ANNUAL FOSTER YOUTH RUNAWAY REPORT

WEST VIRGINIA DEPARTMENT OF

HUMAN SERVICES

Bureau for Social Services

Child Locator Unit

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Contents

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 their families, 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 Human Services (DoHS), 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.

The Child Locator Unit provides recovery, screening, and informational services to runaway foster children. When a foster child is on runaway status for more than 48 hours, the Child Locator Unit 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 or harm 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.

Establishment of Child Locator Unit

Passed during the 2020 Regular Session of the West Virginia Legislature, House Bill 4415 amended, and added thereto, various sections of the Missing Persons Act and the Missing Children Information Act. See W. Va. Code §5D-3-1, *et seq.*, and W. Va. Code §49-6-101, *et seq.* This legislation is 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,
- The establishment of a pilot Child Locator Unit within the West Virginia Department of Health and Human Resources (now West Virginia Department of Human Services).

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

Casework Process

When a foster child runs from care, a report is required to be made immediately to law enforcement and DoHS's Centralized Intake Unit (CI). Each placement provider has an internal process for handling reporting. The Bureau for Social Services (BSS) began handling all reports of missing and located runaway children through CI 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 foster child to Centralized Intake, they are asked for the following information:

- Basic identifying information;
- Client ID number to determine their involvement with the agency;
- Last known whereabouts and clothing worn at time of runaway;
- Identified endangerment status[2]; and
- Details surrounding the run event.

Once a report is generated by CI, 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.

When a child has been missing for 48 hours or longer or has a verified endangerment status, they will be assigned to the Child Locator Unit who will assist in locating the child.

Endangerment status is based on the presence, or absence, of certain criteria regarding the child and the nature of the child's runaway status. For example, if a child suffers from substance abuse disorder, is actively homicidal, is actively suicidal, has a medical condition requiring medication, has atypical sexual behaviors, has an intellectual or developmental disability, engages in in violent behavior, has a history of being trafficked, or is under the age of 13, the child may have and endangerment status.

Furthermore, if the child left in a motorized vehicle; there are weather conditions present which place the child at risk; the child has recently exhibited a substantial change in behavior (not related to a medication change); the child is subject to a protection order or no contact order; the child has recently obtained cuts, tattoos, burns, etc. they are unwilling or reluctant to explain; or the child has come into possession of money and/or items that are unaccounted for, the child may have an endangerment status.

When runaway children are located, a return report is called into CI. The report is logged and a notification is sent to the child's BSS worker, district office leadership, Child Locator

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[2] See page [number] for more detailed information regarding Endangerment Status.

Unit, and executive leadership. A follow up notification is sent to the child's assigned BSS worker reminding them of the mandatory reporting to law enforcement and NCMEC that the child has returned. The follow-up notification to the child's assigned BSS worker 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 administered the West Virginia Missing Child Debriefing Interview by the Child Locator Unit.

Locating Missing Children

To enable the Child Locator Unit to assist in the location of a missing child, the Unit must have accurate information concerning the child's history, current characteristics, connections to family and friends, and a recent photograph.

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

Social media accounts play a vital role in the search for missing children. Child Locators regularly conduct searches on various social media platforms for a child's account. This enables a Child Locator to identify potential friends and family previously unknown, obtain recent photographs, and often provides information on the child's potential whereabouts as children will occasionally continue to post photographs and comments while on the run. Social media account discoveries are immediately shared with NCMEC and the child's BSS worker. 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 called "The West Virginia Missing Child Debriefing 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;
- Whether the child was injured or victimized, including whether they were trafficked; and
- Ways to decrease run events in the future.

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 with 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 a missing child is a critical function of the Child Locator Unit and begins when CI receives the initial report of each run event. Data collected includes a variety of information from run events including length of time on the run,, 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 ultimately the prevention of runaway events.

Identifying and tracking runaway children in foster care has been a challenging area for BSS in the past. This has partly been due to reporting requirements which stipulate that when any child is "outside of a designated boundary" for more than 15 minutes, it must 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 children are recovered and documented appropriately.

In the 2024 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 the child the entire time, events where children that ran were not in custody of the West Virginia Department of Human Services, and events where children were missing from care for less than 15 minutes. During the 2023 calendar year, there were 21 reported incidents that were excluded from data as they did not meet the definition of a missing from care (run) event.

