



Runaway and Missing Foster Youth 2021

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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 Children and Families, 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.

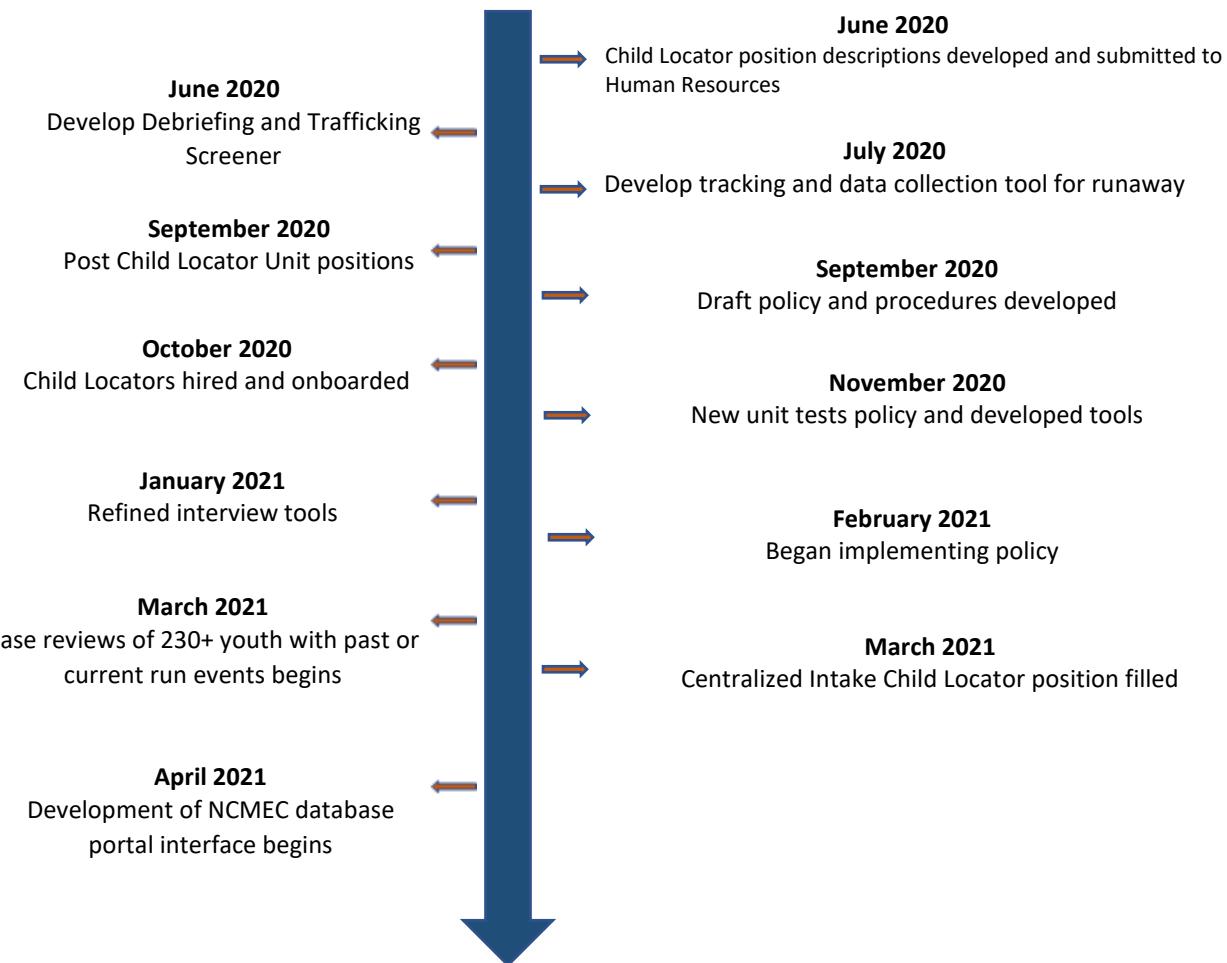
Establishment of Child Locator Unit

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 Department of Health and Human Resources.

The Bureau for Children and Families (BCF) began implementation of the Child Locator Unit immediately upon passage. Below 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.



Child Locator Target Population

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 will move towards the Centralized Intake Unit handling all reports of missing and located foster children beginning SFY 22. 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 (see more later); and,
- Details surrounding the run event.

A completed example report may be reviewed in Appendix A.

Once generated, the report is immediately provided to the assigned child welfare worker, district office leadership, Child Locator Unit, and executive leadership within the Bureau for Children and Families. 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 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 the details of such 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 the National Center for Missing and Exploited Children (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 vital 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.

Children who are gone for a period of 24 hours or longer or have frequent running behaviors are asked additional 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 and the causes of such events and subsequent returns 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 Children and Families 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 problematic area for the Bureau for Children and Families. This has primarily 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 are reported as runaways. This mechanism of reporting makes it impossible to determine those who truly leave 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 we are able to make these distinctions and continue to refine this process to ensure all youth are captured and documented.

Reported Runaways

Current data is available for calendar year 2020 and from January 1 through April 30, 2021. However, as previously indicated, not having a centralized run reporting process in place has created barriers to accurate reporting.

In 2020, there were 93 documented reported run events. There were only 53 actual runners reported as the majority of the youth ran more than once. At midnight on December 31, 2020, there were 24 youth still missing from care, which is 25.8% of the run events or 45.3% of runners reported for 2020.

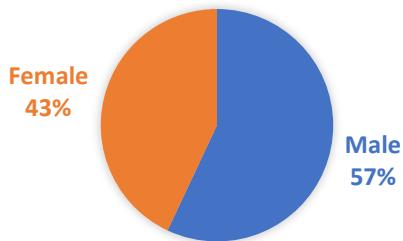
During the period of January 1, 2021 to April 30, 2021, there were 175 run events documented and reported with 117 youth running. The noted increase is not believed to be an indication of increased runs but due to an increase in reporting and documentation of events because of efforts to improve reporting. This is a direct result of changes in policies and procedures put into effect at the end of 2020 and the beginning of 2021 as well as the creation of a dedicated Centralized Intake employee as part of the Child Locater Unit to accurately track and record this data. It is also a result of increased awareness of the need for proper documentation to help ensure runaway youth are found and brought back into proper supervision. At midnight on April 30, 2021, there were 21 youth still missing from care, which is 12.0% of the run events and 17.9 % reported for the review period of January 1 to April 30, 2021. This seems to indicate that youth are returning or being located and returned to care at a higher rate.

For reported events in 2020, between 3:00 p.m. and 11:00 p.m. (48.9%) constituted the most frequent time for runaway events to occur. Between January and April 2021, between 2:00 p.m. and 10:00 p.m. (65.3%) was the most common time. Fridays were the most common day (20.7%) in 2020 for run events to occur and Tuesday has been the most common day in 2021 (21.6%), with only 10.2% of events occurring on Fridays.

