living is much less meaningful to the younger individual who is usually struggling less with society than with himself. While some communes generously extend hospitality to anyone who wishes to stop for temporary

food and lodging, the young runaway is seldom attracted enough by such a situation to remain long.

Classification of Runaways

When one is talking about runaways, it is important to realize that the causes for running away include at least five subgroupings:

1. those who wander in order to see the world and broaden their perspective,
2. those who break ties with traditional institutions because of dissatisfactions with the system,
3. those who have been seriously damaged psychologically by mistreatment in their homes, schools, and/or community environment,
4. those who feel compelled to leave the pressures of home and school and, subsequently, wander aimlessly,
5. juveniles who are away from home for more than an evening without permission but do not fit into one of the other categories.¹

These five subgroupings are not always distinct. The first group, those who wander to "see the world," are often older youths; many are fairly stable and may well be adding to their maturity and experience by traveling and being away from home. Those in the second group who are dissatisfied with traditional institutions do not experience the same problems as the other three groups; these are also frequently older individuals, though many are in their teens. They have a tendency to be affiliated with causes and movements and are frequently part of a group. They may live a communal life-style and receive considerable support from each other, in contrast to the younger runaway who is usually alone, without friends or acquaintances and at the mercy of more dangerous and inhospitable elements of society.

In the third group there are a number of young people who need help because of personality problems. These adolescents have great difficulty relating to society in general and to almost all of the people with whom they come into contact. The reasons for this large number of closed-off and isolated young people are complex. Many of these individuals are not receptive to help offered by conventional programs and agencies. Their backgrounds and life experiences are usually very different from those of a

majority of professionals who work in agencies. When they do request help, it is often difficult for the average professional to understand their attitudes, values, and life experiences. Most will not reach out to agencies, or for that matter to any individual, for help. Urban centers are drawing large numbers of such young people from semi-rural and smaller communities who are almost totally unfamiliar with big city life. While they do not wish to leave the city, they experience great difficulty in adjusting to the urban setting and become more alienated and withdrawn. Although we have little reliable information on their childhood experiences, many come from broken homes or families that are psychologically broken. It is an oversimplification to say that they are just young people with emotional problems who need treatment, or delinquents who have to be dealt with through legal machinery. Rather, they have developed this way of life because of social, economic, psychological, and physical factors.

In our study of runaways in the Seattle area, attention was focused on all five groups, although primary concern was on the latter two. Difficulties with housing, legal problems, and community understanding and support, however, affect all five groups.

Clifford English has divided runaways into four main groups.⁴ The first he calls *floaters*. This, he feels, is the largest group made up of adolescents who toy with the idea of running away but never really do it. They spend a lot of time on the streets, often stay away from home overnight, but do not actually run away. They usually remain in their own locality and, even when gone for a day or two, keep in touch with their parents. English feels that being out of the home but not really running away acts as a safety valve for many of the tensions in the home. If these tensions are not relieved, however, the young person may eventually become a runaway.

The second group is described by English as *runaways*, the main difference between the floater and the runaway being the amount of time spent away from home. Usually the runaways are gone for weeks or even months. He suggests the reasons for running away as follows: (1) escaping a disruptive family situation, (2) running away for altruistic reasons (eg,

the child who is in an unhappy home situation and feels the parents will resolve their differences more easily if he is away or that they will be forced to call on someone for help), or (3) having a secret, unsharable problem (an example of this would be the pregnant teenager who, because she cannot face her parents, runs away).

A third group is identified as *splitters*. Perhaps another way of describing this group is to call them "chronic runaways." They leave for a few months, go home, and as pressures build up they run away again. They seem to derive satisfaction from being on the street. In contrast to runaways, they can usually survive on the street without much trauma simply because they have been there before and know the dangers and pitfalls.

The fourth and final group is described as *hard-road freaks*. This group is the most street-wise and usually consists of older adolescents, often in the 17 to 20 year-old range. Some have been on the streets for four or five years. Their ties with family and home town have been severed. They are often involved in activities of an illegal nature such as drug dealing, prostitution, and housebreaking. Most have rejected conventional society and have high status in the street culture where they often adopt a permanently nomadic life-style. English sees these categories as progressive, a few runaways become splitters, a few splitters become hard-road freaks and, although the number who progress all the way from runaway to hard-road freak is not large, it is enough to cause concern for parents, schools and courts.

