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Introduction

“Beyond the potential dangers running may present, it may also be a red flag that there are other things going on with youth while in care. They may be experiencing harm in their placements, missing family, receiving inadequate attention to their mental health needs, or lacking access to normative youth experiences such as sports.”¹ Experiences such as these are commonly referred to as “push-and-pull” factors. Understanding what factors push a child to run away and factors which may be pulling the child away from their placement is critical in reducing the length of time children are away from care and identifying meaningful run prevention strategies. The West Virginia Department of Health and Human Resources, Bureau for Social Services, through the creation of its Child Locator Unit, is focused on assisting in the location of missing foster children, as well as identifying successful strategies to reduce the prevalence of runaway events.

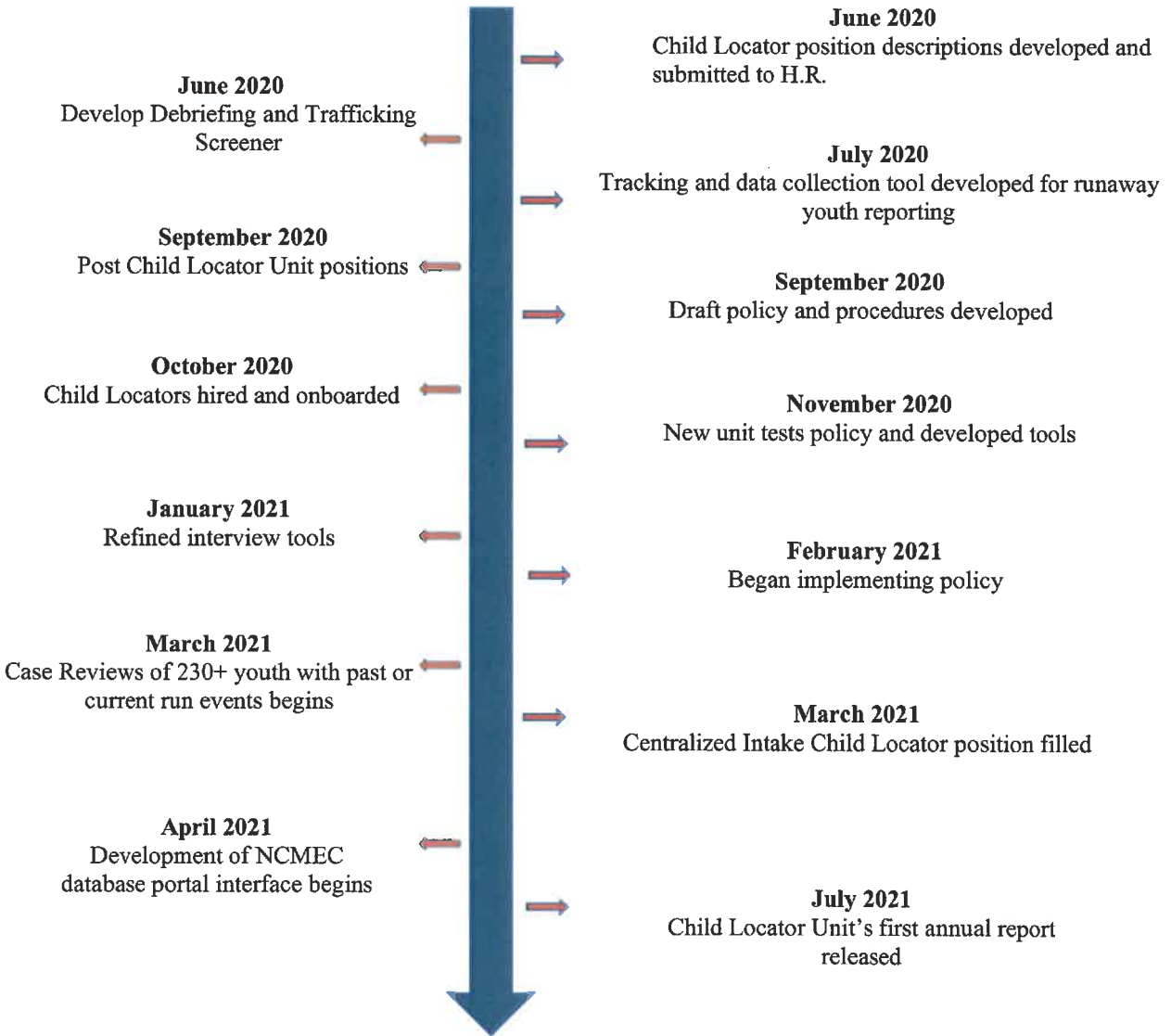
Establishment of Child Locator Unit

House Bill 4415 passed the 2020 legislative session, which amended various sections of W. Va. Code §49-6-101, et seq., and created W. Va. Code §49-6-116. The bill was signed into law on March 25, 2020. This legislation intended to solve significant problems concerning runaway and missing youth in the state of West Virginia. Two important developments resulting from this landmark legislation are:

- The establishment of a Missing and Endangered Child Advisory System, and
- The establishment of a pilot Child Locator Unit within the West Virginia Department of Health and Human Resources.

The Bureau for Social Services (BSS), formerly the Bureau for Children and Families began implementation of the Child Locator Unit immediately upon passage. The following is a timeline of events.

¹ Courtney, Mark E., et al. "Youth Who Run from Out-of-Home Care." Chapin Hall Center for Children, no. 103, Mar. 2005.



The Child Locator Unit provides services to runaway foster children. When a foster child is on runaway status for more than 48 hours, a Child Locator is assigned to begin assisting in efforts to locate and return the child to the care of the Department. When a child has a verified endangerment status, a Child Locator is assigned to immediately assist in locating the child. Endangerment statuses are child characteristics, or situational criteria, which place a child at an even greater risk of injury while on runaway status. When foster children missing for six hours or longer return from runaway status, Child Locators are assigned to complete an interview with the child.

Casework Process

Reporting Runaway Events and Return Events

When a foster child runs from care, a report is required to be made immediately to law enforcement and the West Virginia Department of Health and Human Resources. Currently, each provider has an internal process for handling reports to the Department. The Bureau for Social Services began handling all reports of missing and located foster children through the Centralized Intake Unit in SFY 2022. The centralization of reporting is believed to have a positive impact on the state's ability to accurately identify the number of missing children. When callers report a runaway foster child to Centralized Intake, they are asked a series of questions aimed at basic identifying information, as well as:

- Last known whereabouts and clothing at time of run;
- Identified endangerment status (additional information later in annual report); and,
- Details surrounding the run event.

A completed example Centralized Intake report may be reviewed in Appendix A.

Once generated, the report is immediately provided to the assigned child welfare worker, district office leadership, and the Child Locator Unit. Staff are then required to provide additional notifications, including:

- Reporting to law enforcement and requesting the child be entered into the National Crime and Information Center (NCIC); and,
- Reporting the Child to the National Center for Missing and Exploited Children (NCMEC) and requesting the creation of a missing child poster.

When a child has been missing for 48 hours or longer or has a verified endangerment status, they will be assigned a Child Locator who will assist in locating the child. While Child Locators are specifically tasked with locating missing foster youth, they are made available to the Bureau's child welfare workers to provide technical assistance as needed.

When youth are located, a notification is provided to Centralized Intake. A return report is logged, and a notification is sent to the child's assigned child welfare worker, district office leadership, Child Locator Unit, and executive leadership. A follow up notification is sent to the child's assigned child welfare worker reminding them of the mandatory reporting to law enforcement and NCMEC that the child has returned. This will prompt the removal of the child's information from NCIC and any missing child posters which have been distributed by NCMEC. Children who were missing for at least six hours or who have had multiple run events in the past six months will be assigned to a Child Locator, who will conduct an interview with the child.

Locating Missing Youth

Efforts to locate youth take various forms. To enable a Child Locator to assist in the location of a missing youth, the Child Locator must have accurate information concerning the child's history

and current characteristics, connections to family and friends, and a recent photograph. Child Locators frequently begin by researching the child's agency case file to search for family, friends, and any information regarding past run events. This information provides the Child Locator with a starting point to begin their search. For example, documentation of past run events and details of those events can provide possible locations the child may be residing or heading, or individuals the child may regularly communicate with for assistance while on runaway status.