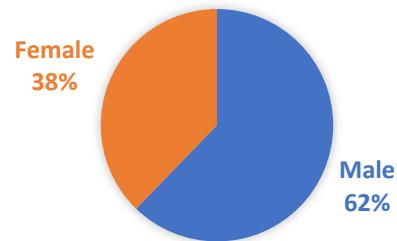
Demographics

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

2020 YOUTH'S SEX BY RUN EVENTS



2020 RUNAWAY YOUTH BY SEX

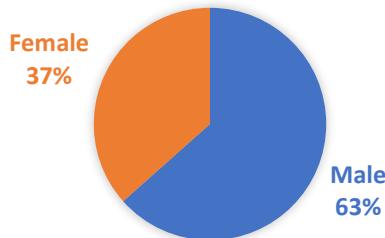


| 2020 Youth's Sex | | | | |
|------------------|------------|--------|---------------|--------|
| | Run Events | | Runaway Youth | |
| Male | 53 | 57.0% | 33 | 62.3% |
| Female | 40 | 43.0% | 20 | 37.7% |
| Total | 93 | 100.0% | 53 | 100.0% |

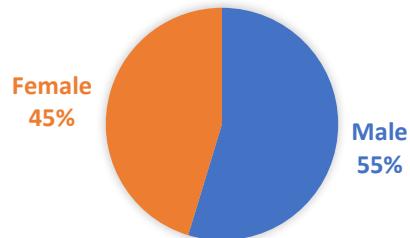
The above chart indicates that of the 53 runaway youth in calendar year 2020, 62% were males. Data reflecting the youth's sex by runaway events indicates that males still constituted the majority of youth who had multiple run events; females who ran once had a higher likelihood to run again. Male youth are still reflected as the majority of running youth in 2021; however, they were significantly more likely than females to have multiple run events, as reflected in the charts below. National data compiled by the National Center for Missing and Exploited Children (NCMEC) indicates that females were more than three-fifths of the reported runs.²

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.

2021 YOUTH'S SEX BY RUN EVENTS



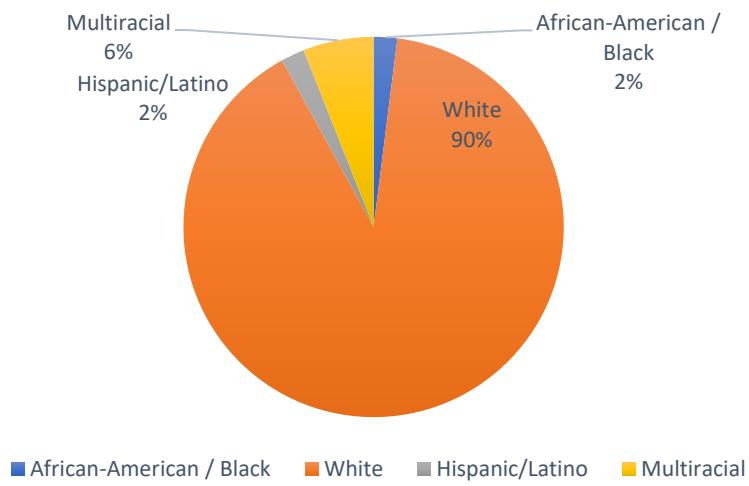
2021 RUNAWAY YOUTH BY SEX

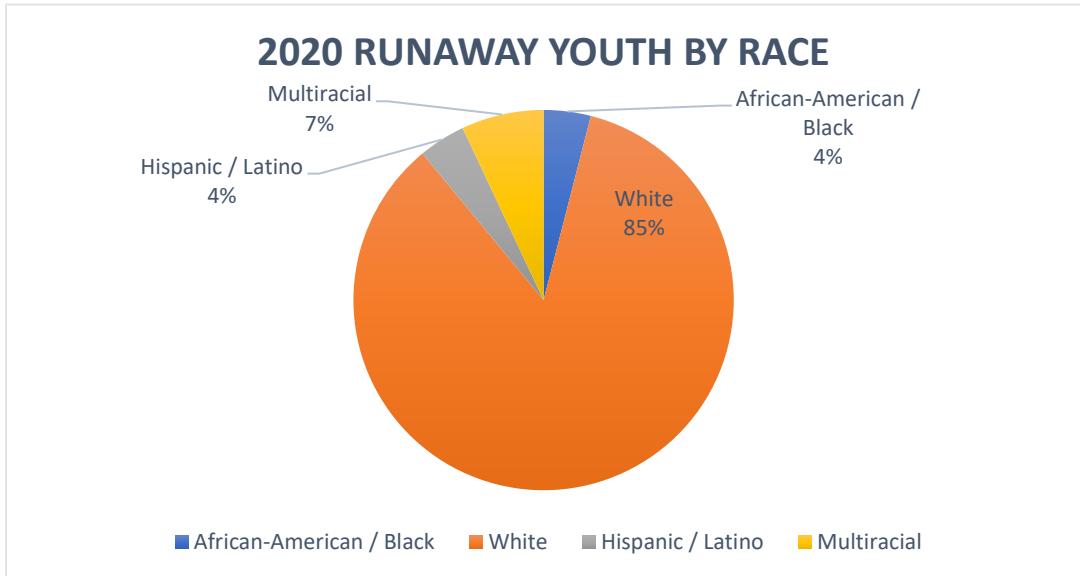


| 2021 Youth's Sex | | | | |
|------------------|------------|---------------|------------|---------------|
| | Run Events | Runaway Youth | | |
| Male | 111 | 63.0% | 64 | 55.0% |
| Female | 64 | 37.0% | 53 | 45.0% |
| Total | 175 | 100.0% | 117 | 100.0% |

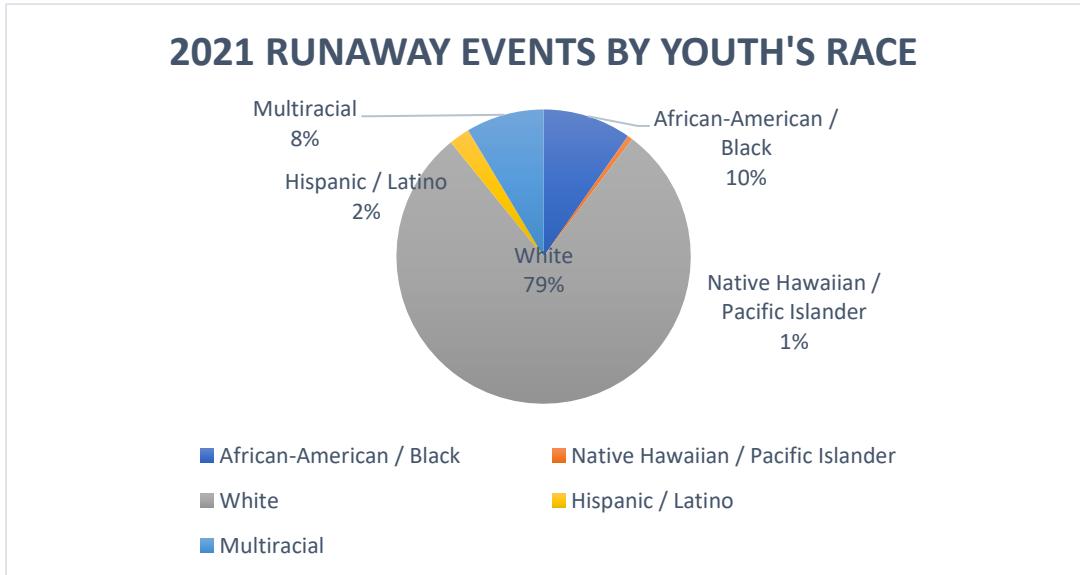
The below charts indicate the number of runaway youth and the number of runaway events by racial identity. Racial identity is defined by the racial or ethnic identity documented in the child's official case record and is not necessarily reflective of the child's perceived racial or ethnic identity. Multiracial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