Reported Runaways

Creation and improvement of the centralized reporting process has improved accuracy of reporting and will continue to do so.

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 children ran more than once during 2021.

During the period of January 1, 2022, to December 31, 2022, a total of 517 run events were documented, involving 293 children. Of those involved in runs, 233 children ran more than once during 2022.
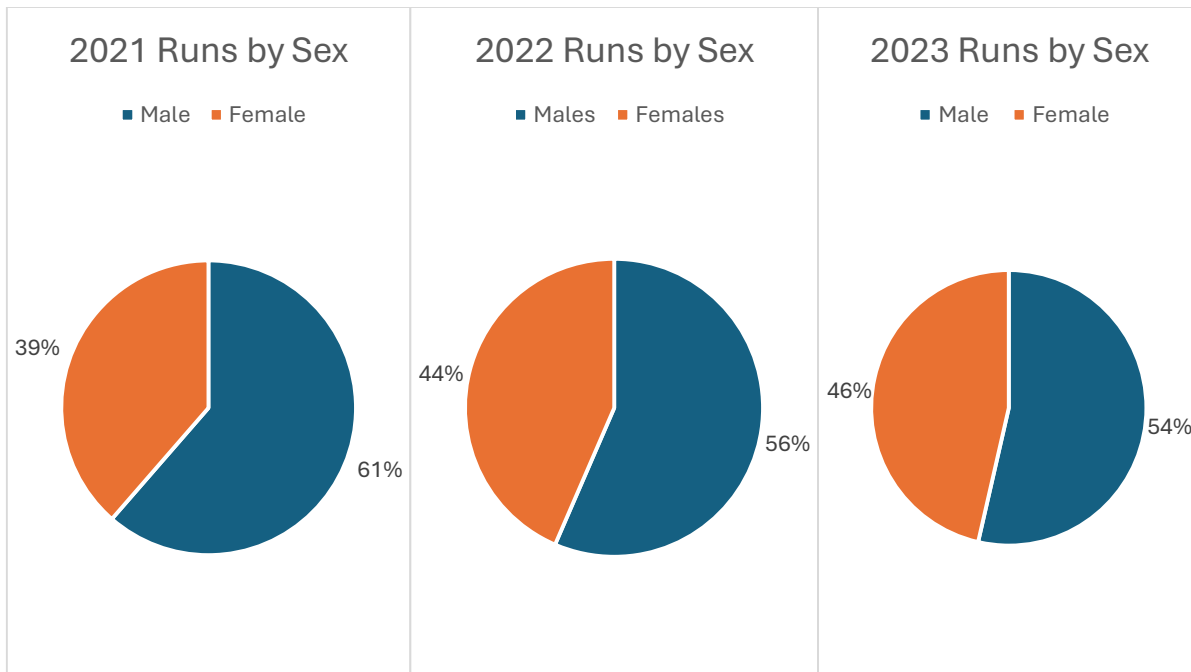
During the period of January 1, 2023, to December 31, 2023, a total of 450 run events were documented, involving 275 children. Of those involved runs, 96 children ran more than once during 2023.

At midnight on December 31, 2021, 14 youth were missing from care. At midnight on December 31, 2022, 26 youth were missing from care. 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 increase could be due to more accurate reporting to CI. At midnight on December 31, 2023, 16 children were missing from care.

In 2021, Sunday was the most common day of the week for run events. In 2022, Monday was the most common day for run events. And in 2023, Sunday was the most common day for run events.

