



CHILD LOCATOR UNIT

2023 Annual Report

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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 (DHHR), Bureau for Social Services (BSS), 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.

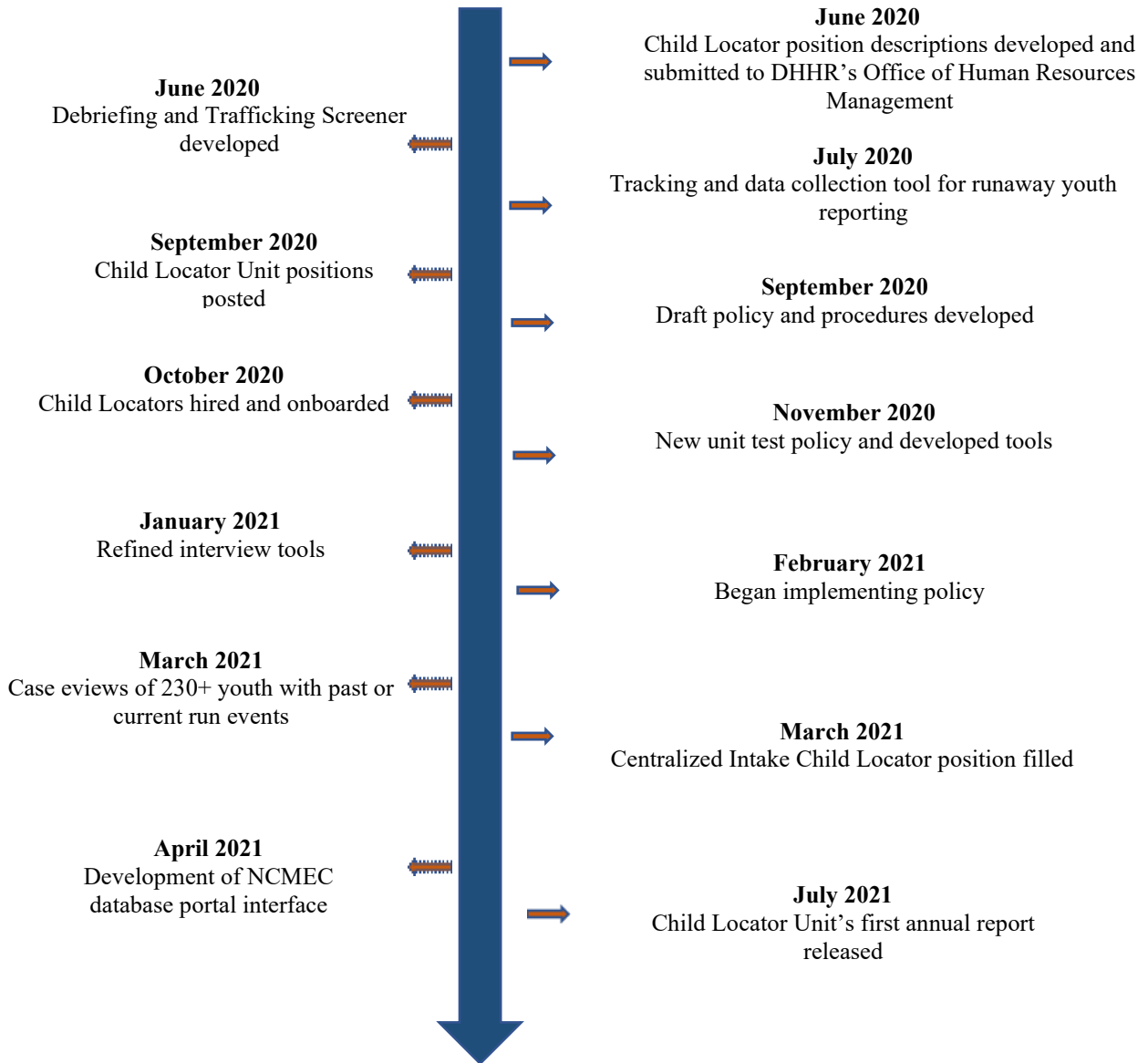
Establishment of Child Locator Unit

House Bill 4415, which passed during the 2020 Regular Legislative Session, 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 and was 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 DHHR.

BSS, formerly the Bureau for Children and Families, began implementation of the Child Locator Unit immediately upon the bill’s 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 West Virginia's children in foster care who run away. When a child in foster care 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 DHHR. 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 a child in foster care who was missing for six hours or longer returns from runaway status, Child Locators are assigned to complete an interview with the child.

Casework Process

Reporting Runaway Events and Return Events

When a child in foster care runs away, a report is required to be made immediately to law enforcement and DHHR. Each provider has an internal process for handling its reporting. BSS began handling all reports of missing and located runaway children in foster care through DHHR's Centralized Intake Unit in February 2021. 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 child in foster care 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.

Once a report is generated by Centralized Intake, it is 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.

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

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 a missing child, they are made available to BSS child welfare workers to provide technical assistance as needed.

When runaway children are located, a notification is provided to Centralized Intake. A return report is logged, and a notification is sent to the child's assigned BSS 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 Children

Efforts to locate children take various forms. To enable a Child Locator to assist in the location of a missing child, 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 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 discover 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

Child Locators conduct an interview with any child in foster care 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 child's experiences on the run; and
- Whether the child was injured or victimized, including whether they were trafficked.

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

Whenever possible, 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. Children 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 child is a critical function of the Child Locator Unit and begins when the Runaway Social Worker at Centralized Intake receives the initial report of each run event. 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 child'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 BSS child welfare staff to assist in improving their response to runaway children and the ultimate prevention of runaway events.

Identifying and tracking runaway children in foster care has been a challenging area for the BSS 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 runaway children are recovered and documented.

In the 2023 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 a child 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 children were missing from care less than 15 minutes. During the 2022 calendar year, there were 69 reported incidents that were excluded from data as they did not meet the definition of a missing from care (run) event.

Reported Runaways

During the period of January 1, 2021, to December 31, 2021, a total of 474 run events were documented, involving 268 children. Of those involved in runs, 206 (or 43.0%) children ran more than once during 2021, averaging 1.77 runs per youth. From January 1, 2022, to December 31, 2022, a total of 517 run events were documented, involving 293 children. Of those involved in runs, 233 (or 43.3%) children ran more than once during 2022, averaging 1.76 runs per child.

At midnight on December 31, 2021, 14 children were missing from care, equaling 3.0% of the run events and 5.2% of children involved in run events for 2021. At midnight on December 31, 2022, 26 children were missing from care, equaling 5.0% of the run events and 8.9% of children involved in run events for 2022. While there does appear to be an increase in the number of children running and remaining on the run at the end of 2022, part of this apparent increase may be due to more accurate reporting to Centralized Intake.

During calendar year 2021, 79.7% of run events occurred 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%).

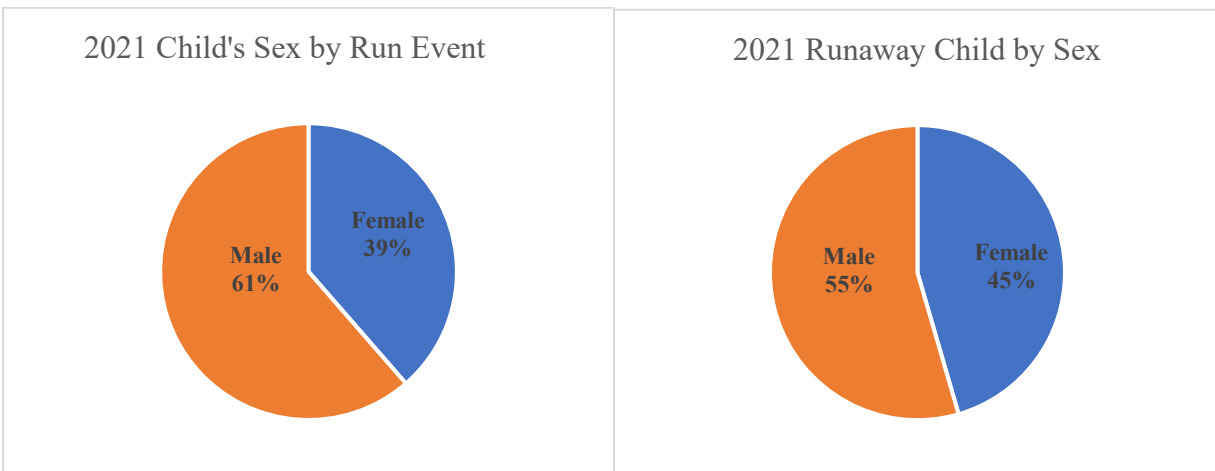
For reported events in 2022, the hours between 2:00 p.m. and 10:00 p.m. constituted the most frequent time for runaway events to occur (72.9%). More specifically, the hours between 8:00 p.m. and 12:00 a.m. were the most common time for all run events (30.7%). Hours of 8:00 p.m. – 10 p.m. and 10:00 p.m. – 12:00 a.m. were nearly the same at 15.47% and 15.28%, respectively.