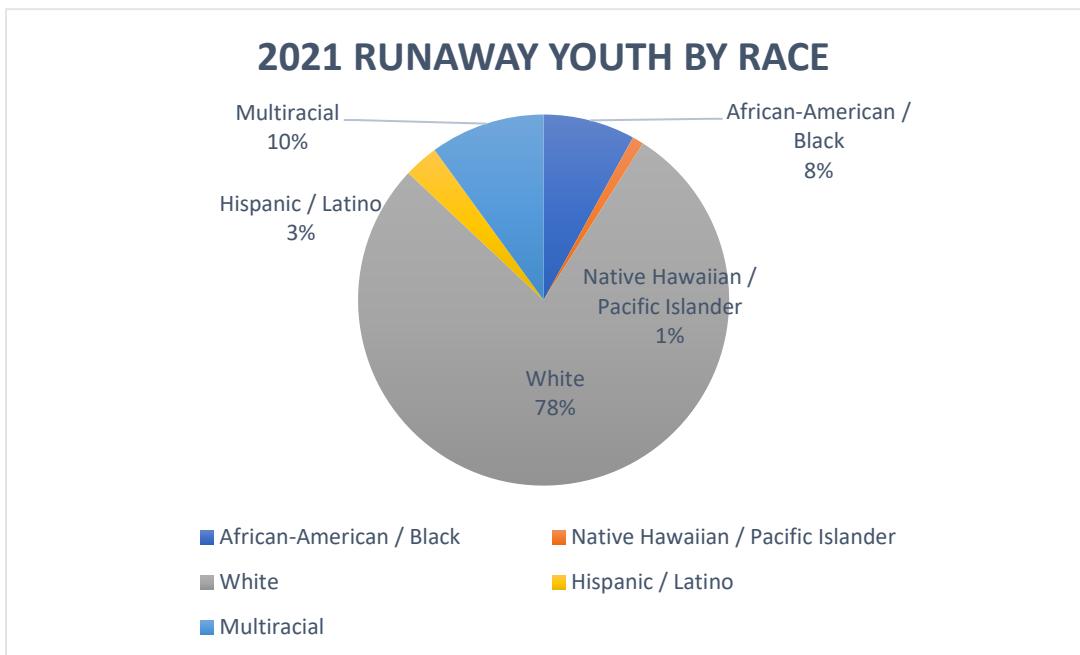
2020 RUN EVENTS BY YOUTH'S RACE





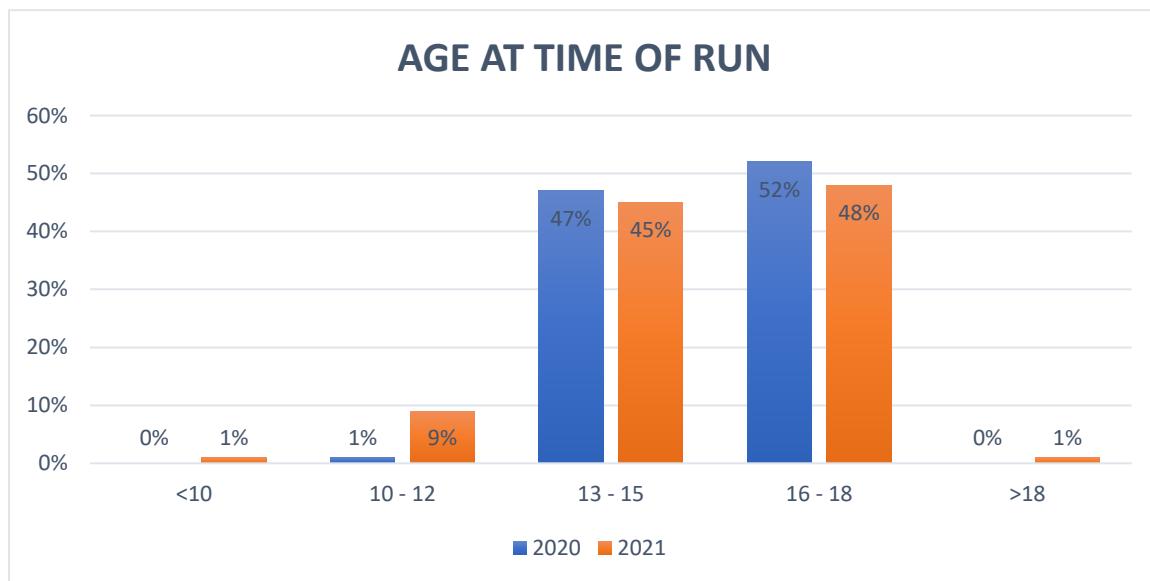
| 2020 Race/Ethnicity | Run Events | Runaway Youth |
|----------------------------|-------------------|----------------------|
| African American/Black | 2 | 2 4% |
| White | 84 | 45 85% |
| Hispanic/Latino | 2 | 2 4% |
| Multiracial | 5 | 4 7% |
| Total | 93 | 53 100% |





| 2021 Race/Ethnicity | Run Events | Runners |
|------------------------------------|------------|-------------|
| African American/Black | 17 | 10% |
| Native Hawaiian / Pacific Islander | 1 | 1% |
| White | 138 | 79% |
| Hispanic/Latino | 4 | 2% |
| Multiracial | 15 | 8% |
| Total | 175 | 100% |
| | | 117 |
| | | 100% |

The following chart provides an unduplicated count of youth who run by age:

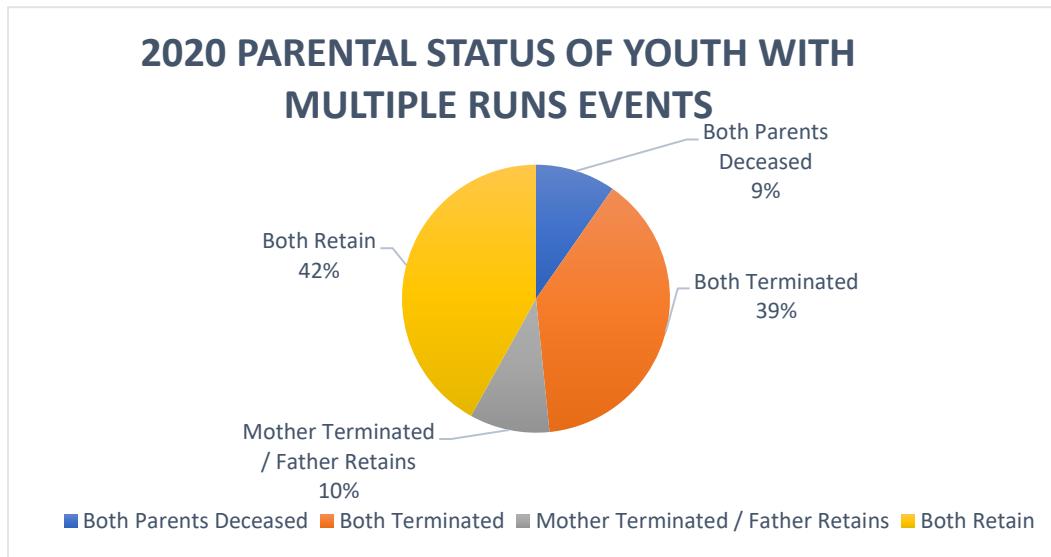


| 2020 Age of Youth at Time of Run | | | 2021 Age of Youth at Time of Run | | |
|---|-----------|-------------|---|------------|-------------|
| <10 | 0 | 0% | <10 | 1* | 1% |
| 10 - 12 | 1 | 1% | 10 - 12 | 9 | 5% |
| 13 - 15 | 44 | 47% | 13 - 15 | 79 | 45% |
| 16 - 18 | 48 | 52% | 16 - 18 | 85 | 48% |
| >18 | 0 | 0% | >18 | 1 | 1% |
| Total | 93 | 100% | Total | 175 | 100% |