Social media accounts play a vital role in the search for missing children. Child Locators regularly conduct searches on various social media platforms for a child's account. This enables a Child Locator to identify potential friends and family previously unknown, obtain recent photographs, and often provides information on the child's potential whereabouts, as children will occasionally continue to post photographs and comments while on the run. Social media account discoveries are immediately shared with NCMEC for continuous monitoring. In some instances, Child Locators have found it beneficial to review social media accounts associated with the child's parents and friends. Even though the child may not be posting while on the run, it is not uncommon to see friends and family of the child continue to post information concerning the missing child.

Interviews and physical location searches also play a role in the location of missing children. Child Locators regularly communicate with the child's foster care provider, family, friends, child welfare workers, probation staff, and law enforcement to gather as much information about the child's potential whereabouts, or any recent communications individuals may have had with the child. Child Locators visit homes of family members and search other locations such as gas stations, shopping centers, and parks when they are known hangout locations for groups of children.

Debriefing Interviews and Trafficking Screens

Child Locators conduct an interview with any foster youth who was considered missing for a period of six hours or more or has had multiple run events in the past six months. The interviews focus on:

- Understanding the precipitating factors leading to the run event;
- The youth's experiences on the run; and,
- Whether the child was injured or victimized, including whether they were trafficked.

Youth who are interviewed are also asked questions focused on understanding strategies or opportunities to prevent future running.

Interviews are conducted at the child's current placement setting, in a private interview space, allowing the child to speak freely. Children do have the opportunity to decline the interview. When a child declines, the child is provided the survey in the mail with a letter informing them of the purpose and benefit of completing the survey. Youth are then offered the opportunity to reschedule for an in-person interview, telephone or video chat interview, or to complete the interview tool independently and return to the Child Locator.

Data

Data collection and analysis concerning missing youth is a critical function of the Child Locator Unit. Data collected ranges from information about specific run events, (including length of time on the run and static and dynamic factors concerning specific children) to data concerning the youth's experiences on the run, the cause of such events and subsequent return to care. Collecting and analyzing this data allows the Child Locator Unit to identify common patterns in runaway behavior such as timing of run events, factors contributing to running behavior, and run destinations. This information can be shared with providers and Bureau for Social Services child welfare staff to assist in improving their response to runaway youth and the ultimate prevention of runaway events.

Identifying and tracking runaway foster youth has been a challenging area for the Bureau for Social Services in the past. This has partly been due to ongoing reporting requirements which stipulate that any child who is "outside of a designated boundary" for more than 15 minutes be reported as an "Away from Supervision" event. This defined requirement artificially inflates the number of children who were reported as runaways and made it difficult to distinguish between children who truly left care and those who are only outside of the designated boundary. Steps have been taken to track reported run events in a manner which supports a deeper understanding of those children who are truly exhibiting runaway behavior. Through this revised process, the Child Locator Unit is able to make these distinctions and continue to refine this process to ensure all youth are captured and documented.

In this 2022 annual report, events that do not meet the definition of "Away from Supervision" are excluded from reported data. This includes attempted runs where facility staff followed youth the entire time, events where youth who ran were not in legal custody of the West Virginia Department of Health and Human Resources, and events where youth were missing from care less than 15 minutes. During the 2021 calendar year, there were 24 reported incidents that were excluded from data as they did not meet the definition of a missing from care (run) event.

Reported Runaways

Current data is available for calendar years 2020 and 2021. However, as previously indicated in the 2021 Annual Report, not having a centralized run reporting process in place has created barriers to accurate reporting. Creation and improvement of the centralized reporting process has improved accuracy of reporting and will continue to do so. It is important to note that although reported events from calendar years 2020 to 2021 have increased by nearly 500%, it is not believed that run events have increased by the same rate. This increase in events is largely a reflection of more consistent and accurate reporting.

In 2020, there were 93 documented reported run events. There were only 53 youth involved as most of the youth ran more than once. At midnight on December 31, 2020, there were 24 foster children missing from care (equaling 25.8% of the total run events or 45.3% of youth involved for 2020).

During the period of January 1, 2021, to December 31, 2021, a total of 474 run events were documented, involving 268 youth. Of those involved in runs, 206 (or 43.0%) youth ran more than once during 2021, averaging 1.77 runs per youth.

Again, this increase is not believed to be solely an indication of increased runs but improvements in reporting and documentation of events. Another result of improved reporting is an increased awareness of the need for proper documentation within official agency case records to help ensure runaway youth are found and brought back into proper supervision. However, it is important to note that additional factors such as isolation and restrictions due to COVID-19 were reported by some runaway youth as a contributing factor in their decision to run.

At midnight on December 31, 2021, 14 youth were missing from care, equaling 3.0% of the run events and 5.2% of youth involved in run events for 2021. This appears to indicate a trend of youth returning to or being located and returned to care at a higher rate.

For reported events in 2020, the hours between 3:00 p.m. and 11:00 p.m. constituted the most frequent time for runaway events to occur (48.9%). During the calendar year of 2021, 79.7% of run events occurring between 2:00 p.m. and 10:00 p.m. More specifically, the hours between 8:00 p.m. and 10:00 p.m. were the most common time for all run events (24.05%).

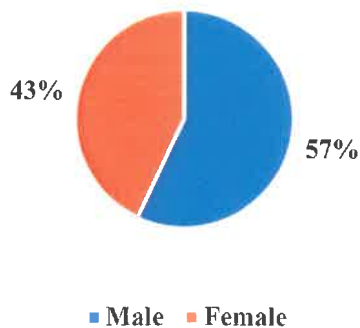
Fridays were the most common day in 2020 for run events to occur (20.7%). In 2021, Sunday was the most common day for run events (18.1%) with only 10.8% occurring on Fridays.

Demographics

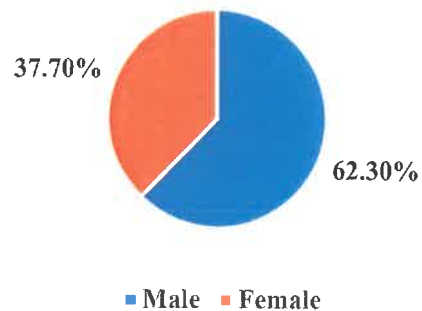
The following charts illustrate the number of runaway youths by sex and the number of runaway events by sex for the calendar year 2020 and 2021. The sex of each youth is determined by the youth's assigned sex at birth, as documented in the child's official case record.

During the 2020 calendar year, of the 53 runaway youth documented, 62% were male. Data reflecting the youth's sex by runaway events indicates that males constitute the majority of youth who had multiple run events. However, females who ran once had a higher likelihood of running again.

2020 Youth's Sex by Run Event



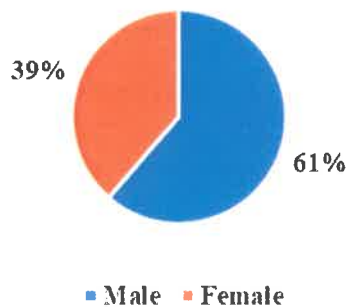
2020 Runaway Youth by Sex



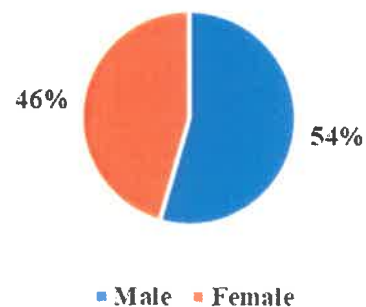
2020 Youth's Sex				
	Run Events		Youth Involved	
Male	53	57%	33	62.30%
Female	40	43%	20	37.70%
Total	93	100%	53	100%

During the 2021 calendar year, male youth continue to constitute the majority of running youth; they were also significantly more likely than females to have multiple run events, as reflected in the charts below. National data compiled by NCMEC indicates that females were more than three-fifths of the reported runs.² Factors influencing why this statistic is not aligned with statistics for West Virginia's foster children who run requires additional research.