In 2021, Sunday was the most common day of the week for run events (18.1%) with only 10.8% occurring on Fridays. In 2022, Monday was most common day with 16.6% of runs occurring that day. Nearly half (48.55%) of runs occurred on a Monday, Saturday, or Sunday.

Demographics

The following charts illustrate the number of runaway children by sex and the number of runaway events by sex for calendar years 2021 and 2022. The sex of each child is determined by the child’s assigned sex at birth, as documented in the child’s official case record.

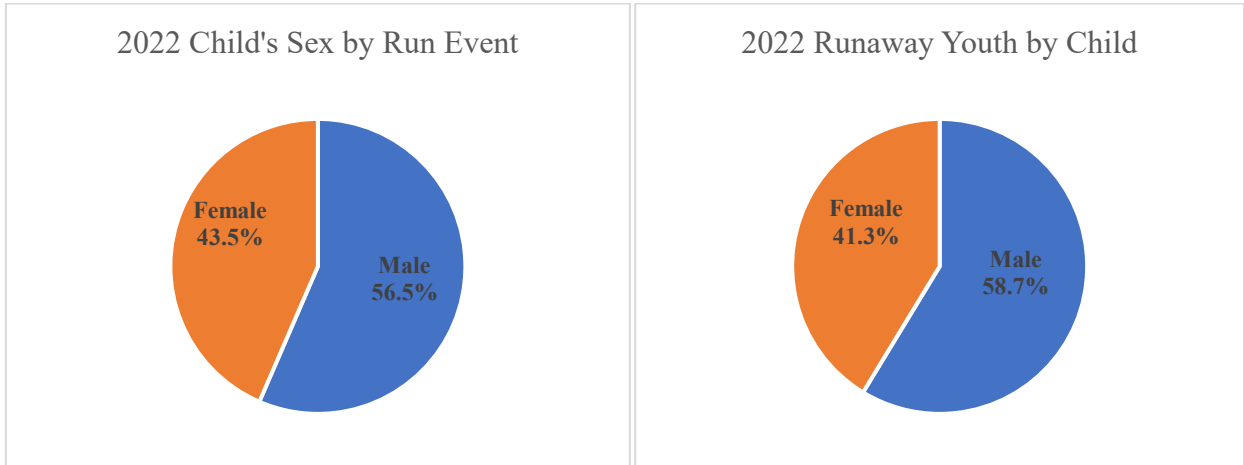
During the 2021 calendar year, males constitute the majority of running children; they were also significantly more likely than females to have multiple run events, as reflected in the charts below.



2021 Children by Sex				
	Run Event		Youth Involved	
Male	291	61.4%	146	54.5%
Female	183	38.6%	122	45.5%
Total	474		268	

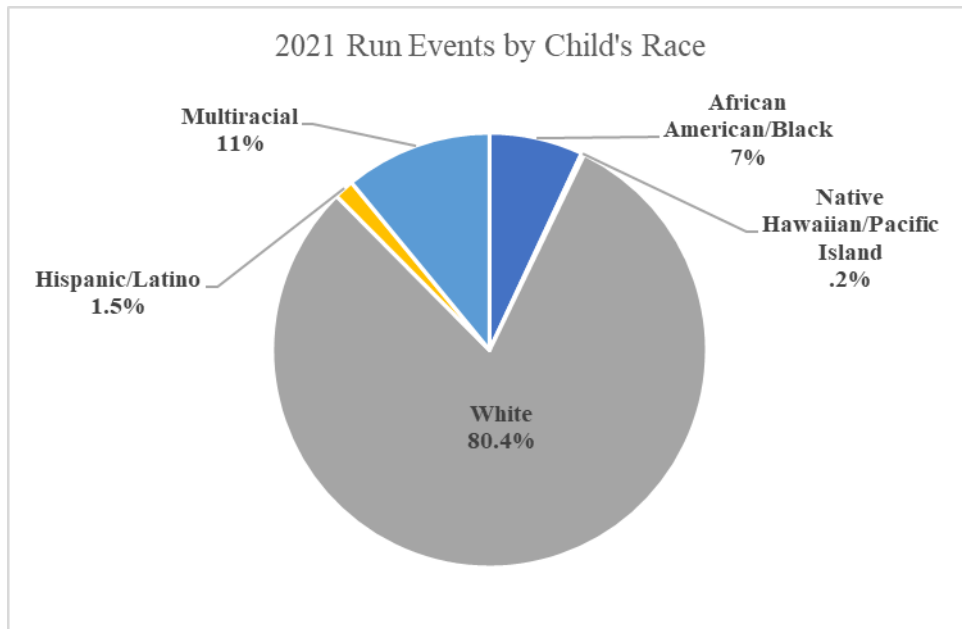
During the 2022 calendar year, males constitute the majority of running children; they were also significantly more likely than females to have multiple run events. National data compiled by NCMEC indicates that females were more than three-fifths of the reported runs.² Factors influencing why this statistic is not aligned with statistics for West Virginia is largely due to the population being studied. NCMEC’s data reflects all runaway children, nationwide and not specific to runaway children in the custody of their state’s child welfare agency.

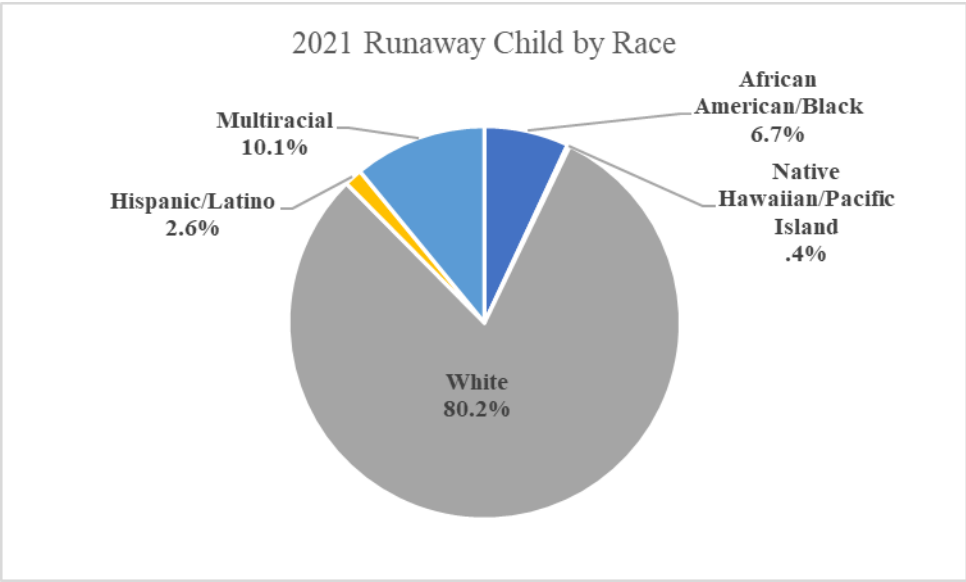
² Latzman, N. E., & Gibbs, D. (2020). Examining the link: Foster care runaway episodes and human trafficking. OPRE Report No. 2020-143. Washington, D.C.: Office of Planning, Research, and Evaluation, Administration for Children and Families, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services.