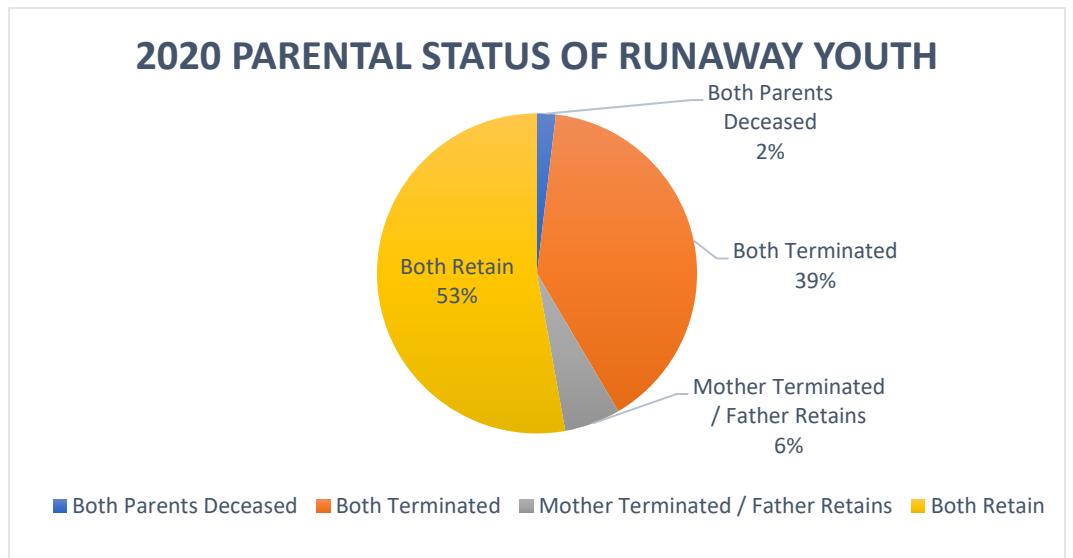
*Child under 10 reported as runaway was a child taken by an older sibling when the older youth ran from care.

Youth under the age of 13 have had increased reported run events in the first few months of 2021. Ages 16 through 18 appear to be the most common age of runaway youth across both reporting periods. According to the Office of Planning, Research and Evaluation within the 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 West Virginia Department of Health and Human Resources’ age-specific data indicates that between January and April 2021, seven youth who ran were 12 years of age, 10 youth were 13 years of age, and 29 youth were 14 years of age. The average age of a runaway youth was 15 across both reporting periods.

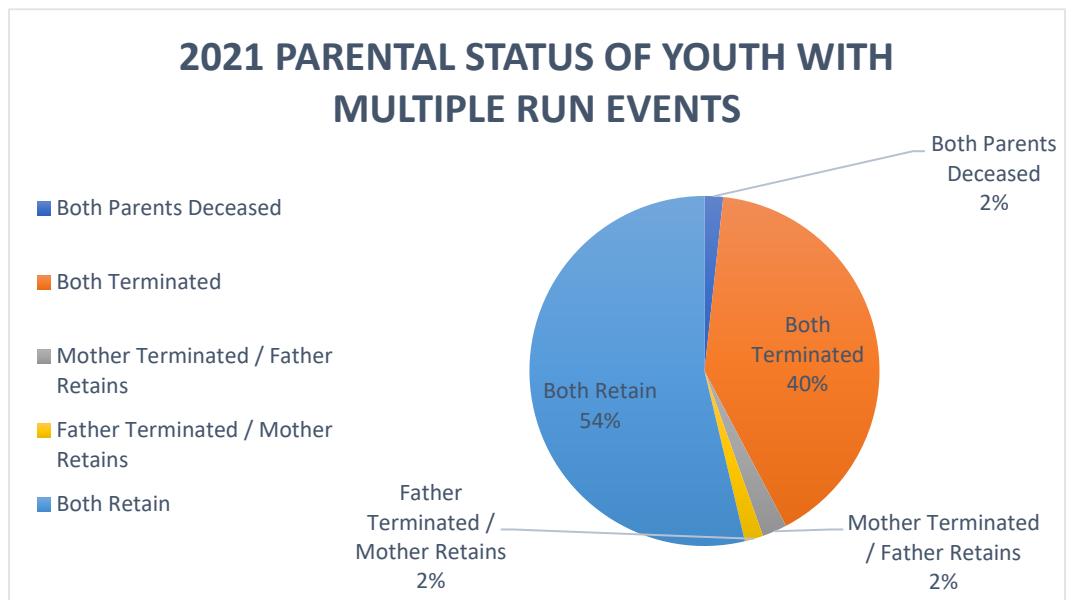
The below charts indicate the parental status of youth who run away from care.



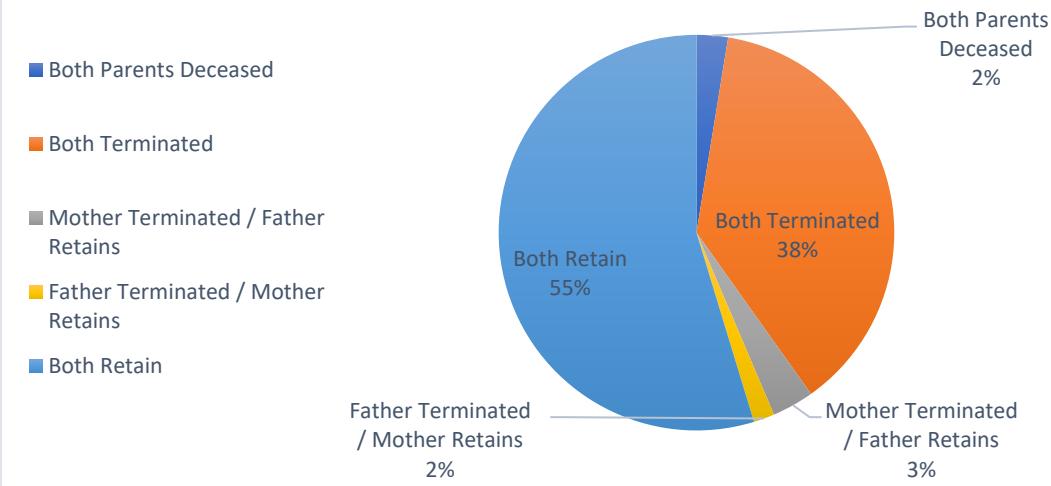
³ Latzman, N. E., & Gibbs, D. (2020). Examining the link: Foster care runaway episodes and human trafficking. OPRE Report No. 2020-143. Washington, D.C.: Office of Planning, Research, and Evaluation, Administration for Children and Families, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services.