2021 Youth's Sex by Run Event



2021 Runaway Youth by Sex



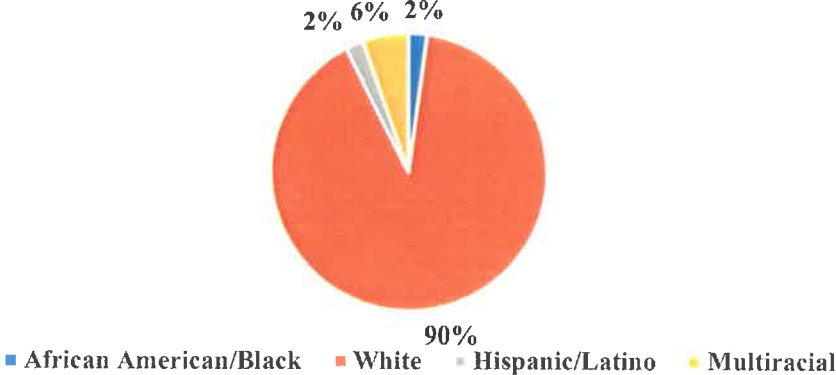
2021 Youth's Sex				
	Run Events		Youth Involved	
Male	291	61%	146	54%
Female	183	39%	122	46%
Total	474	100%	268	100%

The following charts indicate the number of runaway youth and the number of runaway events by racial identity. Each youth's racial identity is defined by the racial or ethnic identity documented

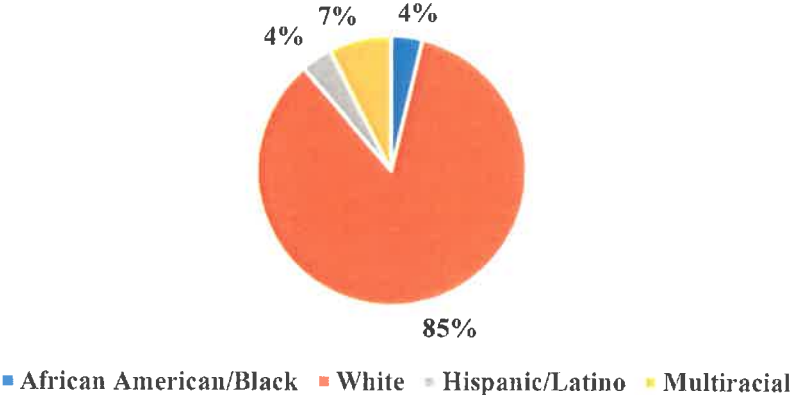
² Latzman, N. E., & Gibbs, D. (2020). Examining the link: Foster care runaway episodes and human trafficking. OPRE Report No. 2020-143. Washington, D.C.: Office of Planning, Research, and Evaluation, Administration for Children and Families, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services.

in the child’s official case record and is not necessarily reflective of the youth’s perceived racial or ethnic identity. Multiracial is applied to any child with two or more reported races documented in the official case record.

2020 Run Events by Youth's Race

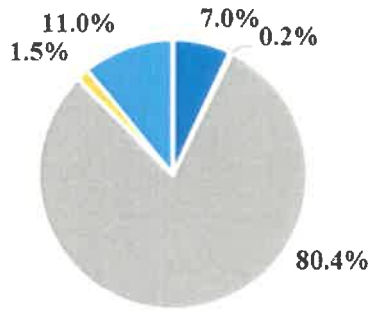


2020 Runaway Youth by Race



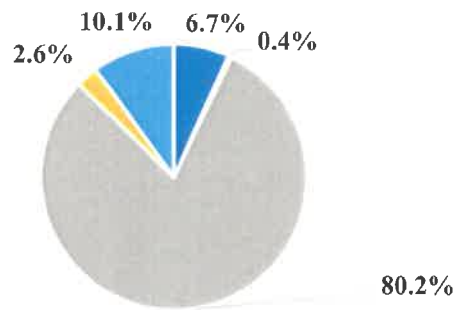
2020 Race/Ethnicity	Run Events		Runaway Youth	
African American/Black	2	2%	2	4%
White	84	90%	45	85%
Hispanic/Latino	2	2%	2	4%
Multiracial	5	6%	4	7%
Total	93	100%	53	100%

2021 Run Events by Youth's Race



- African American/Black
- White
- Multiracial
- Native Hawaiian/Pacific Islander
- Hispanic/Latino

2021 Runaway Youth by Race

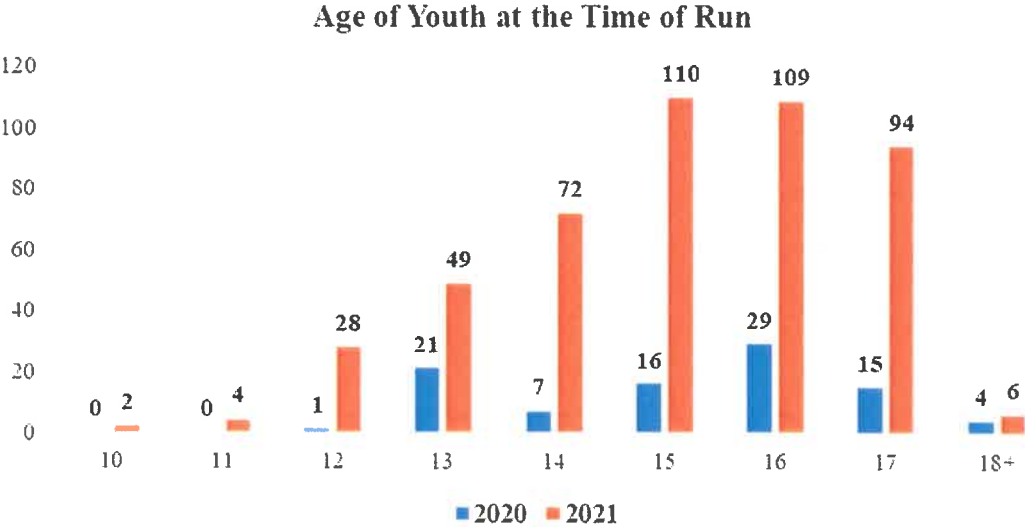


- African American/Black
- White
- Multiracial
- Native Hawaiian/Pacific Islander
- Hispanic/Latino

2021 Race/Ethnicity	Run Events		Runaway Youth	
African American/Black	33	7.1%	18	6.6%
Native Hawaiian/Pacific Islander	1	0.2%	1	0.4%
White	381	80.2%	215	80.2%
Hispanic/Latino	7	1.5%	7	2.6%
Multiracial	52	11.1%	27	10.3%
Total	474	100%	268	100%

West Virginia youth under the age of 13 have had an increase in reported run events in 2021 as compared to data available for 2020. Age 16 was the most common age of runaway youth in 2020; ages 15 and 16 were the most common to run in 2021. According to the Office of Planning, Research and Evaluation within the federal Administration for Children and Families, “data from the National Center for Missing and Exploited Children (NCMEC) indicate that since 2012, reported runaways involving youth aged 12 to 14 years have increased as a percentage of all reported foster care runaway cases.”³ The average age of a runaway youth was 15 across both reporting periods.

The following chart illustrates the age of the youth at each run event for both 2020 and 2021.

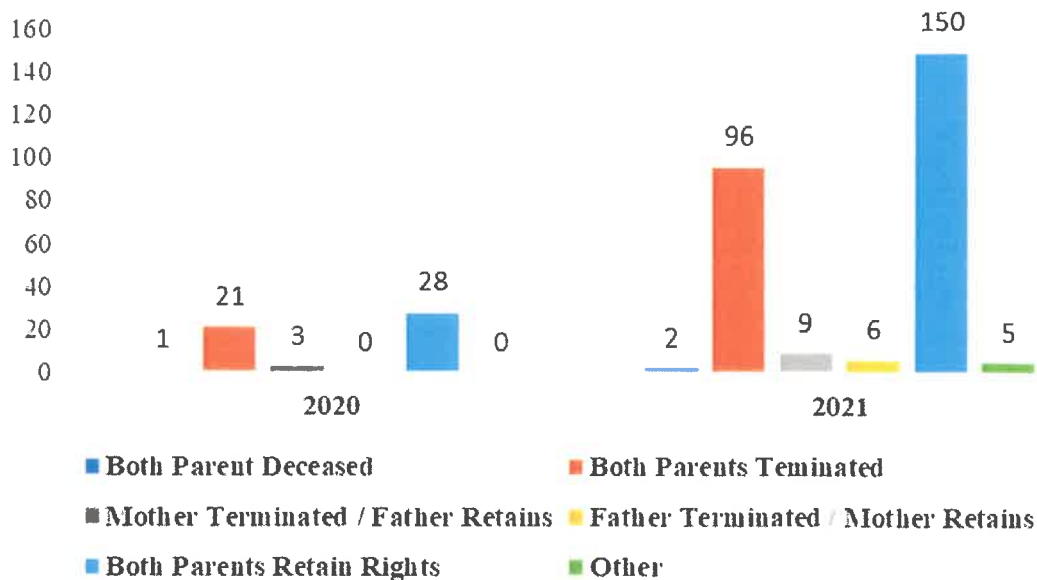


³ Latzman, N. E., & Gibbs, D. (2020). Examining the link: Foster care runaway episodes and human trafficking. OPRE Report No. 2020-143. Washington, D.C.: Office of Planning, Research, and Evaluation, Administration for Children and Families, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services.