2022 Children by Sex				
	Run Event		Youth Involved	
Male	292	56.5%	172	58.7%
Female	225	43.5%	121	41.3%
Total	517		293	

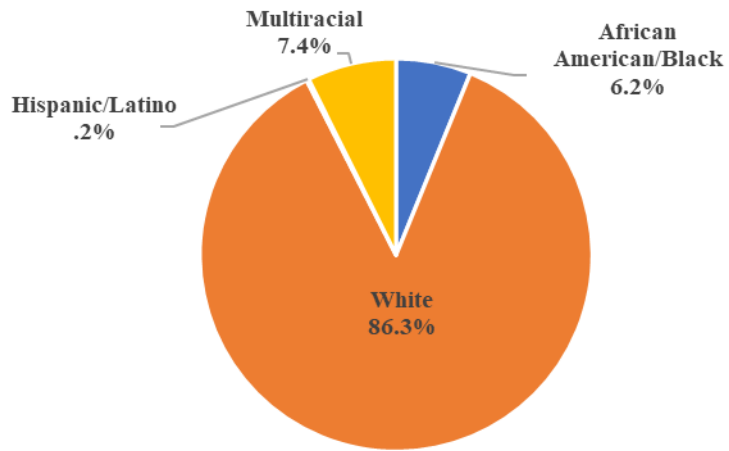
The following charts indicate the number of runaway children and the number of runaway events by racial identity. Each child's racial identity is defined by the racial or ethnic identity documented in the child's official case record and is not necessarily reflective of the child's perceived racial or ethnic identity. Multiracial is applied to any child with two or more reported races documented in the official case record.



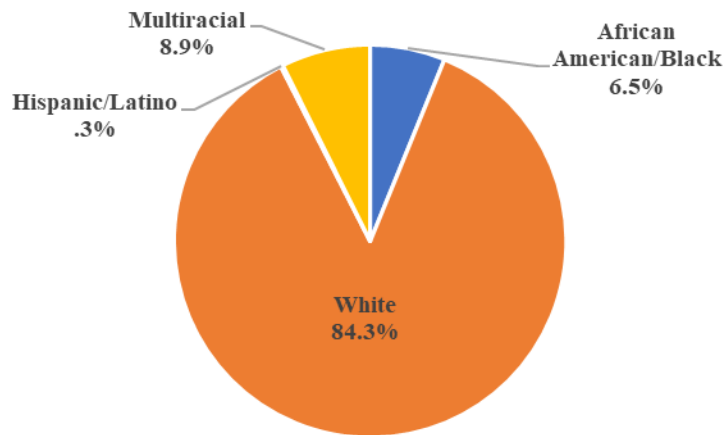


2021 Run Events by Child's Race				
Race/Ethnicity	Run Events		Runaway Youth	
African American/Black	33	7.0%	18	6.7%
Native Hawaiian/Pacific Island	1	0.2%	1	0.4%
White	381	80.4%	215	80.2%
Hispanic/Latino	7	1.5%	7	2.6%
Multiracial	52	11.0%	27	10.1%
Total	474		268	

2022 Run Events by Youth's Race

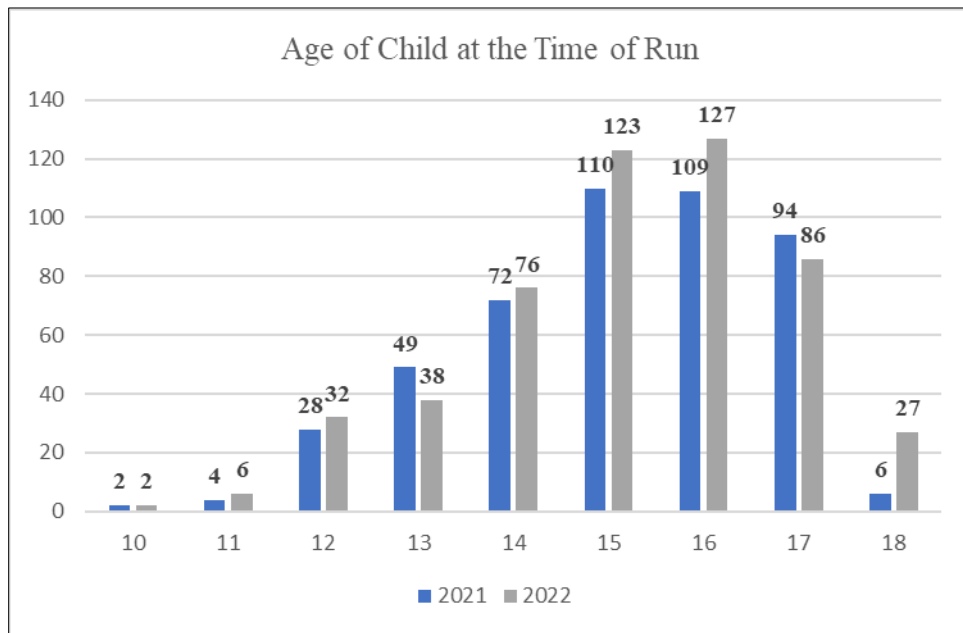


2022 Runaway Children by Race



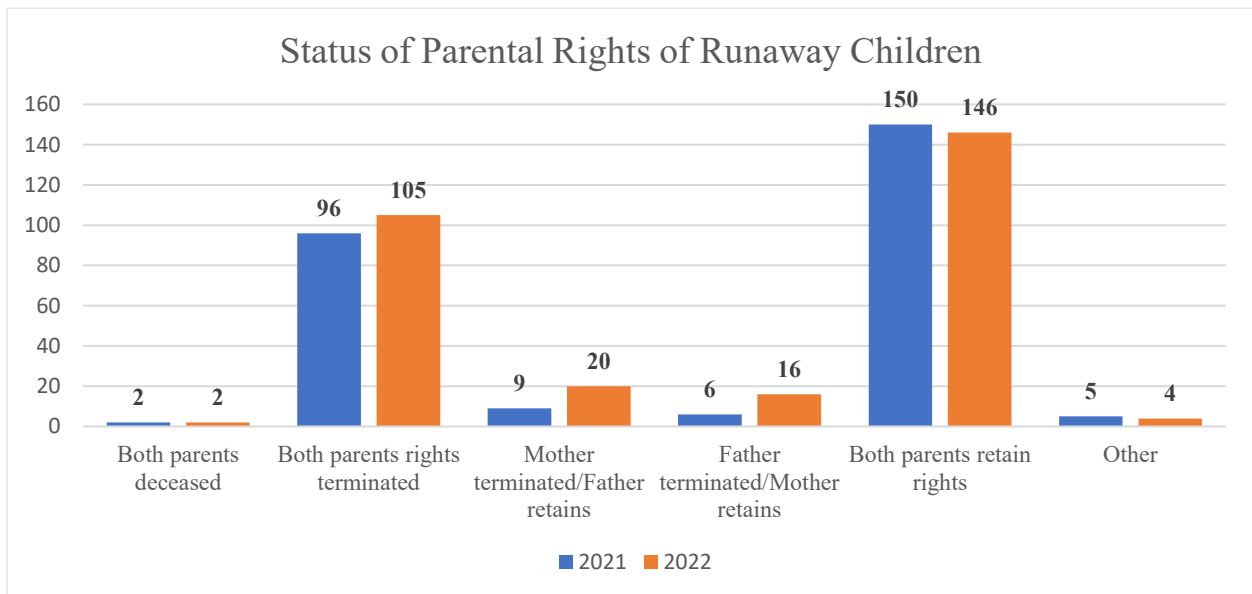
2022 Run Events by Child's Race				
Race/Ethnicity	Run Events		Runaway Youth	
African American/Black	32	6.2%	19	6.5%
White	446	86.3%	247	84.3%
Hispanic/Latino	1	0.2%	1	0.3%
Multiracial	38	7.4%	26	8.9%
Total	517		293	

Ages 15 and 16 were the most common age to run in 2021 and 2022. The average age of a runaway child was 15.6 in 2021 and 15.7 in 2022. The following chart illustrates the age of the child at each run event for both 2021 and 2022.