Demographics

The following charts illustrate the number of run events by sex for the calendar years 2021, 2022 and 2023. The sex of each child is determined by assigned sex at birth, as documented in the child's official case record.
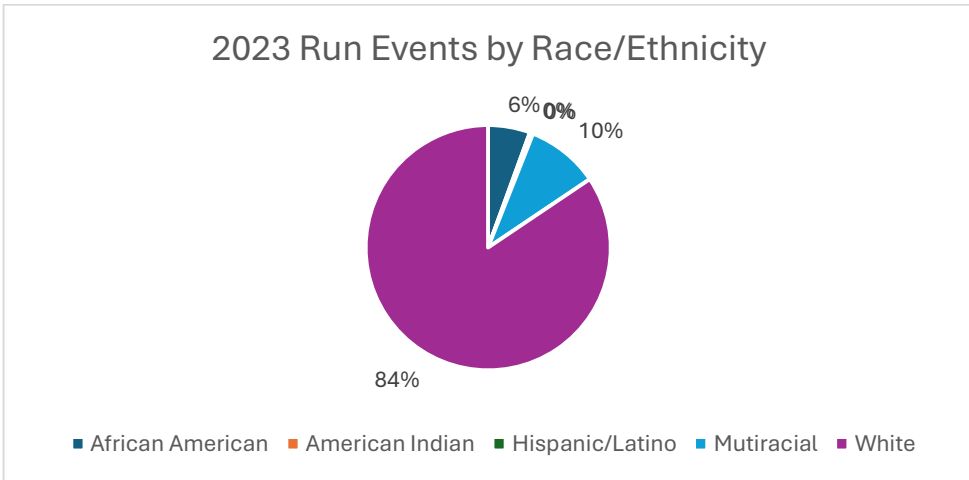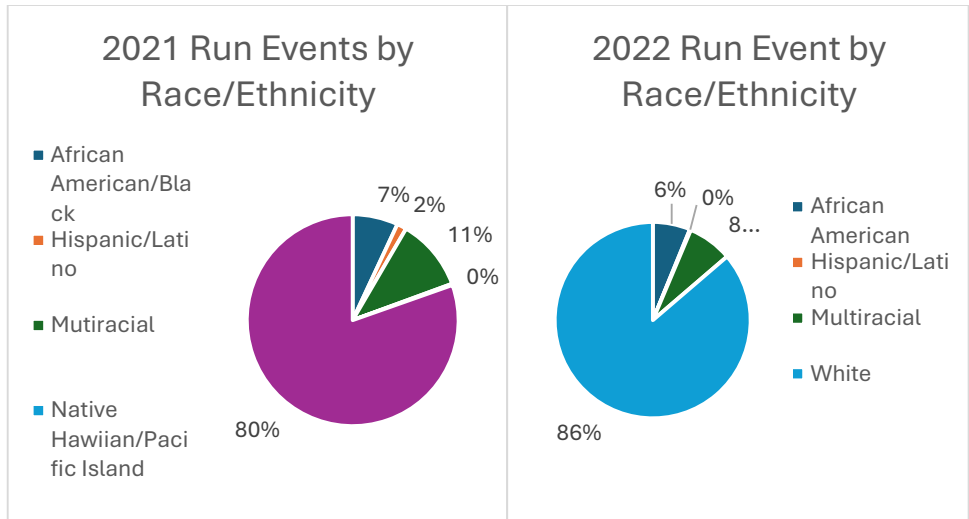
2021 Runs by Sex
■ Male ■ Female
39%
61%

2022 Runs by Sex
■ Males ■ Females
44%
56%

2023 Runs by Sex
■ Male ■ Female
46%
54%

Run Events by Sex			
	2021	2022	2023
Male	291	292	255
Female	183	225	195
Total	**474**	**517**	**450**

During the 2021, 2022, and 2023 calendar years, male children continue to constitute the majority of running children. National data compiled by NCMEC indicates that females constituted 59% of runs, while male children only comprised 41% of run events.[3] The factors influencing this statistical distinction between national statistics on runaway children and West Virginia's statistics on runaway children in West Virginia is not clear at this time and requires additional research.

The following charts indicate the racial identity of children involved in the total run events for the last three years. 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 perceived racial or ethnic identity. Multiracial is applied to any child with two or more reported races documented in the official case record.

[3] National Center for Missing and Exploited Children. *Analysis of Children Missing From Care Reported to NCMEC 2013-2022*. National Center for Missing & Exploited Children, Georgetown University McCourt School of public Policy's Center for Juvenile Justice Reform, 2023, p. 5, www.missingkids.org/content/dam/missingkids/pdfs/analysis-of-children-missing-from-care-reported-to-ncmec-2013-2022.pdf. Accessed 1 Apr. 2024.