Age of Youth at Time of Run				
Age	2020		2021	
10	0	0.00%	2	0.42%
11	0	0.00%	4	0.84%
12	1	1.08%	28	5.91%
13	21	22.58%	49	10.34%
14	7	7.53%	72	15.19%
15	16	17.20%	110	23.21%
16	29	31.18%	109	23.00%
17	15	16.13%	94	19.83%
18+	4	4.30%	6	1.26%
Total	93	100.00%	474	100.00%

On first observation, data from 2020 and 2021 may appear to suggest that youth with parents who retain their parental rights were just as likely or more likely than those youth whose parents have terminated parental rights to run away from care. The reality is more complicated. This data does not account for youth whose biological parents' rights were terminated and the youth was later adopted. Also unaccounted for are those youth who have experienced other forms of parental loss (i.e., an absent parent with rights or the loss of a psychological parent).

Status of Parental Rights of Runaway Youth

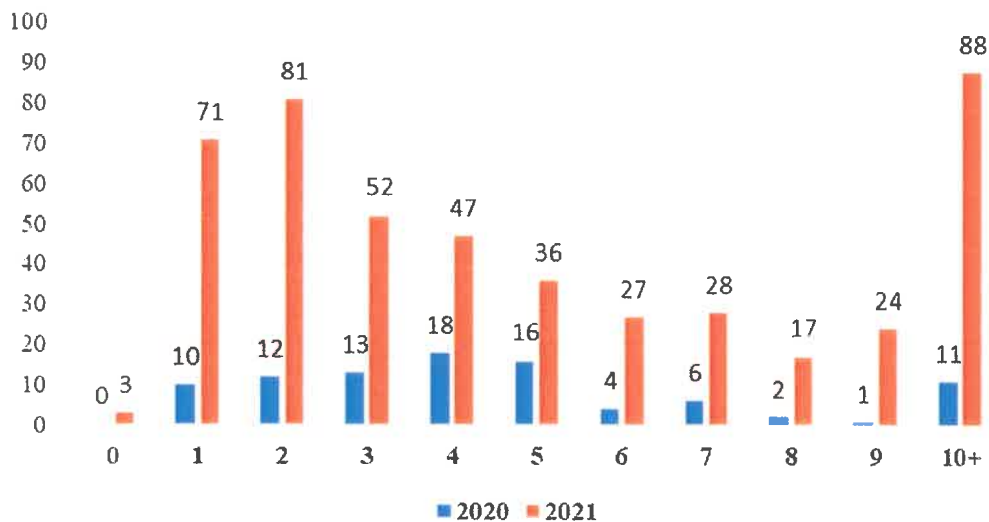


Status of Parental Rights		
	2020	2021
Both Parent Deceased	1	2
Both Parents Terminated	21	96
Mother Terminated / Father Retains	3	9
Father Terminated / Mother Retains	0	6
Both Parents Retain Rights	28	150
Other	0	5
Total	53	268

Placement

An increased number of placements is believed to increase the risk of running from care. Studies have indicated that placement stability is a factor which contributes to a youth’s decision to run. Such studies have found an increased risk of running away correlated positively to youth experiencing high numbers of placement changes.⁴ While the exact reason is unknown, it is hypothesized that familiarity with residential environments, less established ties to agency or facility staff and a lack of positive role models may contribute to the decision to run away. The chart below illustrates the documented number of placements a youth has had at the time of each run event.

Number of Placements at Time of Each Run Event



⁴ Dworsky, Amy, et al. “Predictors of Running Away from Out-of-Home Care: Does County Context Matter?” *Cityscape*, vol. 20, no. 3, 2018, pp. 101–116. JSTOR, www.jstor.org/stable/26524874. Accessed 10 June 2021.

Number of Placements at Time of Each Run Event				
	2020		2021	
0	0	0	3*	0.63%
1	10	10.75%	71	14.98%
2	12	12.90%	81	17.09%
3	13	14.00%	52	10.97%
4	18	19.35%	47	9.92%
5	16	17.20%	36	7.59%
6	4	4.30%	27	5.70%
7	6	6.45%	28	5.90%
8	2	2.15%	17	3.59%
9	1	1.07%	24	5.06%
10+	11	11.82%	88	18.57%
Total	93	100%	474	100.00%

**In 2021, three youth were in custody and ran prior to being physically placed.*

As expected, the number of runaway youth with more than 10 placements represents a high percentage of the population. However, somewhat more surprising is the high number of youth who run during their first placement.

Placement options for youth in foster care include relative or kinship homes, traditional foster care homes, shelters, group residential facilities, out-of-state facilities, and psychiatric residential treatment facilities. The Bureau for Social Services strives to identify and secure the least restrictive and most appropriate environment that will meet the youth’s needs while maintaining their safety.

Group residential facilities have three levels of care; the higher the level, the more restrictive and intensive the supervision. Studies have shown a positive correlation between the risk of running away and placement in a congregate care setting, such as group residential or emergency shelter care. Further, evidence suggests that children placed in kinship or relative foster homes as opposed to more traditional foster care settings are less likely to run away.⁵

⁵ Dworsky, Amy, et al. “Predictors of Running Away from Out-of-Home Care: Does County Context Matter?” *Cityscape*, vol. 20, no. 3, 2018, pp. 101–116. JSTOR, www.jstor.org/stable/26524874. Accessed 10 June 2021.

Placement Type at Time of Run				
	2020		2021	
Youth's Home/Prior to Placement	1	1.08%	18	3.80%
Kinship/Relative Home	9	9.68%	18	3.80%
Foster Care	7	7.53%	23	4.85%
Shelter	25	26.88%	147	31.01%
Out of State Placement	8	8.60%	32	6.75%
Transitional Living	0	0.00%	1	0.21%
Psychiatric Residential Treatment Facility	0	0.00%	2	0.42%
Department of Juvenile Justice facility	0	0.00%	2	0.42%
Group Residential Unspecified	0	0.00%	1	0.21%
Group Residential Level 1	4	4.30%	35	7.38%
Group Residential Level 2	20	21.50%	139	29.32%
Group Residential Level 3	19	20.43%	56	11.81%
Total	93	100.00%	474	100.00%

Length of Time Away from Supervision

The length of time that a youth remains away from care has multiple factors: the youth's reason for leaving, response from law enforcement, whether the youth ran with companions, etc.

The inconsistency in the reporting of runs during the 2020 calendar year can be easily observed by considering the length of time that reported runaway youth remain away from care and making comparisons to the length of time runaway youth were reported to be out of care during the 2021 calendar year. In 2020, nearly 53.7% of all reported runs were out of care for longer than 24 hours and the average number of days out of care was 185.86. During 2021, more than 69% returned to care within 24 hours while the average number of days out of care was 32.5.

Time Away from Care: All Documented Runs		
	2020	2021
Number of documented runs	93	474
Average days out of care	185.86	32.5
Runners away >24 hours	50	145

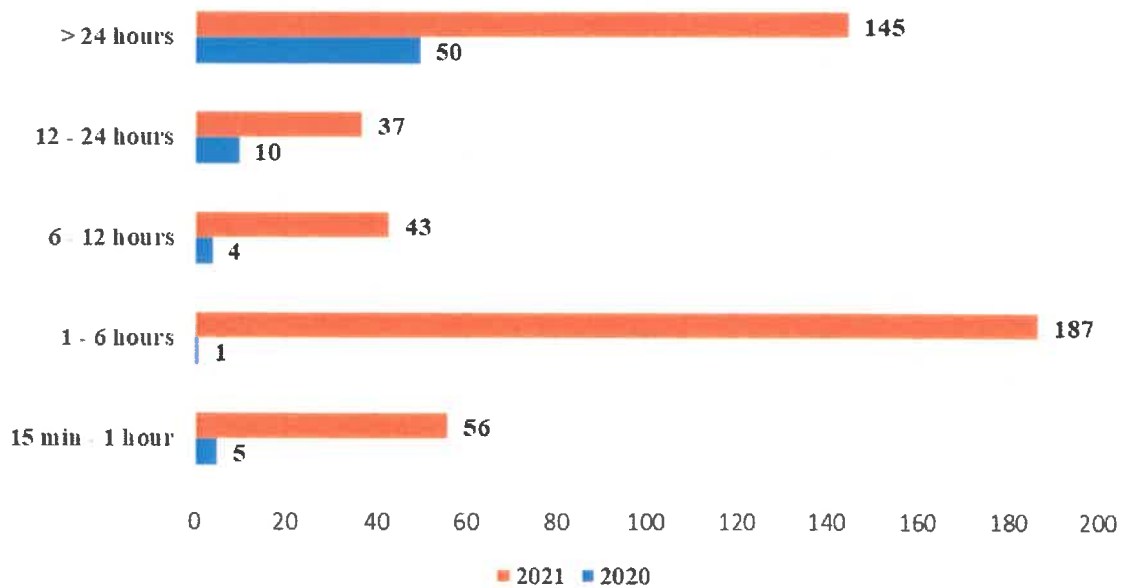
When considering only runaway youth who were reported to be away from supervision longer than 24 hours, the average amount of time runners remained away from care also drastically decreased between 2020 and 2021 as seen below.