| <i>Parental Rights 2020</i> | <i>Run Events</i> | <i>Runaway Youth</i> | |
|------------------------------------|-------------------|----------------------|----------------|
| Both Parents Deceased | 9 | 10% | 1 2% |
| Both Terminated | 36 | 38% | 21 39% |
| Mother Terminated / Father Retains | 9 | 10% | 3 6% |
| Father Terminated / Mother Retains | 0 | 0% | 0 0% |
| Both Retain | 39 | 42% | 28 53% |
| Total | 93 | 100% | 53 100% |



2021 PARENTAL STATUS OF RUNAWAY YOUTH

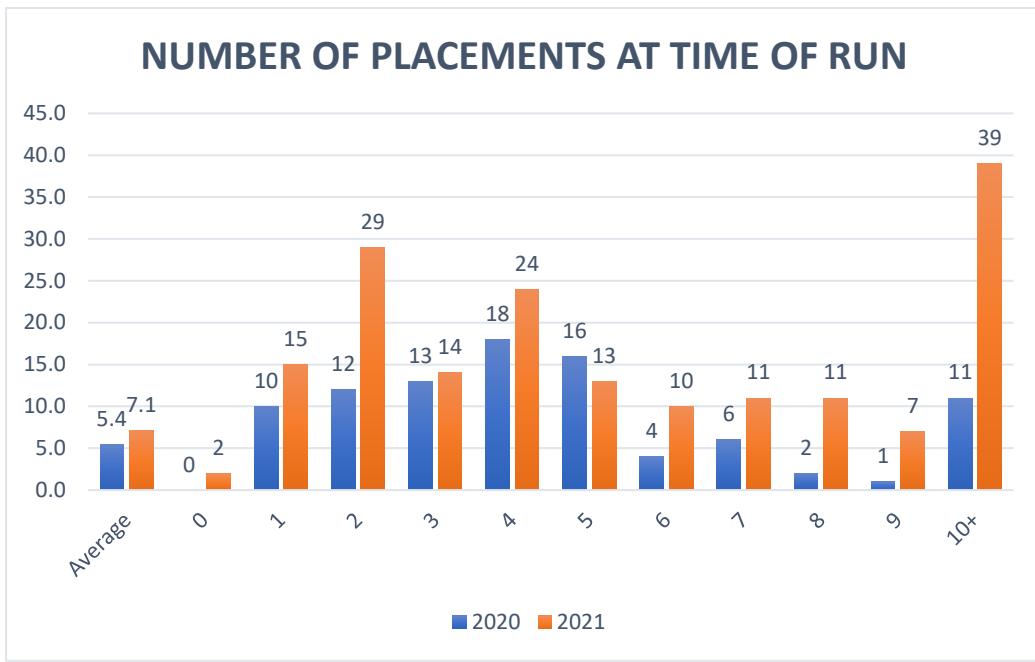


| <i>Parental Rights 2021</i> | <i>Run Events</i> | <i>Runaway Youth</i> | |
|------------------------------------|-------------------|----------------------|-------------|
| Both Parents Deceased | 3 | 2% | 3 |
| Both Terminated | 71 | 40% | 44 |
| Mother Terminated / Father Retains | 4 | 2% | 4 |
| Father Terminated / Mother Retains | 3 | 2% | 2 |
| Both Retain | 94 | 54% | 64 |
| Total | 175 | 100% | 117 |
| | | | 100% |

Both 2020 and 2021 data suggest a high number of children whose parental rights have been terminated runaway from care.

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 associated positively to youth experiencing high numbers of placement changes.⁴ Though 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 is provided based on run events only not runners as numbers of placement change throughout the review period for the same youth.

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.



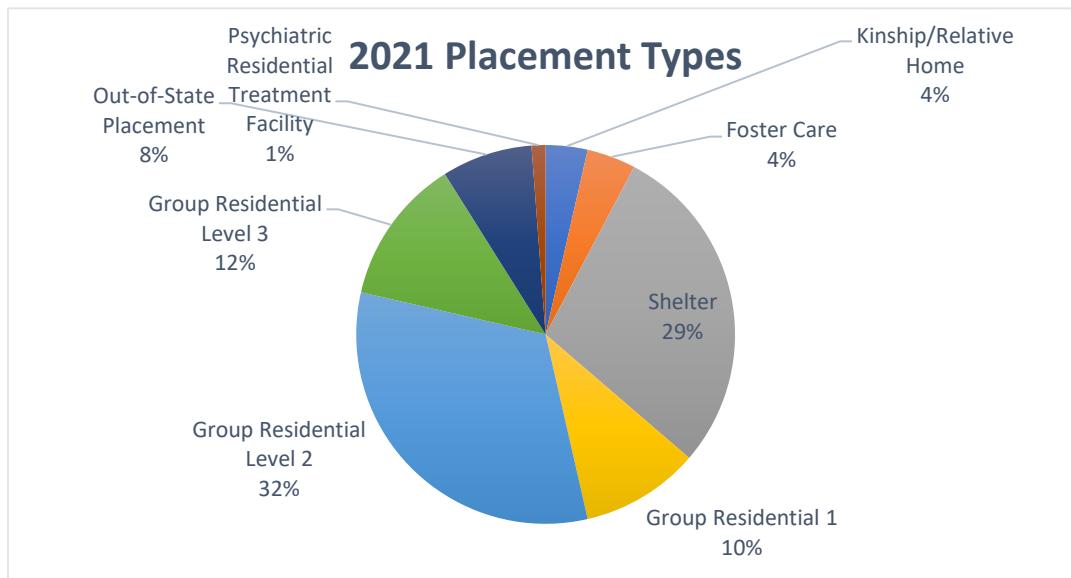
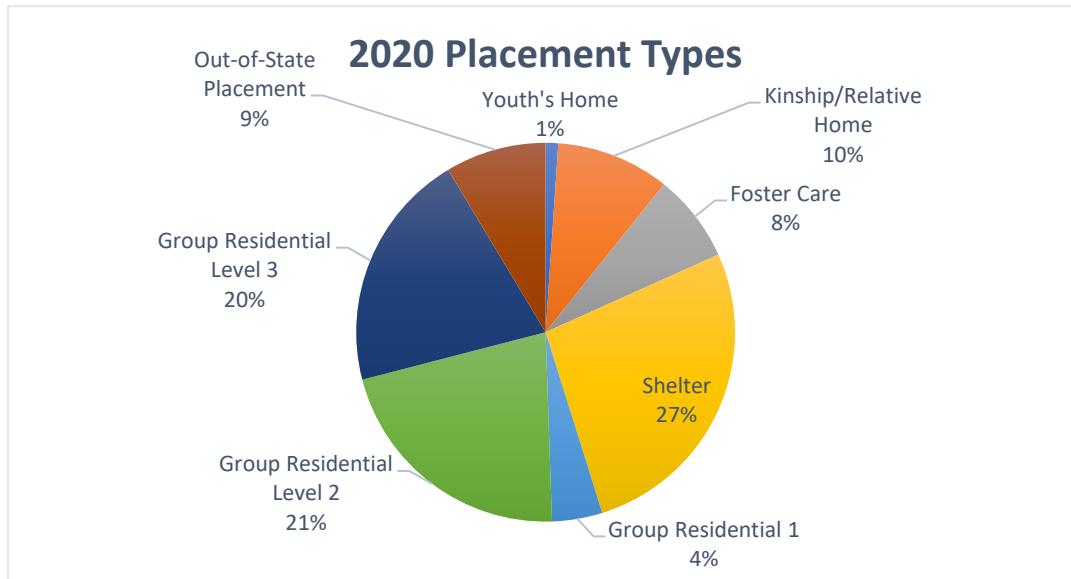
*2021 indicates two youth who had no placements reported at the time of run. This represents youth whose custody resided with the West Virginia Department of Health and Human Resources but had not been removed from the home.