Age of Child at Time of Run				
Age	2021		2022	
10	2	0.4%	2	0.4%
11	4	0.8%	6	1.2%
12	28	5.9%	32	6.2%
13	49	10.3%	38	7.4%
14	72	15.2%	76	14.7%
15	110	23.2%	123	23.8%
16	109	23.0%	127	24.6%
17	94	19.8%	86	16.6%
18	6	1.3%	27	5.2%
Total	474		517	

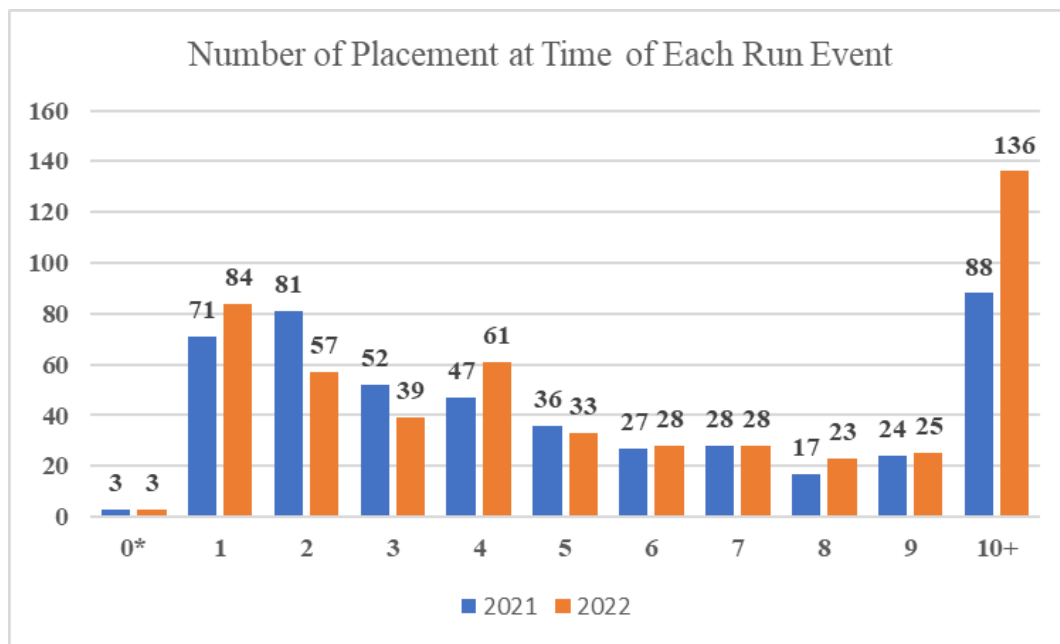
On first observation, data from 2021 and 2022 may appear to suggest that children with parents who retain their parental rights were just as likely or more likely than children whose parents have terminated parental rights to run away from care. The reality is more complicated. Data reflects the status of biological parents and is not adjusted for status of adoptive parents. Data also only reflects when a child becomes a ward of the state due to death of both parents but does not reflect death of a single parent. Also unaccounted for are those children 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 Children		
	2021	2022
Both parents deceased	2	2
Both parents rights terminated	96	105
Mother terminated/Father retains	9	20
Father terminated/Mother retains	6	16
Both parents retain rights	150	146
Other	5	4
Total	268	293

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 child’s decision to run. Such studies have found an increased risk of running away correlated positively to children experiencing high numbers of placement changes.³ 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 child has had at the time of each run event.



³ 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				
	2021		2022	
0*	3	0.6%	3	0.6%
1	71	15.0%	84	16.2%
2	81	17.1%	57	11.0%
3	52	11.0%	39	7.5%
4	47	9.9%	61	11.8%
5	36	7.6%	33	6.4%
6	27	5.7%	28	5.4%
7	28	5.9%	28	5.4%
8	17	3.6%	23	4.4%
9	24	5.1%	25	4.8%
10+	88	18.6%	136	26.3%
Total	474		517	

** In both 2021 and 2022, there were 3 incidents during which children ran prior to being physically placed in placement.*

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

Placement options for children 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. BSS strives to identify and secure the least restrictive and most appropriate environment that will meet the child’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 placement in a congregate care setting (such as group residential or emergency shelter care) and running behavior. 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.⁴

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.

Placement Type at the Time of Run				
	2021		2022	
Prior to Placement	18	3.8%	19	3.7%
Kinship/Relative Home	18	3.8%	32	6.2%
Foster Care	23	4.9%	49	9.5%
Shelter	147	31.0%	103	19.9%
Out-of-State Placement	32	6.8%	19	3.7%
Transitional Living	1	0.2%	2	0.4%
Psychiatric Residential Treatment Facility	2*	0.4%	1*	0.2%
Bureau for Juvenile Services Facility	2	0.4%	0	0.0%
Group Residential Unspecified	1	0.2%	0	0.0%
Group Residential 1	35	7.4%	17	3.3%
Group Residential Level 2	139	29.3%	122	23.6%
Group Residential Level 3	56	11.8%	153	29.6%
Total	474		517	

* This number is representative of children placed in detention that had active child welfare involvement and may not be representative of all runs from a BJS facility

Length of Time Away from Supervision

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

During 2021, more than 69% returned to care within 24 hours while the average number of days out of care was 32.5. In 2022, just under 80% returned within 24 hours while the average number of days out of care was 20.03.

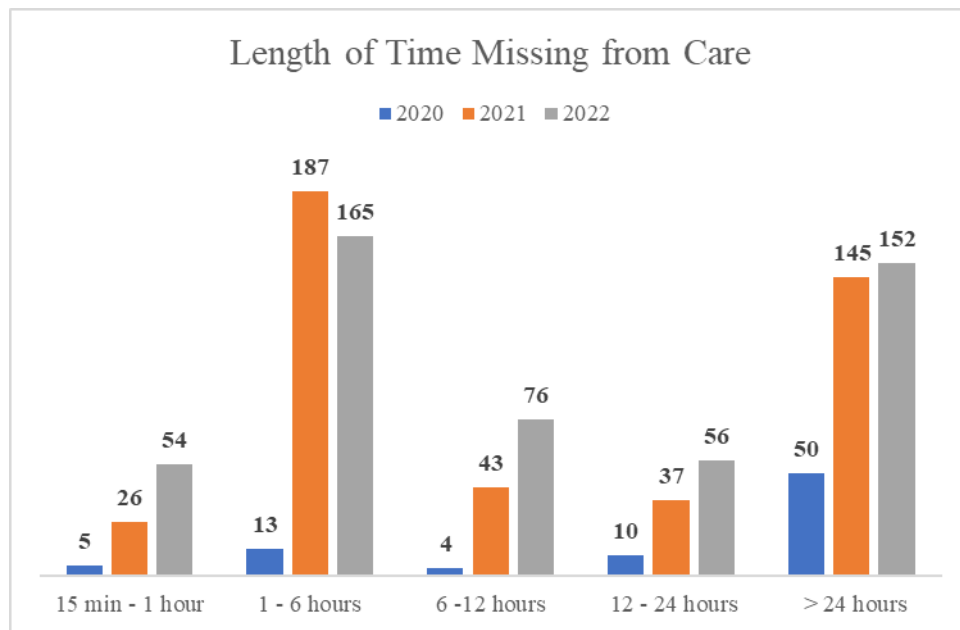
Time Away from Care: All Documented Runs		
	2021	2022
Number of runs	474	517
Average days out of care	32.5	20.03
Runners away > 24 hours	145	152

When considering only runaway children 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 2022.

Average Days Away from Care: Gone Longer than 24 Hours			
	2020	2021	2022
Average days out of care	304.59	105.25	65.71

Another detail to note when considering the apparent decrease in the length of time that children remained away from care from 2020 to 2022 is that the Child Locator Unit began actively searching for runaway children in early 2021. It is worth noting that the length of time continues to decrease despite the number of reported runs increasing for the year.

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 children were missing from care.



Length of Time Missing From Care						
Length of time	2020		2021		2022	
15 min - 1 hour	5	6.1%	26	12.0%	54	10.7%
1 - 6 hours	13	15.9%	187	40.0%	165	32.8%
6 - 12 hours	4	4.9%	43	9.2%	76	15.1%
12 - 24 hours	10	12.2%	37	7.9%	56	11.1%
> 24 hours	50	61.0%	145	31.0%	152	30.2%
Total	82		468		503	

**Time out of care could not be verified for 11 runs in 2020, 27 runs in 2021, and 14 runs in 2022. These events have been excluded from this data set to calculate percentages.*

Child Interviews

Debriefing interviews formally began in February 2021 after the finalization of the piloted interview tool. The West Virginia Missing Child Debriefing Interview Tool was used for children who are away from supervision longer than six hours or have engaged in three or more runs in the previous six months.