Average Days Away from Care of Runners Gone Longer than 24 Hours		
	2020	2021
Average days out of care	304.59	105.25

Another detail to note when considering the apparent vast decrease in the length of time that youth remained away from care from 2020 to 2021 is that the Child Locator Unit began actively searching for runaway youth in early 2021.

In some cases, specific run or return dates and times are not officially reported. When possible, this information was determined through review of the official case file. Some run events could not be narrowed down sufficiently to determine the amount of time the youth were missing from care.

Length of Time Away from Care



Length of Time on Runaway Status				
Length of time	2020 Run Events		2021 Run Events	
15 min - 1 hour	5	6.09%	56	11.97%
1 - 6 hours	13	15.85%	187	39.96%
6 - 12 hours	4	4.88%	43	9.19%
12 - 24 hours	10	12.20%	37	7.90%
> 24 hours	50	60.98%	145	30.98%
Total *	82	100.00%	468	100.00%
Average days out of care	127.31		30.23	

**Time out of care could not be calculated for 11 run events in 2020 and 27 in 2021. These runs have been removed from the run events data set to calculate percentages.*

Youth Interviews

Debriefing and screening interviews formally began in February 2021 after the finalization of piloted interview tools. Initially, the West Virginia Missing Child Debriefing Interview Tool was used for youth who are away from supervision longer than 24 hours or have engaged in three or more runs in the previous six months, while the West Virginia Trafficking Screen (a shortened version of the debriefing tool) was used for youth who had a run event lasting longer than six hours but less than 24 hours. However, early in the interviewing of these youth, Child Locators realized that it was likely that valuable information would be missed by using the shorter, less thorough tool. Beginning May 1, 2021, all youth with run events longer than 6 hours were interviewed using the West Virginia Missing Child Debriefing Interview Tool.

As reported in the 2021 annual report, between February 8 and April 30, 2021, 35 debriefings were attempted. Two youth refused to participate; however, some information regarding these two youth could be verified (time away from care, multiple runs in six months prior to interview and verification of endangered youth status). During this same timeframe, two trafficking screens were also completed.

This 2022 annual report includes information from all attempted interviews taking place February 8, 2021, through January 31, 2022, and is comprised of youth with run events who returned to care prior to December 31, 2021. Child Locators attempted 113 total interviews; of these, 4 youth refused to participate for part or all of their interview and two of the 113 were completed using the shorter screening interview tool (as reported above and in the 2021 report). When youth refuse to participate, some information can be gleaned from the official case record or by statements made by that youth; information gathered in this way has also been included.

It is important to note that the accuracy of the information provided in the following data is dependent on how forthcoming and truthful each youth is during their interview. While Child Locators understand the importance of taking time to build rapport to make each youth feel comfortable while in the interview process, Child Locators are generally unable to verify the information provided to them during each interview and can only document the information as it is given. Caution should be taken when attempting to make conclusions from the following data for these reasons.

Interview Process

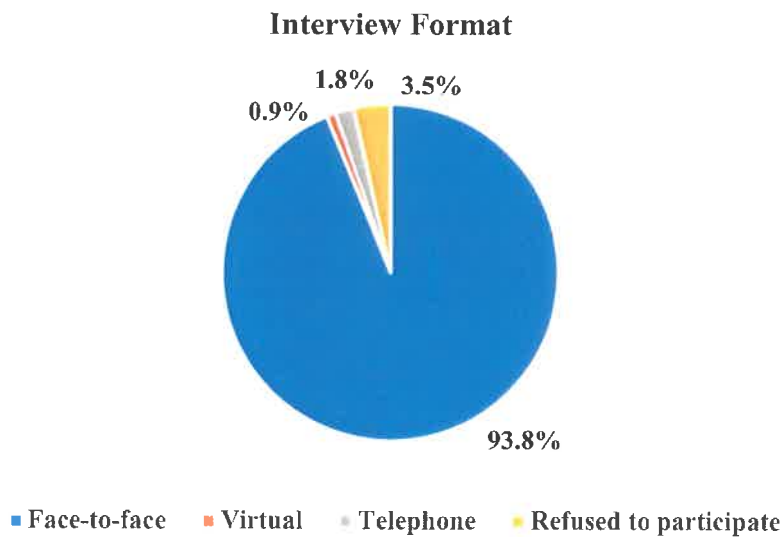
Interviews are conducted at the child's current placement setting, in a private interview space, to permit the child to speak freely. The Child Locator explains the purpose of the Child Locator Unit, the purpose of the interview, and what happens with the information received through each interview. The Child Locator explains that the youth will not receive any additional punishment for information gained through the interview process (apart from the Child Locator's mandated reporting rules) and if the youth agree to participate in the interview, the youth may decline to answer any question, without consequence, or may stop the interview at any time.

When a child declines to be interviewed, the child is provided a printed copy of the interview tool with a letter informing them of the purpose and benefit of completing the survey either prior to the

Child Locator leaving the location or by mail. Youth are then offered the opportunity to reschedule for an in-person interview, telephone, or video chat interview, or to complete the interview tool independently and return it to the Child Locator by mail.

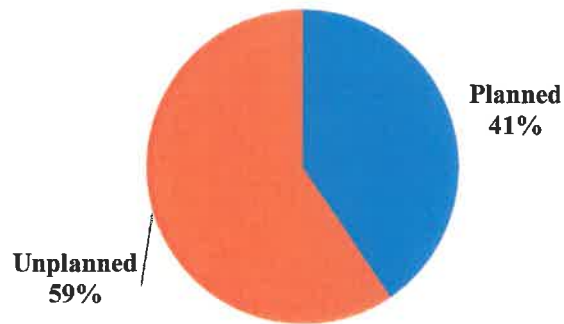
Results

Every attempt is made to conduct debriefing interviews with each youth in person to ensure that the youth has the privacy required to speak freely and to allow the Child Locator to build sufficient rapport. Nearly all (93.8%) of the interviews were done in person.



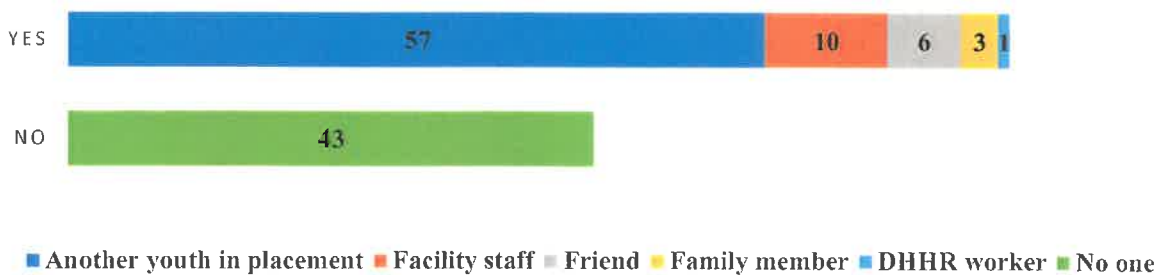
Youth were asked, “Was your run planned or unplanned?” The degree to which the amount of preparation or thought is considered “planning” is left to the youth to determine. Some youth describe the supplies gathered and why they take certain items, such as the layering of clothing so that their “last seen wearing” can be changed quickly, clothing for warmth, personal hygiene items, etc. Others have described always having the idea of running in the back of their mind without planning out what to take or where to go; when the opportunity arises, they leave. Many others describe their run as impulsive, usually when they are angry or frustrated in the moment of a present situation.