2021 Run Events by Race/Ethnicity

Legend:
- African American/Black
- Hispanic/Latino
- Mutiracial
- Native Hawiian/Pacific Island

7% 2% 11% 0% 80%

2022 Run Event by Race/Ethnicity

Legend:
- African American
- Hispanic/Latino
- Multiracial
- White

6% 0% 8... 86%

2023 Run Events by Race/Ethnicity

6% 0% 10% 84%

■ African American ■ American Indian ■ Hispanic/Latino ■ Mutiracial ■ White

Run Events by Race/Ethnicity			
Year	2021	2022	2023
African American	33	32	25
American Indian	0	0	1
Hispanic/Latino	7	1	1
Multiracial	52	38	43
Native Hawaiian/Pacific Island	1	0	0
White	381	446	380
Total	**474**	**517**	**450**

Ages 15 to 16 were the most common ages of runaway children in 2021, 2022, and 2023. According to the Office of Planning, Research and Evaluation within the federal Administration for Children and Families, "data from the National Center for Missing and Exploited Children (NCMEC) indicate that since 2012, reported runaways involving children aged 12 to 14 years have increased as a percentage of all reported foster care

runaway cases."[4] The average age of a runaway child was 15.6 in 2021, 15.7 in 2022, and 15.3 in 2023. National data compiled by NCMEC cited that children missing from care were typically between the ages of 14 and 17 (85%) with a mean age of 15.[5]

The following charts illustrate the age of the youth at each run event for both 2021, 2022, and 2023.

Age of Child at the Time of Run
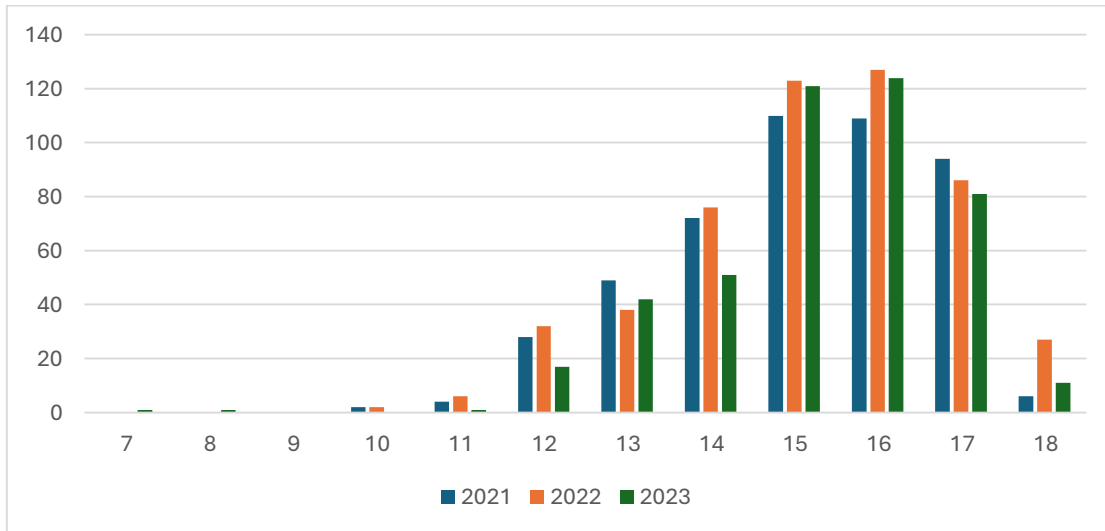
Age of Child at Time of Run						
Age	2021		2022		2023	
7	0	0.0%	0	0.0%	1	0.2%
8	0	0.0%	0	0.0%	1	0.2%
9	0	0.0%	0	0.0%	0	0.0%
10	2	0.4%	2	0.4%	0	0.0%
11	4	0.8%	6	1.2%	1	0.2%
12	28	5.9%	32	6.2%	17	3.7%
13	49	10.3%	38	7.4%	42	9.3%
14	72	15.2%	76	14.7%	51	11.3%
15	110	23.2%	123	23.8%	121	26.8%
16	109	23.0%	127	24.6%	124	27.5%
17	94	19.8%	86	16.6%	81	18.0%
18	6	1.3%	27	5.2%	11	2.4%
Total	**474**		**517**		**450**	

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[4] 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.

[5] National Center for Missing and Exploited Children. *Analysis of Children Missing From Care Reported to NCMEC 2013-2022*. National Center for Missing & Exploited Children, Georgetown University McCourt School of public Policy's Center for Juvenile Justice Reform, 2023, www.missingkids.org/content/dam/missingkids/pdfs/analysis-of-children-missing-from-care-reported-to-ncmec-2013-2022.pdf. Accessed 1 Apr. 2024.