This 2023 annual report includes information from all attempted interviews taking place January 1, 2022, through January 31, 2023, and is comprised of children with run events who returned to care prior to December 31, 2022. Child Locators attempted 171 interviews; of these, three children refused to participate. When a child refuses to participate, some information can be gleaned from the official case record or by statements made by the child; 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 child is during their interview. While Child Locators understand the importance of taking time to build rapport to make each child 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 draw conclusions from the following data for these reasons.

Interview Process

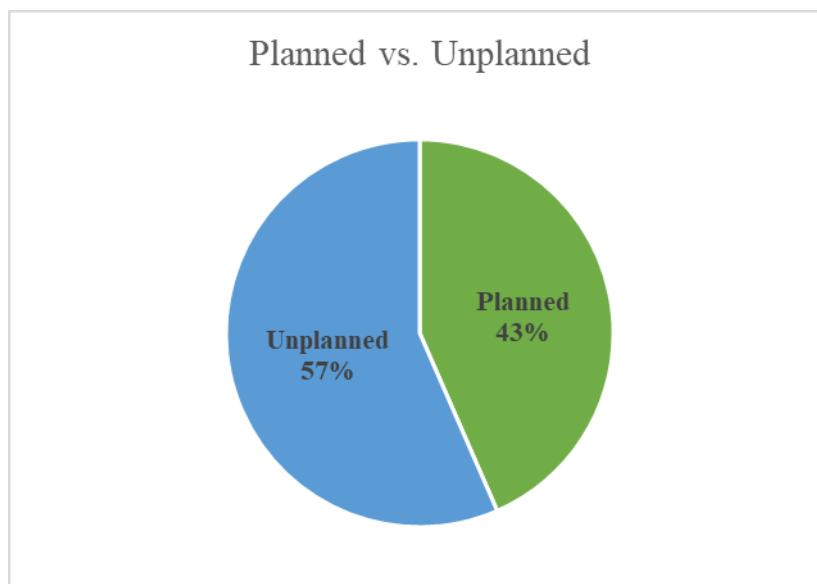
Interviews are conducted at the child's current placement setting, in a private interview space, to permit the child to speak freely. The Child Locator explains the purpose of the Child Locator Unit, the purpose of the interview, and what happens with the information received through each interview. The Child Locator explains that the child 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 child agrees to participate in the interview, the child 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. Children 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.

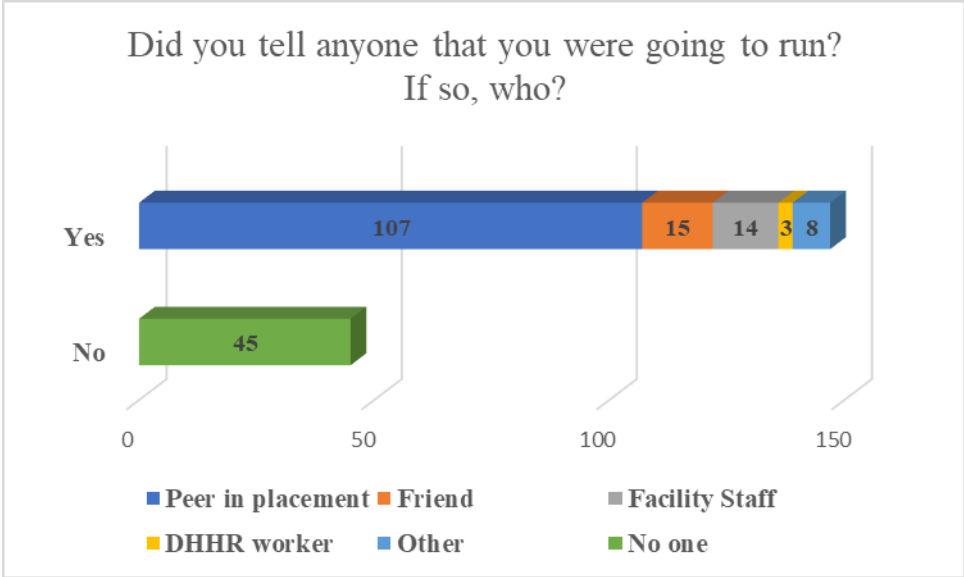
Results

Every attempt is made to conduct debriefing interviews with each child in person to ensure that the child has the privacy required to speak freely and to allow the Child Locator to build sufficient rapport. All 168 completed interviews were conducted in person.

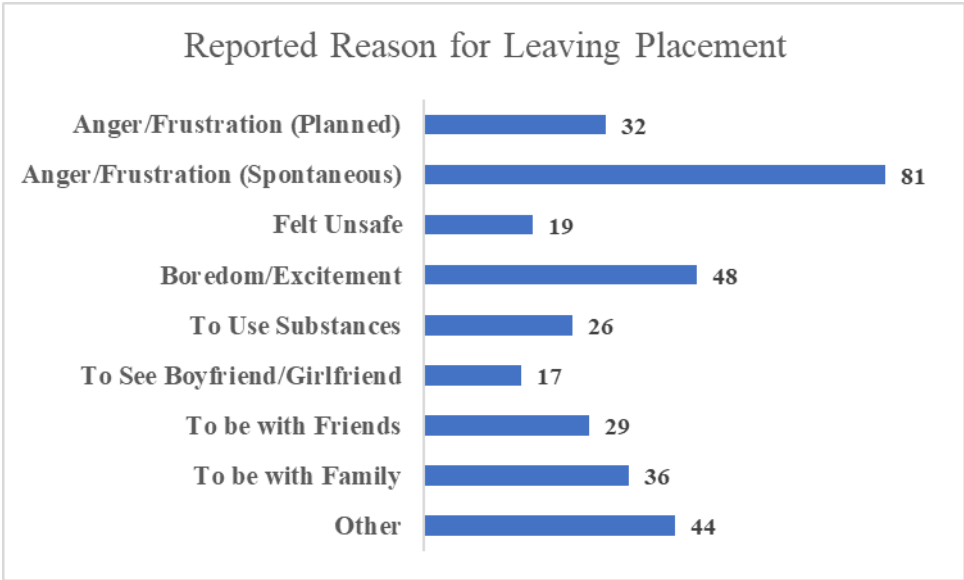
Children were asked, “Was your run planned or unplanned?” The degree to which the amount of preparation or thought is considered “planning” is left to the child to determine. Some children describe the supplies gathered and why they take certain items, such as the layering of clothing so that their “last 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.



Children interviewed were asked, “Did you tell anyone you were going to leave, and if so, who did you tell?” Of those interviewed, 45 reportedly told no one they were going to leave prior to running. Of the others, some told more than one person. Most who reported telling “another youth” indicated that the other was a peer placed in the same facility or may have followed and became a run companion.

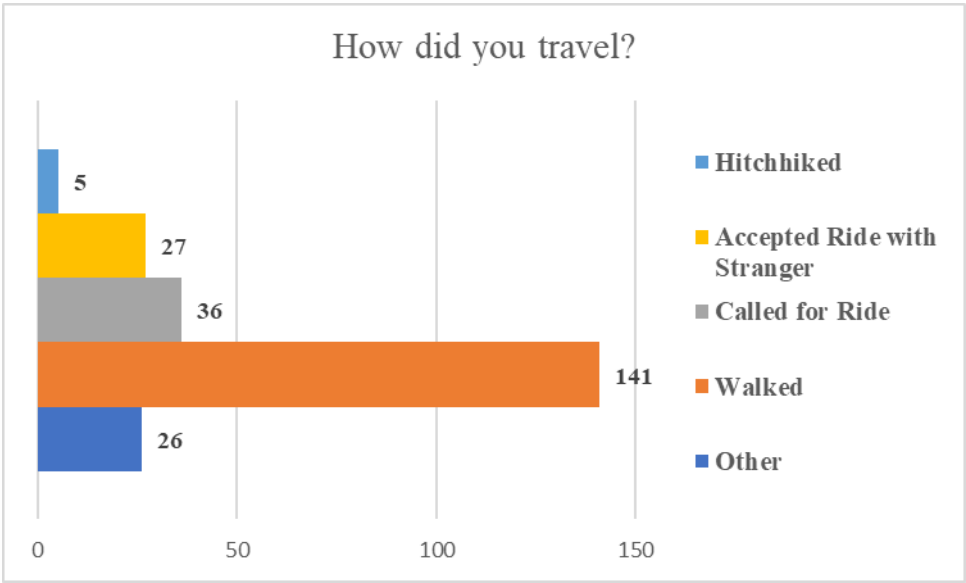


When interviewed, children were asked, “What made you decide to leave?” Many gave more than one or multiple reasons. Most often, children interviewed described being angry or frustrated, often with facility staff or a situation in placement from which they ran. Several interviewed talked about their 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 (an upcoming hearing or change in placement); and to help a peer.