Planned vs. Unplanned



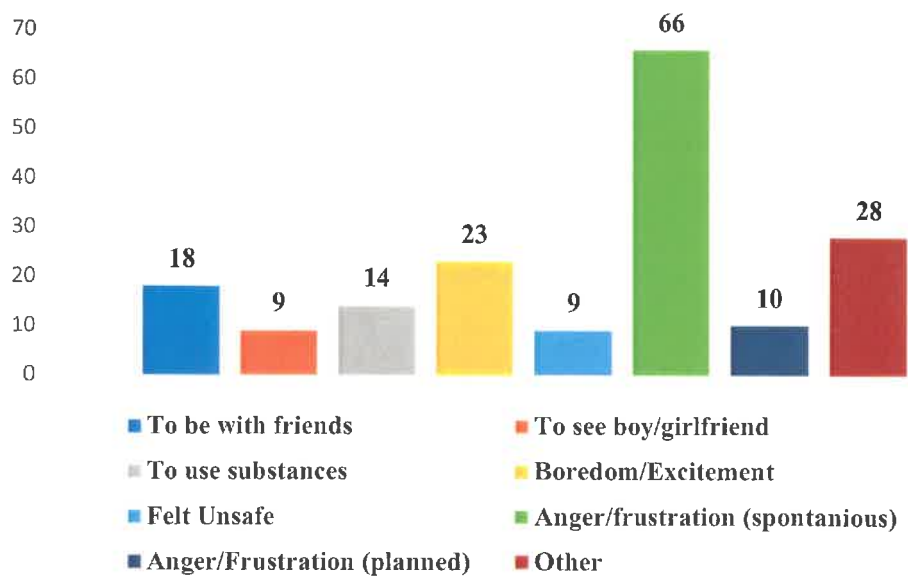
Youth interviewed were asked: “Did you tell anyone you were going to leave, and if so, who did you tell?” Of the interviewed youth, 43 reportedly told no one they were going to leave prior to running. Of the others, some told more than one person. Most of the youth who reported telling “another youth” indicated that the other youth was placed in the same facility or may have followed the youth and became a run companion.

Did you tell anyone that you were going to run? If so, who?



When interviewed, youth were asked: “What made you decide to leave?” Many gave more than one or multiple reasons. Most often, youth interviewed described being angry and frustrated, often with facility staff or a situation in placement they ran from. Several interviewed talked about their impulsivity; they did not think, they just left. The most common “Other” reasons given for leaving included a perceived problem with the placement; just needing a break/mental health issue; fear of the unknown (a hearing or change in placement); and to help a friend.

Reported reason for leaving placement

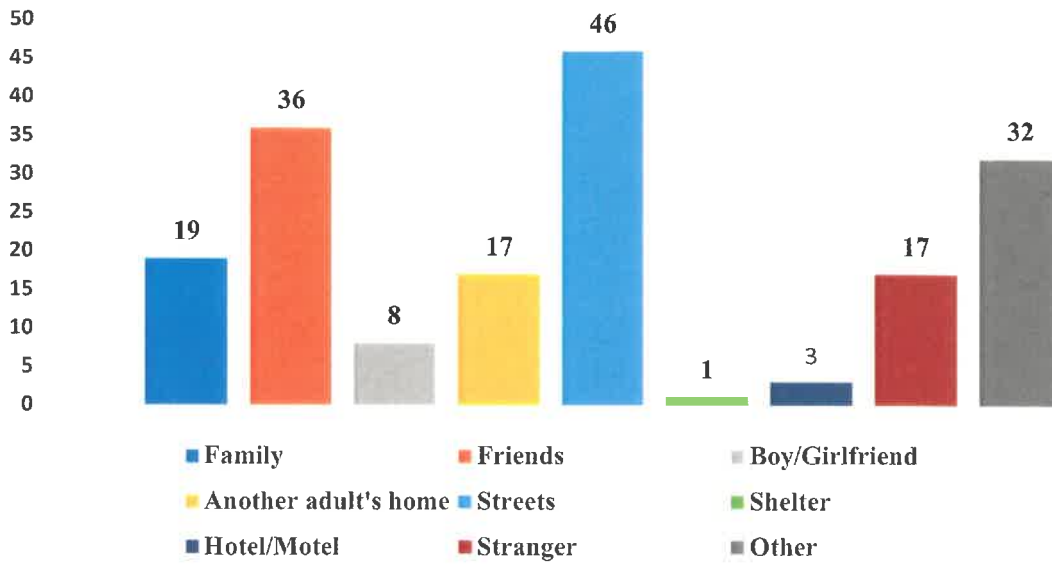


Reported "Other" reasons for having run

Issue with placement	3
Didn't want to be there	3
Followed others	1
To help friend	3
Fear of unknown	4
Feelings/ mental health reasons	9
To find brother	1
To smoke	2
No reason given	1

All youth interviewed were asked: "Where did you stay while away from care?" Some youth had more than one response.

Where did you stay while away from care?

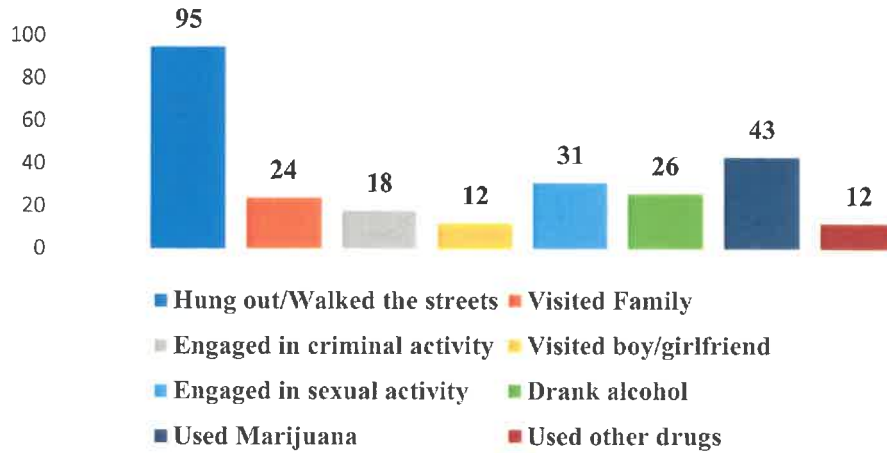


Reported "Other" locations youths stayed	
Outdoor locations	17*
Abandoned house	3
Local church	2
Remained on facility property	2
Youth's personal camper	1

**Outdoor locations include the woods, parks, etc.*

Each youth interviewed was asked if they engaged in a series of activities. Follow up questions were asked to screen for trafficking and victimization.

Disclosed Activities While Away From Care



Screening Question	"Yes" response
Youth obtained good for engaging in sexual activity	3*
Someone else obtained goods for youth to engage in sexual activity	0
Engaged in sexual activity with unwanted partner	3**
Forced/threatened to engage in sexual activity	1
Forced/required to work for needed items	0

*Two youth reported situations which occurred during their time away from care that meet the definition of sex trafficking. One youth received money and another item of value.

**One youth reported being the victim of a forceable sexual assault. One youth reported being coerced by another youth into engaging in sexual activity with a third youth. The final youth counted here was a victim of sex trafficking.

Disclosed Victimization	
Labor trafficked	0
Sex trafficked	2
Sexually assaulted	1
Physically assaulted	5
Robbed	1
Forced to do something against will	1*
Other	1*

*One youth reported being forced into a car and held against her will.

Several youth interviewed denied use of any substance while on the run but indicated that they would have used if substances had been made available to them. Each of the youth who indicated that they had engaged in sexual activity was further questioned regarding their sexual partner and consent. Most youth who ran with a companion report they “just hung out” with those with whom they ran.