| Number Placements at Time of Run | | | | | |
|----------------------------------|------------|--------------|-------------|------------|-------------|
| 2020 | | 2021 | | | |
| Placements | Run Events | Placements | Run Events | | |
| 0 | 0 | 0 | 0% | 0 | 2 |
| 1 - 3 | 35 | 1 - 3 | 37% | 58 | 33% |
| 4 - 6 | 38 | 4 - 6 | 41% | 47 | 27% |
| 7 - 9 | 9 | 7 - 9 | 10% | 29 | 17% |
| 10+ | 11 | 10+ | 12% | 39 | 22% |
| Total | 93 | Total | 100% | 175 | 100% |

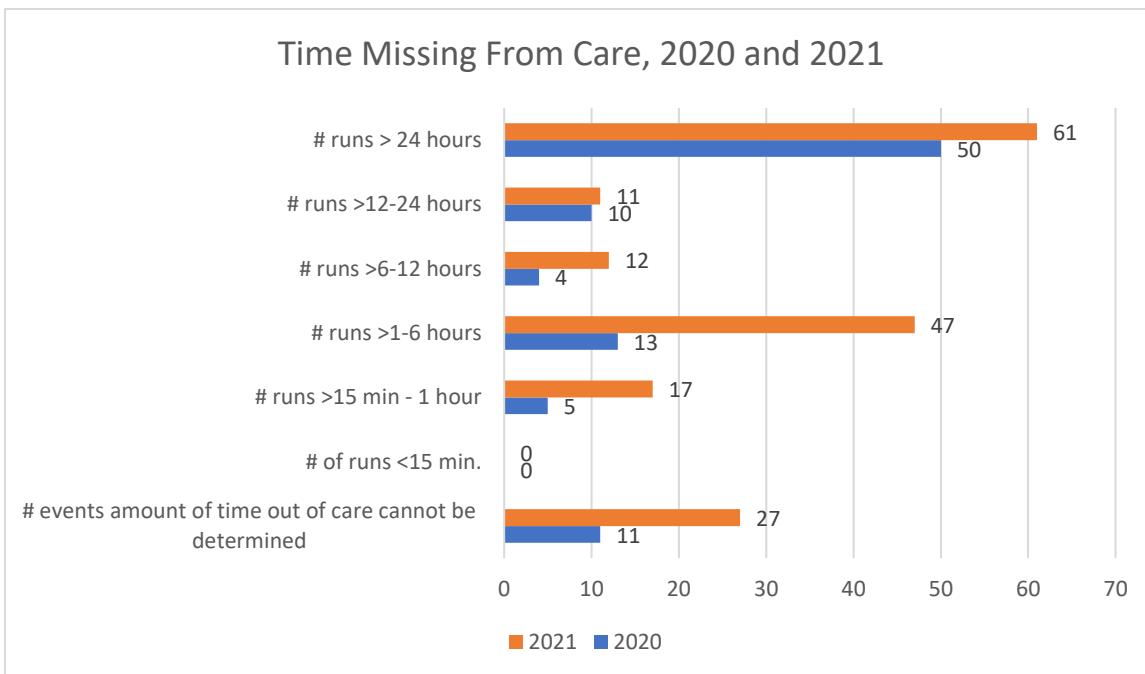
As expected, the number of runaway youth with more than 10 placements represents a high percentage of the population. However, somewhat surprisingly is the high number of youth who run on the first placement.

Placement options for youth in foster care include relative or kinship homes, traditional foster care, shelters, group residential facilities, out-of-state facilities, and psychiatric residential treatment facilities. The Bureau for Children and Families 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 association 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.



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

| Length of Time on Runaway Status | | | | | | |
|----------------------------------|---------------|-------------|---------------------------------|--|--------------|-------------|
| 2020 | | | 2021 | | | |
| Length of Time Away from Care | Run Events | | Length of Time Away from Care | | Run Events | |
| 15 min. > 1 hour | 5 | 6% | 15 min. > 1 hour | | 17 | 12% |
| 1 > 6 hours | 13 | 16% | 1 > 6 hours | | 47 | 32% |
| 6 > 12 hours | 4 | 5% | 6 > 12 hours | | 12 | 8% |
| 12 > 24 hours | 10 | 12% | 12 > 24 hours | | 11 | 7% |
| > 24 hours | 50 | 61% | > 24 hours | | 61 | 41% |
| Total* | 82 | 100% | Total | | 148 | 100% |
| Average days out of care | 127.31 | | Average days out of care | | 59.20 | |

*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 Screening

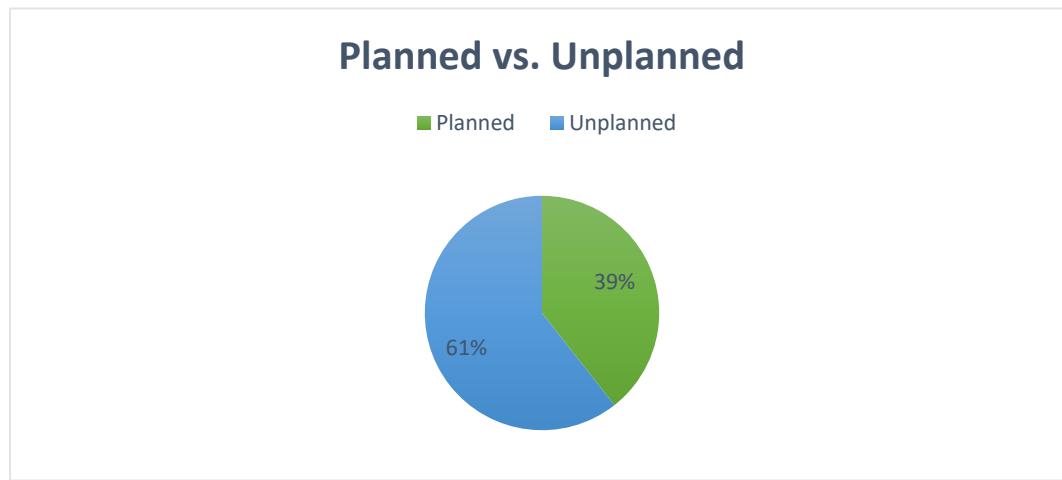
Debriefing and screening interviews formally began in February 2021 after finalization of piloted interview tools. The *West Virginia Missing Child Debriefing Interview Tool* is used for youth who are away from supervision longer than 24 hours or have engaged in three or more runs in the previous six months. The *West Virginia Trafficking Screen* is a shortened version of the debriefing tool and is used for youth who have had a run lasting longer than six hours but less than 24 hours.

Between February 8, 2021 and April 30, 2021, 35 debriefings were attempted. Of these attempts, 33 youth participated and two refused participation. 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 completed. Information from both trafficking screens were included in the data as indicated.

Included in this report are results from a subset of questions from the screening tools which were asked of youth. There are limitations to the data gathered from this first round of interviews. Interviews were determined by the youth who ran during a specific period and who were able to be interviewed during shorter period. Due to the small number of interviews, caution should be taken when attempting to make broader assertions based on the data provided in this report.