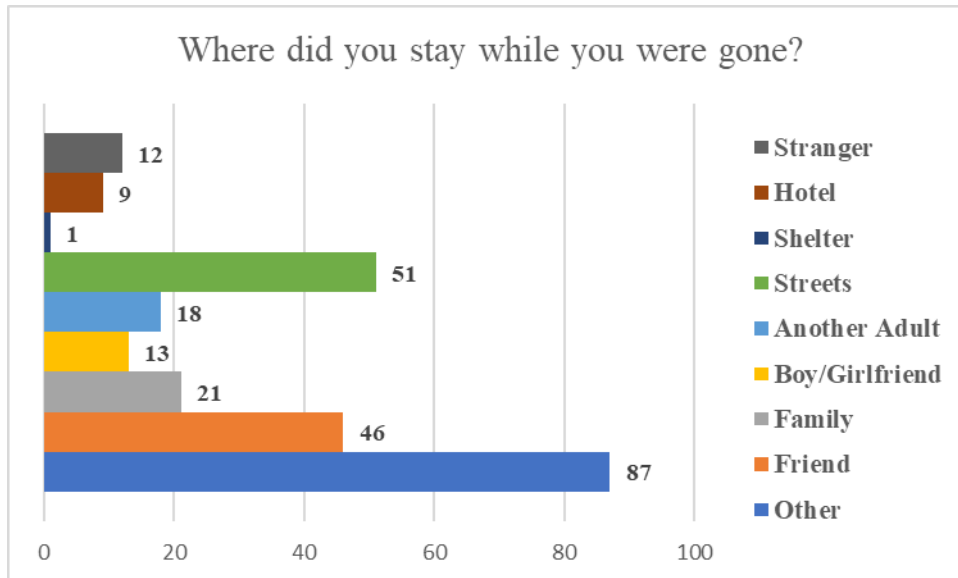


Reported "Other" Reasons for Leaving	
Preceived problem with placement facility	8
Preceived problem with faciltiy staff	6
Fear of future placement	4
Fear of consequences	4
Followed peer	3
To help peer	3
Upset with parent	2
To have fun	2
To find nicotine	2
Miscommunication	2
Access to social media	1
No reason given	5

Those interviewed were asked, “How did you travel to where you wanted to go?” While most reported that they walked where they wanted to go, some gave more than one mode of transportation. When discussing this question, the term “hitchhiked” was used for standing on the side of the road and soliciting rides from passing vehicles. All other rides with drivers that the child did not know were considered under “accepted ride with stranger.”



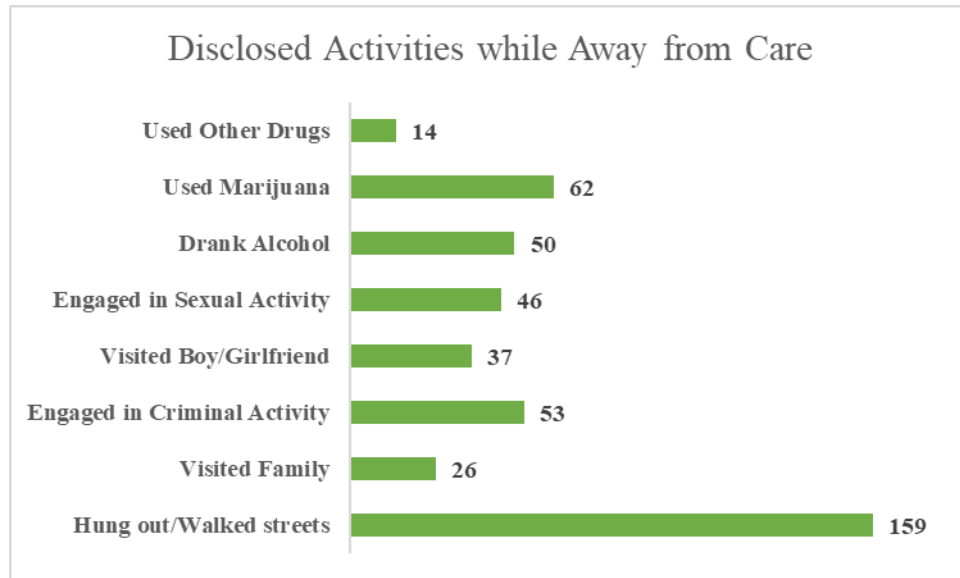
All interviewed were asked, “Where did you stay while away from care?” When considering responses to this question, “places stayed” do not necessarily mean where the child slept. The general understanding of this question by most interviewed was, “Where did you spend your time away from supervision?” regardless of the time the child was away from supervision. Some children had more than one response.



Reported "Other" Places Children Stayed	
Outdoor locations	32
Empty house/trailer	19
Remained on facility grounds	15
Church	4
Vehicle	4
Outbuilding	3
Closed facility building	2
Train	2
Empty business	1

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

Each child interviewed was asked if they engaged in a series of activities. Follow-up questions were asked to screen for trafficking and victimization. The hope of each Child Locator is that by the time the interview reaches this question, sufficient rapport has been built with the child being interviewed that they feel comfortable enough to disclose risk-taking behavior without the fear of negative consequences. Again, it is important to note that the information provided for this question is dependent on how forthcoming and truthful each child is during their interview.



Screening Question	"Yes" response
Youth obtained goods for engaging in sexual activity	2*
Someone else obtained goods for youth to engage in sexual activity	1*
Youth engaged in sexual activity with unwanted partner	3**
Youth was forced/treated to engage in sexual activity	3**
Youth was forced/required to work for needed items	0

**One youth reported both obtaining goods for engaging in sexual activity and that someone else obtained goods for that youth to engage in sexual activity.*

***The three youths who reported engaging in sexual activity with an unwanted partner were the same three who reported being forced/threatened.*

Disclosed Victimization	
Labor trafficked	0
Sex trafficked	2*
Sexually assaulted	3*
Physically assaulted	1
Robbed	3
Forced to do something against youth's will	0
Other	1**

**The two youth who indicated they received goods in exchange for sex had also reported being forced to engage in sexual activity.*

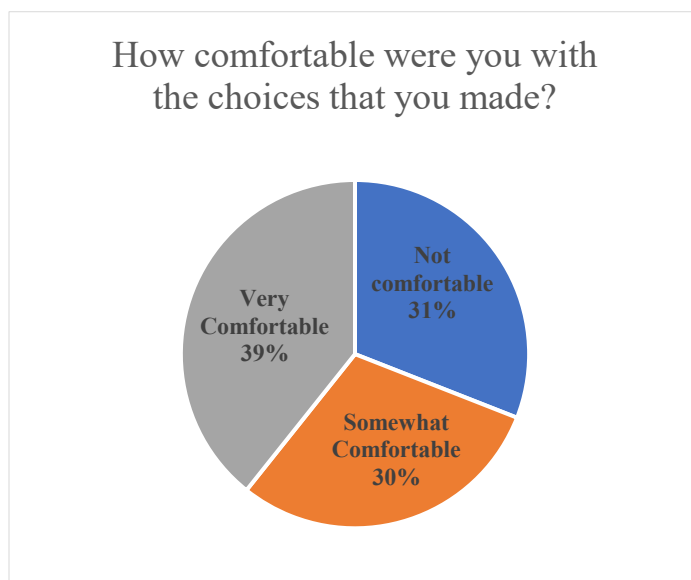
***Youth reported that a phone was stolen.*

Some 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. Three interviewed disclosed being sexually assaulted. One youth reported being physically assaulted during their time away from care; three reported being robbed and one youth reported that someone had stolen a cell phone from them. 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.⁵ 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.