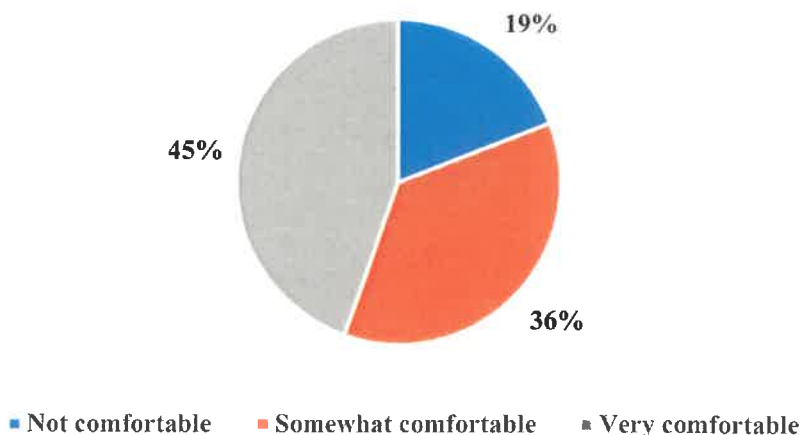
Two instances of sex trafficking were disclosed by youth interviewed during this reporting period. In another interview, a youth disclosed a forceable sexual assault. Five youth reported being physically assaulted during their time away from care; one reported being robbed and one youth reported being forced into a car and held for a period of time (without other assault or injury). The Preventing Trafficking and Strengthening Families Act (P.L. 113-183) dictates that all state agencies must immediately report disclosed incidents of trafficking to law enforcement and to track and report the total number of youth sex trafficking victims to the U.S. Secretary of Health and Human Services.⁶ When a youth being interviewed makes a disclosure of trafficking during an interview, Child Locators make a referral to Centralized Intake to report and track those occurrences. Child Locators also report other instances of victimization and suspected abuse to Centralized Intake and to law enforcement as warranted.

All youth interviewed were asked: “How comfortable were you with the choices that you made?” The purpose of the question was meant to be an additional screener, intended to catch instances in which youth on the run felt uncomfortable or unsafe. Most youth answered this question as if the Child Locator had asked: “Would you do it again?” Many interviewed during this reporting period spoke about feeling free and having a good time while on the run. Some interviewed indicated a regret after the run and being unhappy with consequences from running, even if the consequence was not a punishment. One youth reported that he felt regret after his run assuming if he had not run, perhaps he would have been removed from residential care and placed in a foster home, maybe even with his siblings.

Few youth reported feeling unsafe at any time during their time away from supervision even in situations that Child Locators would consider risk-taking behavior: accepting rides from strangers, hitchhiking, or accepting a place to stay from a stranger.

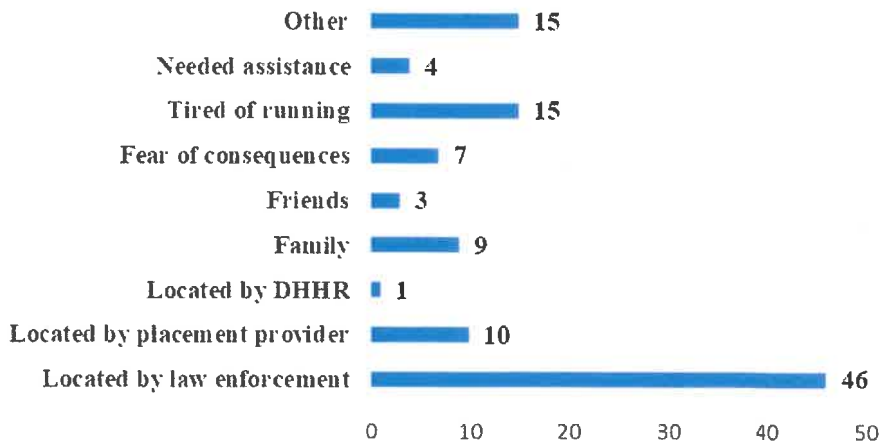
⁶ The Library of Congress. (n.d.). *H.R. 4980 - 113th congress (2013-2014): Preventing sex trafficking and ...* Congress.gov. Retrieved June 2, 2022, from <https://www.congress.gov/bill/113th-congress/house-bill/4980>

How comfortable were you with the choices that you made?



Youth are asked to discuss why they decided to return to care. Most youth do not choose to return but instead are found by law enforcement, often after being reported by others. Others return on their own after a short time away and verbalizing that a break was needed. “Other” reasons given for youth returning were reported included the youth was cold (2); youth never planned to be gone long (7); and one youth was found by their Juvenile Probation Officer.

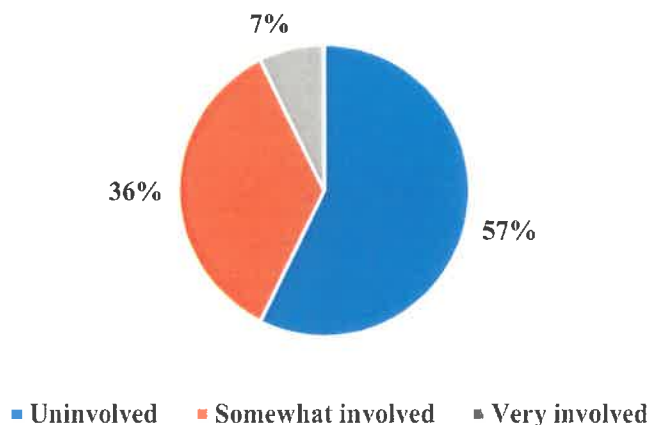
What made you decide to return?



All youth interviewed were asked: “How involved do you feel in the decisions made about your life?” Some youth interviewed reported that they feel as though no one is considering their thoughts and feelings prior to making decisions that impact their lives. One youth responded “zero percent,” and added feeling as though no one listens to her. Another youth reported “Right now? Yeah, they [Multidisciplinary Team] listen, but it wasn’t always that way.” Many interviewed verbalized that they liked their child welfare worker and felt their worker had their best interest in

mind. Others report that often decisions are made without their child welfare worker providing an explanation (e.g., why contact with specific relative is not permitted).

How involved do you feel in the decisions made about your life?

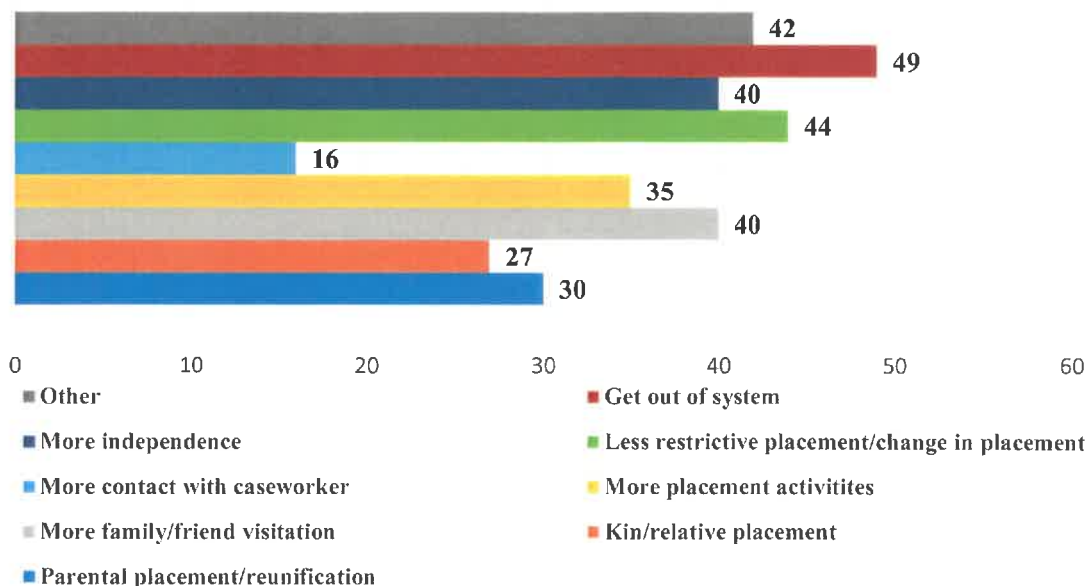


All youth interviewed were asked: “What could prevent them from running in the future?” During the timeframe when COVID-19 infection levels were high, many of the responses given to this question are indicative of the effect that the COVID-19 pandemic has had on youth in placement due to additional restrictions implemented. In-person visitations at facilities and home visits were reduced or ceased. When facility staff or a foster child had likely been exposed to or tested positive for COVID-19, the facility was placed under quarantine and immediately stopped all visits (including those from child welfare workers). Youth participated in virtual calls with their child welfare workers and family as they were able, but reported that virtual were not the same as an in-person visit. Outside activities meant to keep youth active, entertained and to give a sense of normalcy were largely stopped.

Some youth expressed feeling as though there are “too many kids, all cooped up together.” Others talked about how living in a small space with multiple youth when “no one can agree on anything” is difficult for them. Several interviewed verbalized that they needed a break from being in their placement facility and ran “just to get away,” while remaining in the area of the facility and returning on their own once they had calmed down.

Several youth reported that they will not run again. Some of these youth expressed that they regret running due to the consequences from running, others due to the stress it caused to those around them. A few youth reported that they were nearly adults, and it was time to make better decisions.