Results

Each of 33 youth who participated in a debriefing interview 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 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.



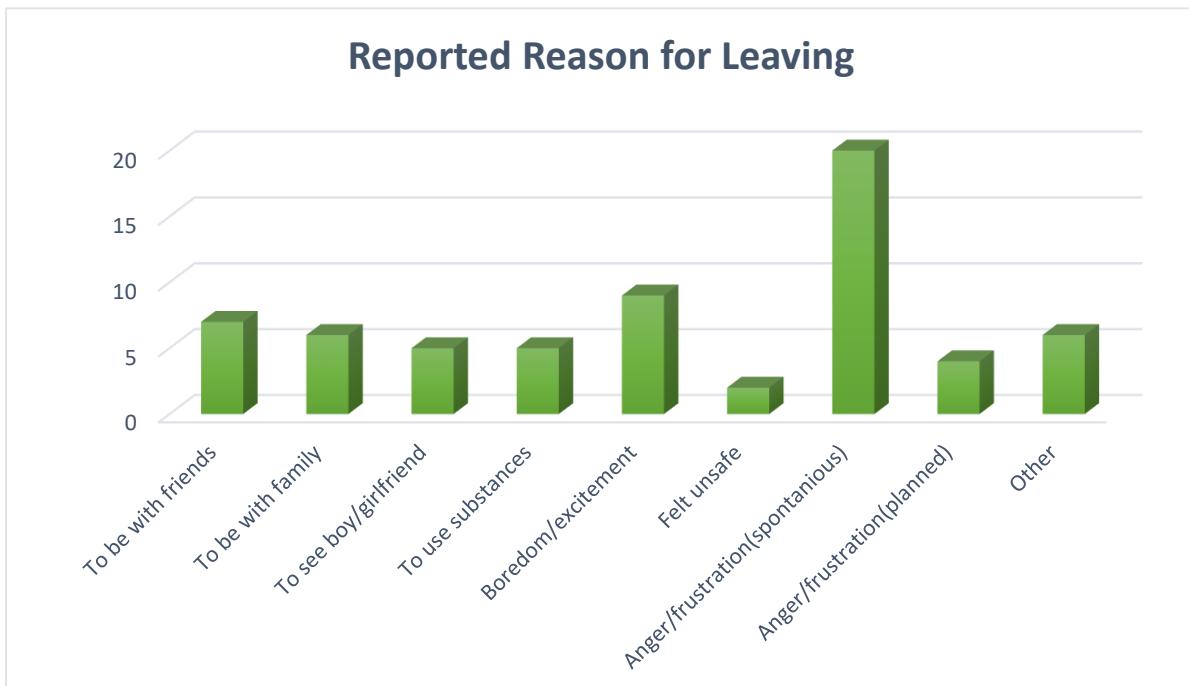
| Response | Number of Youth |
|--------------|-----------------|
| Planned | 13 |
| Unplanned | 20 |
| Total | 33 |

Those who participated in the debriefing interview were asked: "Did you tell anyone you were going to leave and if so, who did you tell?" Of the interviewed youth, 16 reportedly told no one they were going to leave. Of the other 17 youth, 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 was a run companion.



| <i>Person Informed</i> | <i>Number of Youth</i> |
|------------------------|------------------------|
| No One | 16 |
| Another Youth | 12 |
| Friend | 2 |
| Staff | 4 |
| Family | 2 |
| DHHR Worker | 0 |
| Teacher | 0 |
| Other | 0 |

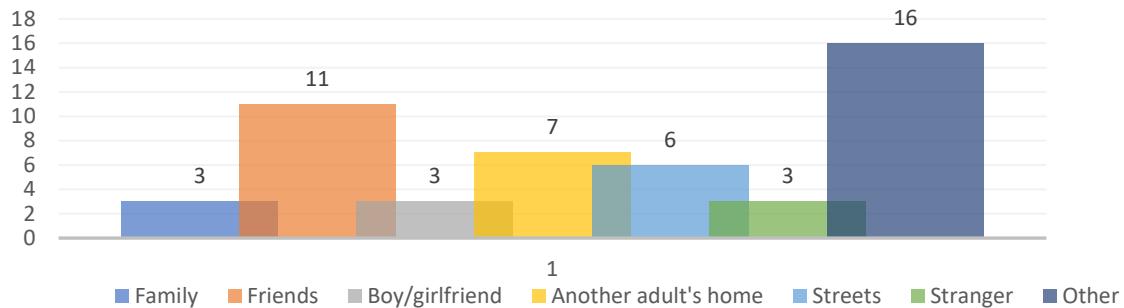
All youth interviewed were asked: "What made you decide to leave?" Many gave more than one or multiple reasons. Most often, youth interviewed described being angry and frustrated, often with facility staff or a situation in placement. A list of "other" reasons has also been given. Several interviewed talked about their impulsivity; they did not think, they just left.



| Reason | Number of Youth | "Other" Reason |
|---------------------------------|------------------------|--|
| To be with friends | 7 | Bedbugs, too many kids |
| To be with family | 6 | Gave no reason |
| To see boy/girlfriend | 5 | Youth "just didn't want to be there" |
| To use substances | 5 | Youth worried about what would happen at court |
| Boredom/excitement | 9 | Youth felt hopeless about situation |
| Felt unsafe | 2 | Followed other youth; no real reason. |
| Anger/frustration (spontaneous) | 20 | |
| Anger/frustration (planned) | 4 | |
| Other | 6 | |

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?



| <i>Location</i> | <i>Number of Youth</i> | <i>"Other" Locations</i> |
|----------------------|------------------------|------------------------------|
| Family | 3 | Outside |
| Friends | 11 | The woods |
| Boyfriend/girlfriend | 3 | Abandoned house |
| Another adult's home | 7 | Personal camper |
| Streets | 6 | Remained on facility grounds |
| Stranger | 3 | |
| Other | 16 | |
| Hotel/motel | 0 | |
| Shelter | 0 | |

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



| Activity | Number of Youth |
|------------------------------|-----------------|
| Hung out/walked streets | 26 |
| Visited family | 6 |
| Engaged in criminal activity | 1 |
| Visited boy/girlfriend | 5 |
| Engaged in sexual activity | 13 |
| Drank alcohol | 10 |
| Used marijuana | 16 |
| Used other drug(s) | 5 |

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

*One youth reported being the victim of a forceable sexual assault. This was not an episode of trafficking. This event was also not counted among the "yes" when asked if youth engaged in sexual activity.

Three 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.

No instances of sex or labor trafficking were disclosed by any youth interviewed during this reporting period.

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, 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.