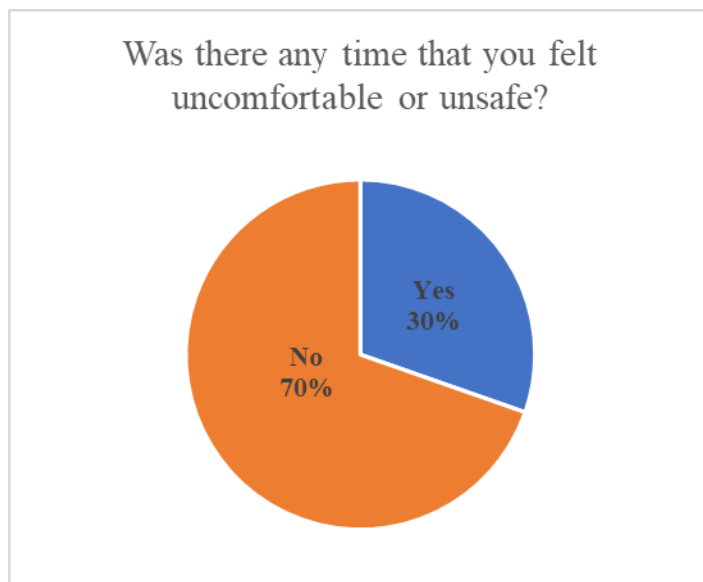
All youth interviewed were asked, “How comfortable were you with the choices that you made?” The purpose of the question was meant to be an additional screener, intended to catch instances in which youth on the run felt uncomfortable or unsafe. Most youth answered this question as if the Child Locator had asked, “Would you do it again?” or “Do you regret it?” Many interviewed during this reporting period spoke about having a good time while on the run, while others indicated regret. Some report being unhappy with consequences from running, even if the consequence was not a punishment, while others appear pleased with the change in placement after their run event. Many youths who reported regret verbalize this regret with a commonly heard, “It was stupid.”



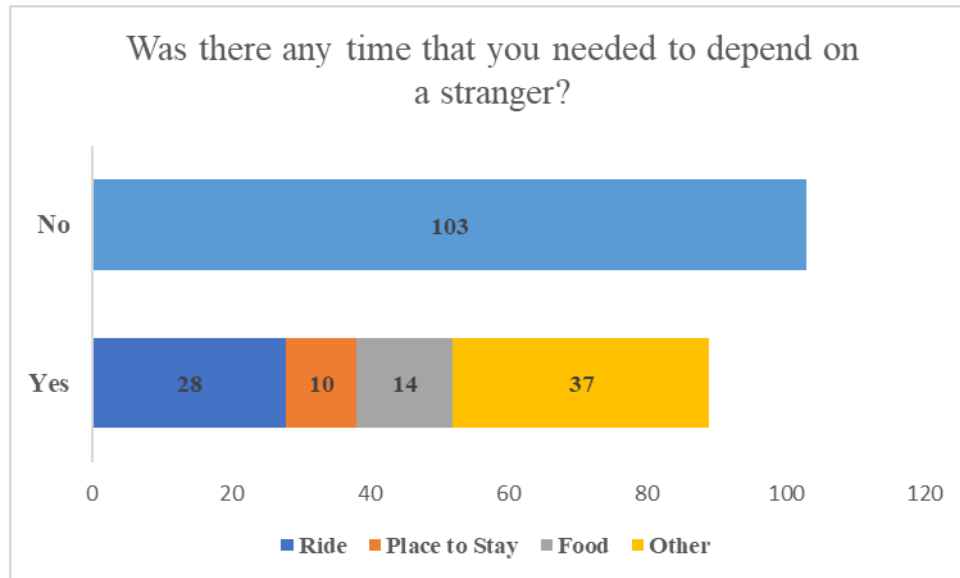
⁵ The Library of Congress. (n.d.). *H.R.4980 - 113th congress (2013-2014): Preventing sex trafficking and ...* Congress.gov. Retrieved June 2, 2022, from <https://www.congress.gov/bill/113th-congress/house-bill/4980>

During previous reporting periods, very few youths had volunteered 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, etc. Due to this, the Child Locator Unit added questions specifically centered on safety to determine whether there are times youths feel unsafe or uncomfortable and whether youths are depending on strangers for needed items while aways from supervision.

The first of these additional questions for the 2022 calendar year was, “Was there any time during your time away that you felt uncomfortable or unsafe?” This question not only gave those interviewed the opportunity to talk about situations that left them feeling uneasy, but it also acted as an additional screening question for victimization.



The second question added to the debriefing tool considered the need for the youth to depend on a stranger. Each youth interviewed was asked, “Was there any time during your time away that you needed to depend on a stranger? If so, how?” Those who answered yes often gave more than one answer for the help received.



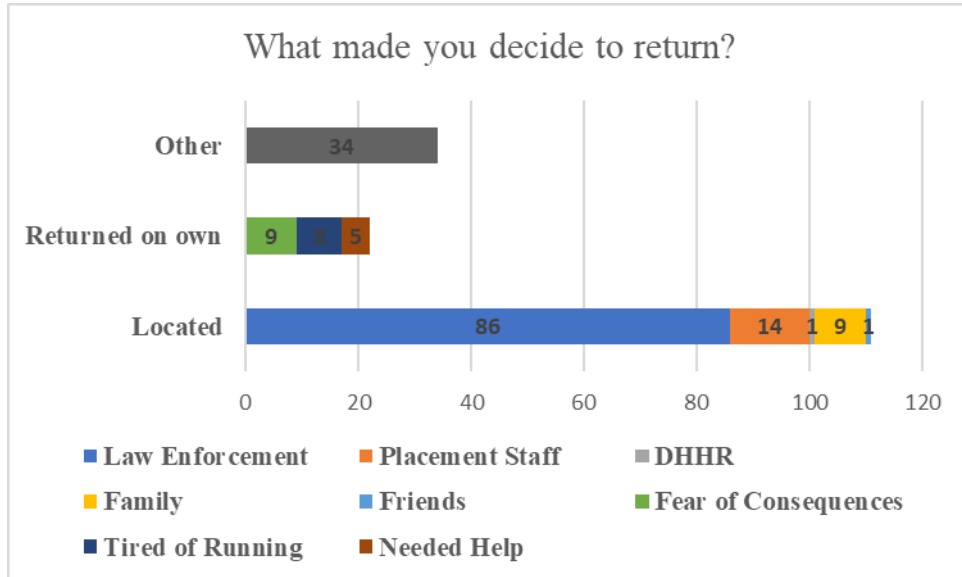
"Other" Items Reported		
Use of phone		9
Money		9
Drugs (marijuana, other)		7
Cigarettes		5
Directions		3
Water (or other drink)		3
Other material item*		4

**Other material items included: shoes, a tent, hair dye and a phone charger.*

"Other" items reported		
Use of phone		9
Money		9
Drugs (marijuana, other)		7
Cigarettes		5
Directions		3
Water (or other drink)		3
Other material item*		4

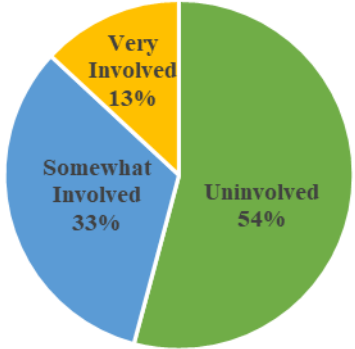
Youth are asked to discuss why they decided to return to care. Most youth do not choose to return but instead are found by law enforcement, often after being reported by others. Others return on their own after a short time away and verbalizing that a break from the environment was needed. "Other" reasons given for youth returning included: the youth never planned to be gone long (6);

the youth had calmed down or was ready to return (9); the youth was bored (2); the youth was concerned for others (3); and the youth was cold/uncomfortable (2).