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 has a positive correlation with children who have experienced high numbers of placement changes.[6] While the exact reason is unknown, it is hypothesized that familiarity with residential environments, less established ties to agency or facility staff, and a lack of positive role models may contribute to the decision to run away. The chart below illustrates the documented number of placements a youth has had at the time of each run event. It is important to note that adoption, as well as some other cases, are confidential. This means that Child Locators do not have access to all official case records and may not be aware of all placements.

Number of Placements at Time of Each Run Event						
	2021		2022		2023	
Pre-Placement	3	0.6%	3	0.5%	6	1.3%
1	71	14.9%	84	16.2%	96	21.3%
2	81	17.0%	57	11.0%	74	16.4%
3	52	10.9%	39	7.5%	64	14.2%
4	47	9.9%	61	11.8%	50	11.1%
5	36	7.5%	33	6.4%	18	4.0%
6	27	5.6%	28	5.4%	31	6.8%
7	28	5.9%	28	5.4%	19	4.2%
8	17	3.5%	23	4.4%	21	4.6%
9	24	5.0%	25	4.8%	15	3.3%
10+	88	18.5%	136	26.3%	55	12.2%
Total	**474**		**517**		**450**	

As expected, the number of runaway youth with more than 10 placements represents a high percentage of the population. More surprising, however, 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, psychiatric residential treatment facilities and juvenile service facilities. The Bureau for Social Services strives to identify and secure the least restrictive and most appropriate environment that will meet the child's needs while maintaining their safety as well as the community.

Group residential facilities have three levels of care; the higher the level, the more restrictive and intensive the supervision. Studies have shown a positive correlation between the risk of running away and placement in a congregate care setting (such as group residential or emergency shelter care). Evidence also suggests that children placed

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[6] 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 kinship or relative foster homes as opposed to more traditional foster care settings are less likely to run away.[7]

| Placement Type at Time of Run						
	2021		2022		2023	
Prior to/awaiting Placement	18	3.8%	19	3.7%	17	3.7%
Kinship/Relative Home	18	3.8%	32	6.2%	19	4.2%
Foster Care	23	4.9%	49	9.5%	44	9.7%
Shelter	147	31.0%	103	19.0%	144	32.0%
Out-of-State Placement	32	6.8%	19	3.7%	5	1.1%
Transitional Living	1	0.2%	2	0.4%	6	1.3%
Psychiatric Residential Treatment Facility	2	0.4%	1	0.2%	9	2.0%
Bureau for Juvenile Services Facility	2	0.4%	0	0.0%	0	0.0%
Group Residential Unspecified	1	0.2%	0	0.0%	0	0.0%
Group Residential Level 1	35	7.4%	17	3.3%	20	4.4%
Group Residential Level 2	139	29.3%	122	23.6%	110	24.4%
Group Residential Level 3	56	11.8%	153	29.6%	76	16.8%
Total	**474**		**517**		**450**	

Length of Time Away from Supervision

The length of time that a child remains away from care can be influenced by multiple factors: the child's reason for leaving, response from law enforcement, and whether the child ran with companions, among others.

During 2021, more than 69% of runaway children returned to care within 24 hours. In 2022, just under 80% of runaway children returned within 24 hours. In 2023, 72.44% of runaway children returned to care within 24 hours.

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 2021, 2022, and continued to decrease for 2023.

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[7] 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.

Length of Time Missing From Care
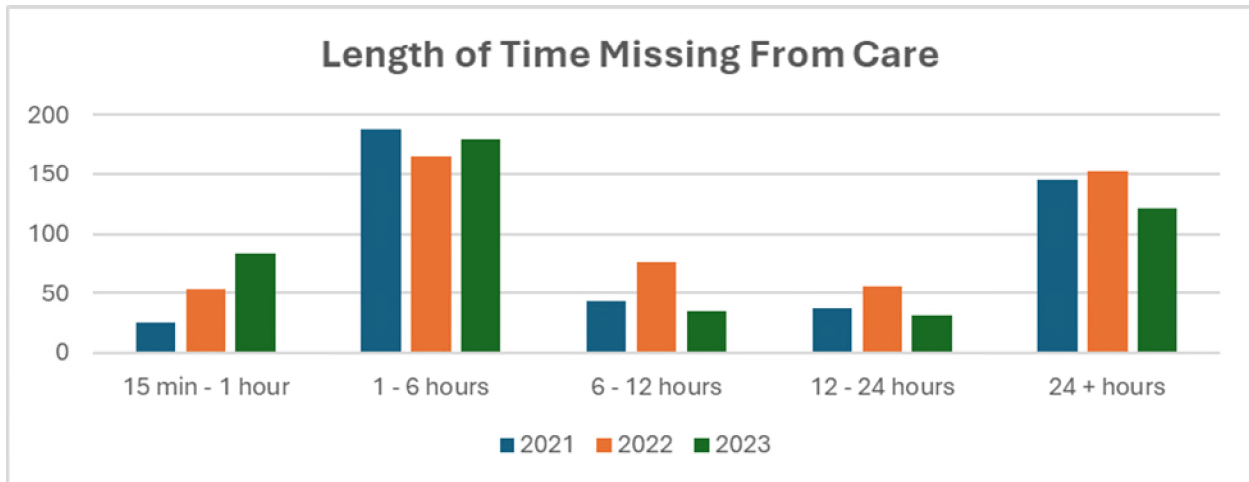
Another detail to note when considering the apparent decrease in the length of time that children remained away from care from 2021, 2022, and now in 2023, is that the Child Locator Unit began actively searching for runaway Children in early 2021. The length of time away from care continues to decrease even as the number of reported runaway children slightly increases.