Institutional Responses to the Problem

Police and juvenile courts are ill-equipped to deal with the problems of the runaway. The runaway is not, in most cases, legally delinquent. Often though, he is treated as such because there is no other category in which to put him. He is usually picked up by the police and taken to juvenile court or police headquarters where he is questioned, his possessions are confiscated, and he is confined to a youth facility or a jail. In many small communities, there are no facilities for children and adolescents, and the runaway may be placed with older people, which may be quite traumatic.

The police department's main function, if the juvenile has done nothing more than run away, is to return him to his parents. There is usually no attempt to resolve the problems that caused the running away and sometimes when police arrange for the young person to return to the family, he leaves again almost immediately. This is not the fault of the police or the juvenile authorities so much as it indicates a lack of time, training, and experience in handling this problem.

Public and private agencies are now establishing shelters in cities where young people congregate in large numbers. Some of these cities, such as New York and San Francisco, have tremendous numbers of young people arriving each week. Despite the establishment of such shelters by charities, individuals and, to a very limited extent, by the use of governmental funds, the great majority of young runaways never reach them.

Many runaways head for the more glamorous spots they have heard or read about. Such a place was San Francisco in the late '60s. This was the height of the "hippie" movement when the Haight-Ashbury section of San Francisco was receiving publicity as a place where anyone could quickly find friends, shelter, and food in an idealistic communal manner. Huckleberry House is a shelter in San Francisco which became quite well known nationally, and a book has been written describing its program and some of the young people who stayed there.⁵ Problems with legal jurisdiction, the police, and financing plague such well-run shelters as Huckleberry House and many are no longer in existence.

There is need for facilities which provide a place for runaways to stay. However, inasmuch as providing shelter to a runaway is illegal in most jurisdictions, there must be proper clearance and licensing so that such a facility does not encounter problems with the authorities. In many of the well-established programs it is a policy to contact the parents almost immediately and obtain permission from them to shelter the young person while helping him with his problems. Usually this is for a short period and every attempt is made to return the child to his family. Occasionally considerable counseling with both the young person and his family is required and, in some instances, returning home is not a

realistic goal and other, more permanent arrangements have to be made. Foster homes are frequently used for this purpose. However, as is often the case with foster homes, children who need such care are frequently those who have the greatest difficulty in accepting limits and adjusting to a foster home. It takes a special kind of foster parent to tolerate the testing and acting out behavior that is sometimes exhibited by runaways and other juveniles who are placed there. This is particularly true in instances where the foster home is provided by conservative individuals who want to help but have quite inflexible standards of behavior. We have seen many instances where such foster homes have not worked well, and the young person either runs away or is removed at the request of the foster parents. This frequently creates more trauma and provokes a feeling of rejection in the young person.

The problem of the runaway is closely related to the problems of an adolescent growing up in modern American society. Family disintegration, schools not attuned to the needs of the adolescent, lack of jobs and other suitable ways for the adolescent

to pass his time are among many factors which contribute to this problem. The situation will not really change until we, the members of society, deal with some of its major problems.

Role of Physician

One may think that this is a problem for the social worker, the police, or other non-physicians. However, I believe that there is a very significant role for the adolescent's physician. First of all, many of the runaways and the situations giving rise to running away can be prevented by an alert physician who can spot problems early. A few of the more obvious examples are parents who do not communicate with their adolescents or frustrated adolescents who are impulsive and likely to take desperate measures to gain parental attention. Such situations can be spotted by the alert physician. It may be a good idea to ask the adolescent if he is contemplating or has thought about running away as a way out of his dilemma. Although many run away purely on the spur of the moment, others have often been tempted to run away and have given it considerable thought. Helping the

adolescent work on his problems, particularly by bringing the parents in for a conference in which both the adolescent and parents state their grievances and try to compromise, is very effective. If this is not possible, the physician serving as an interested person with whom the adolescent can discuss his frustrations may be enough of a safety valve to keep him from the drastic action of running away. In addition, the interested physician may be in a position to work with facilities which are trying to help runaways. This would include not only working as physician to a runaway program, but also helping to determine the philosophy of the institution and planning its relationship to the community and its resources.

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