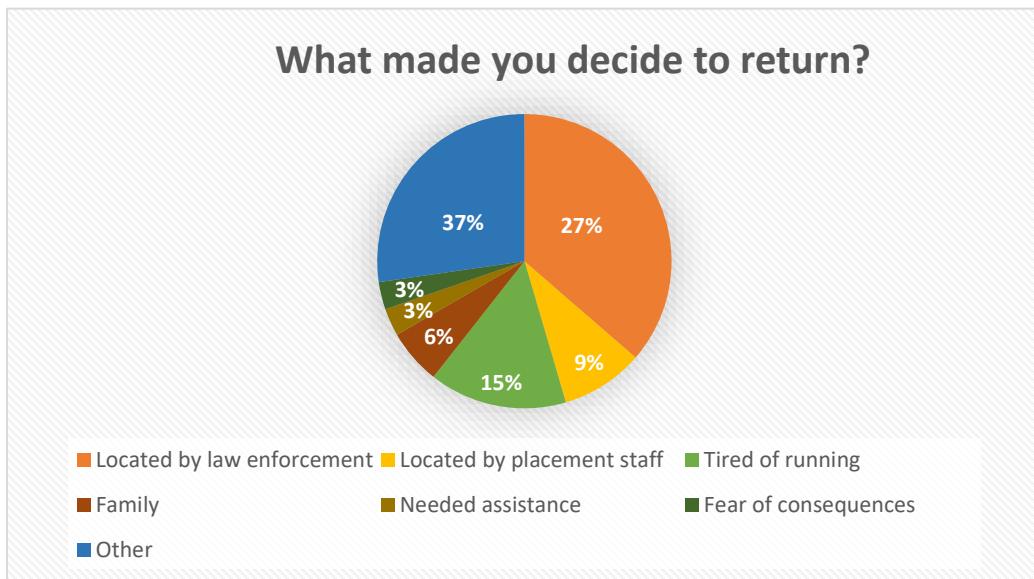
Some interviewed indicated a regret after the run, unhappy with consequences from running, even if the consequence was not a punishment. One youth reported that he felt regret after his run assuming if he had not run perhaps, he would have been removed from residential care and placed in a foster home, maybe even with his siblings.

Few reported feeling unsafe at any time during their time away from supervision even in situations that Child Locators would consider risk-taking behavior. For example, one youth reported willingly accepting a ride from a stranger to both her and her companion (a reported friend of a friend to the youth's companion).



| <i>Comfort Level</i> | <i>Number of Youth</i> |
|-----------------------------|-------------------------------|
| Not comfortable | 7 |
| Somewhat comfortable | 14 |
| Very comfortable | 14 |

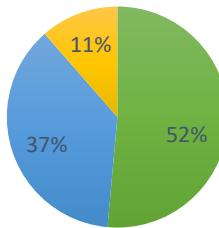
Youth are asked to discuss why they decided to return to care. Most youth do not choose to return but instead are found by law enforcement, often after being reported by others. Others return on their own after a time away.



| <i>Reported Reason</i> | <i>Number of Youth</i> |
|-------------------------------|-------------------------------|
| Located by law enforcement | 12 |
| Located by placement staff | 3 |
| Tired of running | 5 |
| Family | 2 |
| Needed assistance | 1 |
| Fear of consequences | 1 |
| Other | 9 |
| Total | 33 |

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 (who, at the time of interview was a month away from aging out) 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?



■ Uninvolved ■ Somewhat involved ■ Very involved

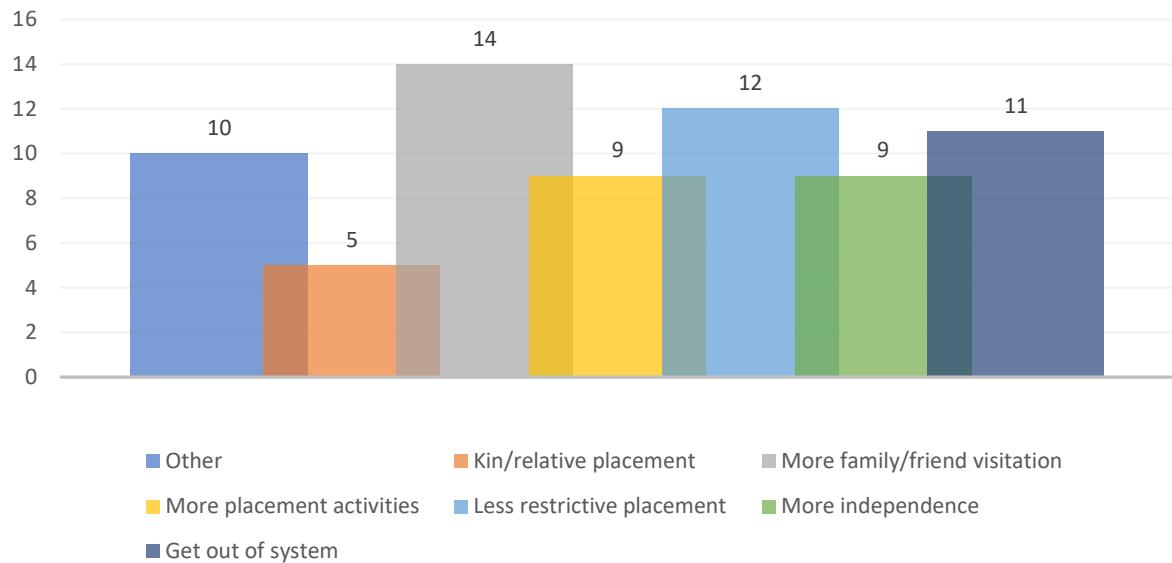
| Response | Number of Youth |
|-------------------|-----------------|
| Uninvolved | 18 |
| Somewhat involved | 13 |
| Very involved | 4 |

All youth interviewed were asked: "What could prevent them from running in the future?" Many of the responses given in this question are indicative of the effect the COVID-19 pandemic has had on youth in placement due to restrictions implemented. In-person visitations at facilities and home visits were reduced or ceased. When facility staff or a foster child has likely been exposed to or tests positive for COVID-19, the facility is placed under quarantine and immediately stops all visitors (including child welfare workers). Youth participate in virtual calls, with their child welfare workers and family as able, but report that these are not the same as an in-person visit. Outside activities meant to keep youth active, entertained and to give them a sense of normalcy have 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 needing a break from being in their placement facility and run "just to get away," while remaining in the area of the facility and returning on their own once they have calmed down.

Several 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. Two youth reported that they were nearly adults and it was time to make better decisions.

What could prevent you from running in the future?



| <i>Response</i> | <i>Number of Youth</i> |
|--|------------------------|
| Kin/relative placement | 5 |
| More visitation with family/friends | 14 |
| More activities in placement | 9 |
| Less restrictive placement/change in placement | 12 |
| More independence | 9 |
| Get out of the "system" | 11 |
| Placement with parent/reunification | 0 |
| More contact with child welfare worker | 0 |
| Other | 10 |

Other Observations

Several foster youth interviewed had been involved in a child protective services case in which their parents' rights were terminated. These youth often have little or no contact with any family members. Those in this situation may have no contact with anyone outside of the system, leaving them with no outside support.

Another point of interest that was not specifically addressed by the interview tools was hitchhiking or accepting rides from strangers. Of the 35 youth who participated in an interview, seven youth rode in a car with an adult stranger and one additional youth knocked on multiple doors asking for a ride (unsuccessfully).

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 critical in reducing the number of runaway events a single youth may engage in.

Appendix A

Missing Youth Report

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. Also indicate clothing worn at time of run): Click or tap here to enter text.

FACTS Case 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 provided.⁶

Serious Substance Use Disorder

Actively Homicidal

Actively Suicidal

Self-Harming

Life Threatening Medical Condition Requiring Medication

Intellectual or Developmental Disability/Special Needs

Pregnant

Violent

Age 13 or under

Trafficking Status: History of Trafficking
 Suspected/At-Risk of Trafficking

Situational Endangerment Condition which may Indicate Youth is at Significant Risk of Harm

⁶ 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 Sheriff's Office.

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)

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

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 or missing foster youth.

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