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

Length of Time Missing from Care						
Length of Time	2021		2022		2023	
15 min – 1 hour	26	12.0%	54	10.7%	83	18.4%
1 – 6 hours	187	40.0%	165	32.8%	179	39.7%
6 – 12 hours	43	9.2%	76	15.1%	35	7.7%
12 – 24 hours	37	7.9%	56	11.1%	31	6.8%
24 + hours	145	31.0%	152	30.2%	122	27.1%
Total	**468**		**503**		**450**	

- *Time out of care could not be verified for 27 runs in 2021, and 14 runs in 2022. These events have been excluded from this data set to calculate percentages. In 2023 data was collected in a different format, making it possible to determine the amount of time all children were missing from care.*

System Crossover

Involvement in the child welfare system can correlate to adverse outcomes. One adverse outcome is known as system "crossover" where a youth is involved in the child welfare system while simultaneously involved in the juvenile justice system.[8]

West Virginia is one of the few states that separates Youth Services (YS) from Child Protective Services (CPS).

Youth Services interventions provide services to alter the conditions contributing to unacceptable behavior by youth and protect the community by managing the behavior of youth. Through the work of Youth Services, the BSS believes it will effectuate its mission to develop a proactive system which preserves safe and healthy families. This can also include crossover with the juvenile justice system.

Child Protective Services protects children from caregivers who may be harming them. Child Protective Services is responsible for the assessment, investigation, and intervention regarding cases of child abuse and neglect, including sexual abuse. Child Protective Services can also include crossover with the juvenile justice system.

The chart below breaks down 2023 run events by the unit they are involved with.

System Crossover: Both 34%, CPS 38%, YS 28%. Legend: CPS, YS, Both.
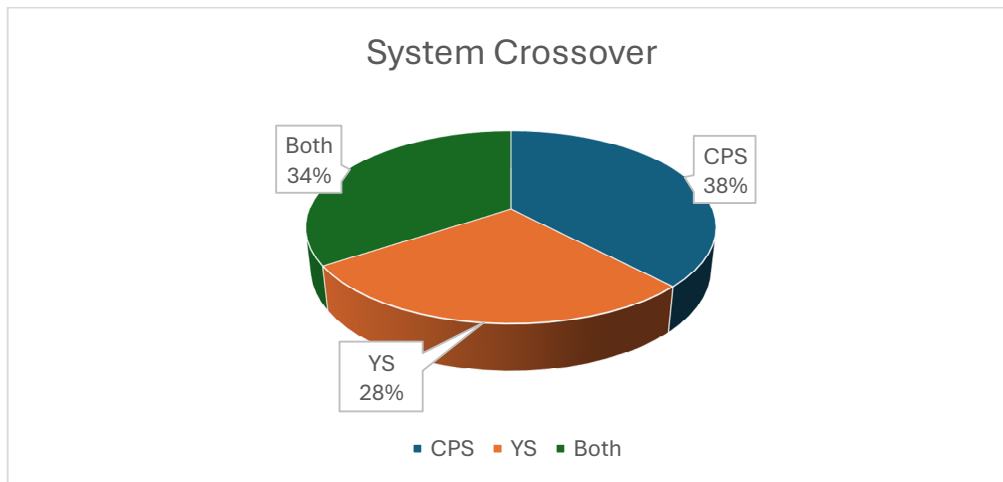
Child Interviews