What could prevent you from running in the future?



Other responses	
Youth "won't run again"	13
Ankle monitor	4
Cigarettes/nicotine gum	2
Change in contacts permitted	4
Better food	1
Permitted caffeine	1
Permitted to listen to music	1
Not being placed in an area youth knows	1
Needed treatment	1
Nothing	1

Other Observations

Several foster youth interviewed who had been involved in a child protective services case in which their parents' rights were terminated have little or no contact with any family members. Those in this situation may also lack contact with anyone outside of the child welfare system, leaving them with no supports. Child Locators have observed that youth without strong connections are more likely to run when frustrated or angry.

Another point of interest that was not specifically addressed by the interview tool was whether the youth needed to depend on a stranger while on the run for a ride, a place to stay, or another perceived need. Many of the youth interviewed disclosed hitchhiking, accepting rides or places to stay, cigarettes, or other items.

Prevention

“Push-and-pull” factors are often characterized by static and dynamic factors which tend to “push” a youth to run away from care or “pull” a youth towards an external factor which also results in runaway behavior. A push factor may include things such as:

- Placement restrictiveness
- Anger or frustration of a child who lacks coping skills
- Lack of engagement or attention by staff

Pull factors may include things such as:

- Desire to see significant other, friends or family
- Addiction or desire to use substances
- Gaining a sense of independence or normalcy

Preventing youth from running away from placement requires an understanding of the push-and-pull factors both on an aggregate and individual level. Data obtained from runaway reporting and debriefing interviews will be utilized to focus efforts on reducing and preventing run away events from occurring whenever possible. Aggregate level data can identify systemic problems which contribute to push-and-pull factors. At this high-level view, changes may be identified which can prevent run away behavior from occurring and reduce its prevalence statewide. Individual level data is important in reducing the number youth may engage in.

2022 Initiatives

The Child Locator Unit will continue to work to improve the reporting of run events and the return of youth to care through Centralized Intake. While reporting has improved in the last year, the unit continues to find evidence of run events that had not been called into Centralized Intake. In addition to this, after a youth has been reported to have run away, Child Locators will often find other documentation that the child has returned without a report to Centralized Intake. This prevents Child Locators from focusing their efforts on youth who continue to be missing and delays the interview process.

Child Locators are also interested in understanding the discrepancies between the statistics gathered for West Virginia’s foster children and with national statistics provided by NCMEC. One possibility is that the unit’s data only considers those youth who are in foster care while NCMEC’s

data counts all children who run away, regardless of their custody status. The Child Locator Unit will compare its data to research from other states on runaway and missing foster children and will also look to see if there are answers within the demographics of the children taken into custody of the West Virginia Department of Health and Human Resources as well.

Additionally, the unit will explore evidence-informed runaway prevention resources to determine if the implementation of a curriculum or a mentoring program would assist those youth who are at the greatest risk of running (or those with significant endangerment statuses) in gaining healthier coping skills to utilize when frustrated or bored. Child Locators have had instances of being contacted by a child while on the run and after an interview, wanting to talk. This may indicate a need for some youth to maintain connections outside of their multi-disciplinary treatment team.

Appendix A
Missing from Care Reporting Form

Runaway and Missing Youth Report

This form is to be utilized when reporting missing and runaway youth

Form Completed Date.

Completed By: Individual Completing the Form *CI Worker* *Child's Assigned Worker*

Reporter's Name: Click or tap here to enter text. **Contact Phone:** Click or tap here to enter text.

Date of Run: Click or tap to enter a date. **Time of Run:** Click or tap here to enter text.

Youth's Name: Click or tap here to enter text. **Preferred Name/Aliases:** Click or tap here to enter text.

Date of Birth: Click or tap here to enter text. **Sex:** Click or tap to enter a date.

Gender Identity: Enter Youth's Preferred Gender **Racial Identity:** Enter Self-Identified Race

Home County: Choose an item. **Placement Provider:** Click or tap here to enter text.

Last Known Whereabouts: Click or tap here to enter text.

Distinguishing Characteristics (including eye color, hair color, height, and weight, scars, and tattoos if known): Click or tap here to enter text.

FACTS ID: Click or tap here to enter text. **DHHR Worker:** Click or tap here to enter text.

Endangerment Statuses

Please check all that apply to the youth and describe in the space provided⁷.

- | | | | |
|--|--|---|--|
| <input type="checkbox"/> Serious Substance Use Disorder | <input type="checkbox"/> Actively Homicidal | <input type="checkbox"/> Actively Suicidal | <input type="checkbox"/> Self-Harming |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Medical Condition Requiring Medication | <input type="checkbox"/> Atypical Sexual Behaviors | <input type="checkbox"/> Pregnant | <input type="checkbox"/> Violent |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Age 13 or under | <input type="checkbox"/> Intellectual or Developmental Disability | <input type="checkbox"/> Trafficking Status: | <input type="checkbox"/> History of Trafficking
<input type="checkbox"/> Suspected/At-Risk of Trafficking |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Situational Endangerment Condition which may Indicate Youth is at Significant Risk of Harm | | | |

⁷ Missing youth must immediately be reported to the National Center for Missing and Exploited Children (NCMEC) @ 1-800-THE-LOST or 1-800-843-5678.

Describe condition's selected: Click or tap here to enter text.

Referral Narrative

Please describe the run event including, run companions, possible destinations, and any information which may have led to the run or otherwise help to locate the youth. If youth is believed or suspected to have use of a vehicle, please include a description of the vehicle.

Click or tap here to enter text.

Did the Youth Have any Companions when Fleeing? Yes No

Name of Law Enforcement Agency Notified? E.g., Cabell County Sherriff's Office.

Was the Youth's Information Requested to be Entered into the National Crime Information Center (NCIC)? Yes No Unknown (Only use if LE did not advise)

Name of Assigned Officer: Click or tap here to enter text.

Case Number Generated from Missing Persons Case: Click or tap here to enter text.

Was National Center for Missing and Exploited Children Notified? Yes No

Unknown (Only use if LE did not advise)

Runaway and Missing Youth Return Report

This form is to be utilized when reporting the return of missing and runaway youth

Form Completed Date.

Completed By: Individual Completing the Form *CI Worker* *Child's Assigned Worker*

Reporter's Name: Click or tap here to enter text. **Contact Phone:** Click or tap here to enter text.

Youth's Name: Click or tap here to enter text. **Date of Birth:** Click or tap here to enter text.

FACTS ID: Click or tap here to enter text. **Home County:** Choose an item.

Date of Run: Click or tap to enter a date. **Time of Run:** Click or tap here to enter text.

Date of Return: Click or tap to enter a date. **Time of Return:** Click or tap here to enter text.

Pickup Location: Click or tap here to enter text. **Placement Provider:** Click or tap here to enter text.

DHHR Worker: Click or tap here to enter text. **Run Event Reported to:**
CI
Assigned Child's Worker

Did the youth return on their own?
 Yes No

Did the Youth have any companions when fleeing? Yes No

Did all companions return? Yes No N/A

Will youth return to the placement they ran from? Yes No

Return Narrative

Please describe the circumstances surrounding the youth's return, including any noted risks to the youth while on runaway status.

Click or tap here to enter text.

Did the youth report being victimized while absent from care? Yes No

Describe: Click or tap here to enter text.

Did the youth report or have any noted injuries? Yes No

Describe: Click or tap here to enter text.

Did the youth disclose substance use while on runaway status, or is there a reasonable suspicion that the youth used substances while on runaway status? Yes No

Describe: Click or tap here to enter text.

Has Law Enforcement Agency been notified of the return? Choose an item.

Appendix B Child Locator Unit

The Child Locator Unit consists of one northern based and one southern based Child Locator and a social worker dedicated to receiving reports of missing foster youth.

<p>Rachel A Deem, LSW Health and Human Resources Specialist, Senior Child Locator, Northern District 400 Fifth Street P.O. Box 1547 Parkersburg, WV 26101 (304) 932-8665</p>	<p>Mary Amanda "Mandy" Muth, LSW, MSW Health and Human Resources Specialist, Senior Child Locator, Southern District 2699 Park Avenue, Suite 100, Rm 2301 Huntington, WV 25704 (304) 932-8167</p>
<p>Spence Peacemaker, MPA, MSW, LCSW Social Service Worker III Runaway Social Worker, Centralized Intake 416 Adams Street Fairmont, WV 26554 (681) 341-3631</p>	