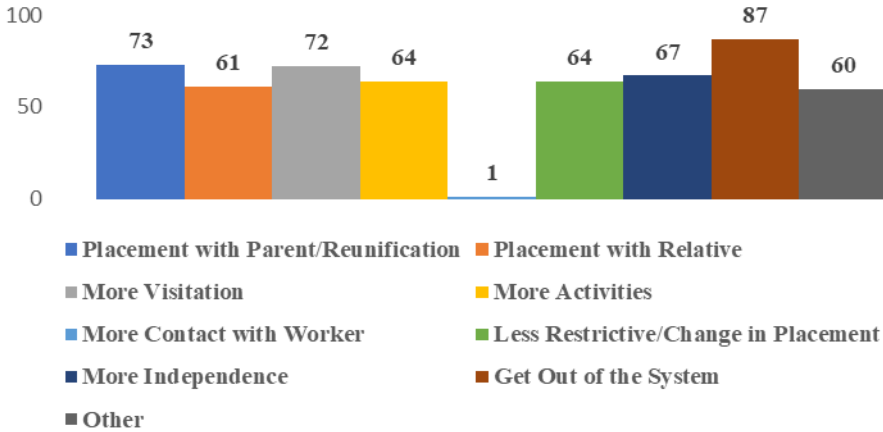
All youth interviewed were asked, “How involved do you feel in the decisions made about your life?” Some youth interviewed reported that they feel as though no one is considering their thoughts and feelings prior to making decisions that impact their lives. One youth responded, “They still think I’m a little kid,” and verbalized that she felt as though no one really listens to what she’s saying. 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 a specific relative is not permitted).

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



When asking those interviewed, “What could prevent you from running in the future?” A wide variety of responses were received. Most interviewed gave multiple responses to this question. Most often, youth report “Getting out of the system” or “Placement with parent/reunification” as preventive measures, followed closely with “More visitation.” Several youths 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.

What might prevent you from running in the future?



Other responses	
Won't run again	17
Placement change	10
No response/I don't know	7
Something to look forward to	6
Nothing	5
Contact with others/better communication	5
Making better choices	4
Home confinement	2
Detention	2
Therapy	1
Time away	1

Other Observations

Several youths in foster care 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.

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; and
- 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; and
- 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 runaway behavior from occurring and reduce its prevalence statewide. Individual level data is important in reducing the number youth may engage in.

2023 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 in to 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.

New questions were added to the debriefing tool beginning January 2023 surrounding safety and youths' future goals.

Each youth will be asked to confirm the accuracy of the information provided to the Unit in their Missing from Care Reporting Form and their Return to Care Reporting Form. This will allow the Unit to ensure that accurate information is documented and may assist in locating that youth if he or she would run again.

In 2022, 70% of those interviewed reported they did not feel uncomfortable or unsafe at any time during the time they were away from supervision. To allow for further assessment and act as an additional screener, the question, "How were you able to keep yourself safe while away from supervision?" has been added.

To engage with youth regarding feeling uninvolved in the decision making surrounding their cases, each youth interviewed is asked "What do you need to be successful?" This permits youths to express what it is they feel they need from treatment and will allow Child Locators to make recommendations to child welfare workers, as appropriate.

Finally, a question was added to engage youth in their future goals by asking, "What are your plans for the future, such as career, higher education, FC-18, Modify, etc.?" This question assess the youth's level of future goal planning and may allow Child Locators to gauge the youth's repeat run risk and make recommendations to child welfare staff.

Appendix A

Missing from Care Reporting Form

Missing from Care Reporting Form (Runaway and Missing Youth Report)

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

Date Completed: Click or tap to enter a date.

Time call came into CI: enter time

Or **Time entered by field:** enter time.

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

Date of Run: Click or tap to enter a date.

Youth's Name: Click or tap here to enter text.

Date of Birth: Click or tap here to enter text.

Gender Identity (self-identified): Enter Youth's Self-Identified Gender

PATH client ID: Click or tap here to enter text.

Home County: Choose an item.

Last Known Whereabouts (not facility name. Be specific Ie: XYZ gas station, bedroom of facility,...): Click or tap here to enter text.

Distinguishing Characteristics (including eye color, hair color, height, and weight, scars, piercings, and tattoos if known) Include what youth was last known to be wearing (include footwear) Include rather they took personal belongings / extra clothing:

Completed By: Individual Completing the Form

Title: Runaway SW CI SSW

other (specify): enter title/role.

Contact Phone or email: Click or tap here to enter text.

Time of Run: Click or tap here to enter text.

Preferred Name/Aliases: Click or tap here to enter text.

Sex (assigned): Click or tap to enter sex assigned at birth and/or verified in FACTS.

Racial Identity: Enter Self-Identified Race

DHHR Worker: Click or tap here to enter text.

CPSW YSW

Placement Provider: Click or tap here to enter text.

Endangerment Statuses

Please check all that apply to the youth and describe in the space provided¹.

(In order for criteria to be met it must increase child's risk of injury or danger to youth, others, or the public. Behavior meeting criteria must be beyond what is normal for a youth of the youth's age.

Ie: Medication must pose a significant risk to life or health if one or more doses are missed. If questions review "Missing and Endangered Advisory Criteria." (DO NOT MARK UNLESS CRITERIA APPLIES!)

Age 13 or under

Actively Homicidal

Actively Suicidal

Actively Self-Harming

Violent (currently or recently)

Atypical Sexual Behaviors

Pregnant

History of Trafficking
 Suspected/At-Risk of Trafficking

Serious Substance Use Disorder ("will obtain by any means.")

Intellectual or Developmental Disability (diagnosed/documentd)

Medical Condition Requiring Medication and will be life threatening or serious if dose or two missed.

Situational Endangerment Condition which may Indicate Youth is at Significant Risk of Harm **Provide details:** Click or tap here to enter text.

Describe details of conditions selected: Click or tap here to enter text.

¹ 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.

Missing from Care Reporting Form (Runaway and Missing Youth Report)

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

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 gotten into or have use of a vehicle, please include a description of the vehicle / plate number if known.**

Did the Youth Have any Companions when Fleeing? Yes No

Date Law enforcement notified: Click or tap to enter a date. **Time:** Click or tap here to enter text.

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

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

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

Case Number Generated from Missing Persons Case (NCIC ID): Click or tap here to enter text.

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

Unknown (Only use if law enforcement did not advise)

As of 10/15/21, Completed form is to be emailed to:

1. The youth's assigned child welfare worker per FACTS,
2. The child welfare worker's supervisor
3. All Child Locators (Rachel Deem, Mary "Mandy" Muth)
4. Runaway Social Worker (Spence CWC PeaceMaker)
5. Immediate supervisor of Runaway Social Worker (Adam Gandee)
6. At least one CI Supervisor on duty (If Adam is on duty, additional CI supervisor is not required)
7. Social Services Supervisor of Centralized Intake Unit (Justin Ash)
8. Social Services Managers (SSM)
9. Director of Field Operations (Lorie Bragg)

Note: These forms continue to be required for all RUNS / RETURNS when reporting / documentation is completed by anyone besides The Child Locator Unit. Form entry in PATH is currently only authorized to be completed by members of the Child Locator Unit. When report is completed or entered by The Child Locator Unit these forms will no longer be required.

Return to Care Reporting Form

Runaway and Missing Youth Return Report

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

Date Completed: Click or tap to enter a date.

Time call came into CI: enter time

Or **Time entered by field:** enter time.

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

Title: assigned CPSW assigned YSW Placement staff **other (specify):** Click or tap here to enter text.

Completed By: Individual Completing the Form

Title: Runaway SW CI SSW

other (specify): enter title/role.

Contact Phone or email: Click or tap here to enter text.

Youth's Name: Click or tap here to enter text.

Date of Birth: Click or tap to enter a date.

PATH client ID: Click or tap here to enter text.

Home County: Choose an item.

DHHR Worker: Click or tap here to enter text.

CPSW YSW

Run Event Reported to:

CI

Assigned YSW/CPSW

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.

Exact Pickup Location (not facility): Click or tap here to enter text.

Placement Provider: Click or tap here to enter text.

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.

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.

Date Law enforcement notified: Click or tap to enter a date. **Time:** Click or tap here to enter text.

Return to Care Reporting Form

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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 Department of Health and Human Resources Bureau for Social Services 400 Fifth Street P.O. Box 1547 Parkersburg, WV 26102 (304) 932-8665</p>	<p>Mary Amanda “Mandy” Muth, LSW, MSW Health and Human Resources Specialist, Senior Child Locator, Southern District Department of Health and Human Resources Bureau for Social Services 2699 Park Avenue, Suite 100, Rm 2301 Huntington, WV 25704 (304) 932-8167</p>
<p>Spence Peacemaker, MPA, MSW, LCSW Social Service Worker III MFC/Runaway Social Worker, Centralized Intake Department of Health and Human Resources Bureau for Social Services 416 Adams Street Fairmont, WV 26554 (681) 341-3631</p>	