Debriefing and screening interviews formally began in February 2021 after the finalization of piloted interview tools. The West Virginia Missing Child Debriefing

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[8] National Center for Missing and Exploited Children. *Analysis of Children Missing From Care Reported to NCMEC 2013-2022*. National Center for Missing & Exploited Children, Georgetown University McCourt School of Public Policy's Center for Juvenile Justice Reform, 2023. www.missingkids.org/content/dam/missingkids/pdfs/analysis-of-children-missing-from-care-reported-to-ncmec-2013-2022.pdf. Accessed 1 Apr. 2024.

Interview Tool is used for children who are away from supervision six hours or longer or have engaged in three or more runs in the previous six months.

This 2024 annual report includes information from all attempted interviews taking place January 1, 2023, through December 31, 2023. Child Locators attempted 126 total interviews; of these, four children refused to participate in part or all of their interviews. When a child refuses to participate, some information can be gleaned from the official case record or by statements made by that 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 and whether the Child Locator has access to all the child's official cases. While Child Locators understand the importance of taking time to build rapport with each child 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. Accordingly, discretion should be used when attempting to draw conclusions from the following data for these reasons.

Interview Process

Ideally, 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 youth has the privacy required to speak freely and to allow the Child Locator to build sufficient rapport. Nearly all interviews were conducted in person. One interview was administered via video conference, due to the child being placed out of state. One hundred and twenty-two interviews were completed in person. Each child is asked to

confirm the accuracy of the information provided to the Child Locator Unit in their Missing from Care Reporting Form and their Return to Care Reporting Form. Child Locators then use The West Virginia Missing Child Debriefing Interview Tool to interview the child. The following are charts that reflect questions and information gathered from those interviews:

'Was your run planned or unplanned?'
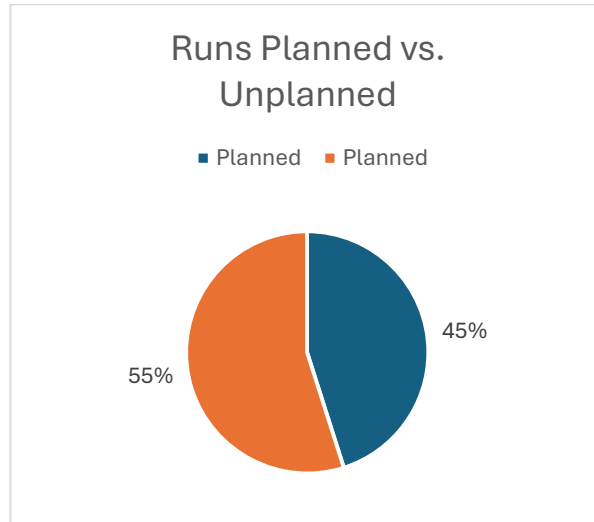
The degree to which the amount of preparation or thought is considered 'planning' is left to the youth to determine. Some children describe the supplies gathered and why they take certain items, such as the layering of clothing so that their 'last seen wearing' can be changed quickly, clothing for warmth, 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.

'Did you tell anyone you were going to leave, and if so, who did you tell?'
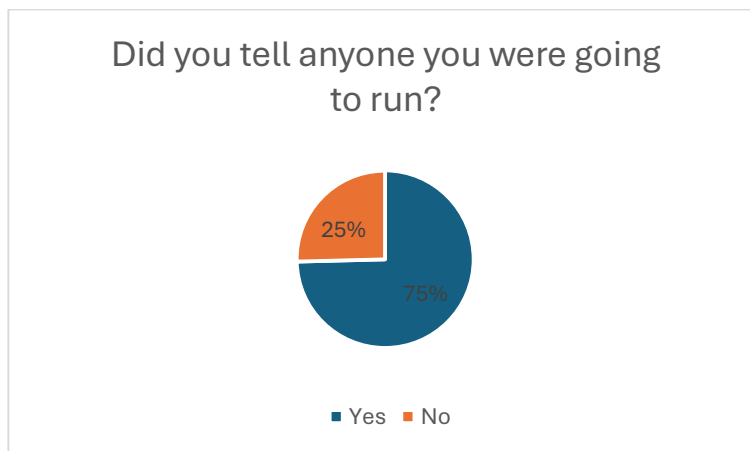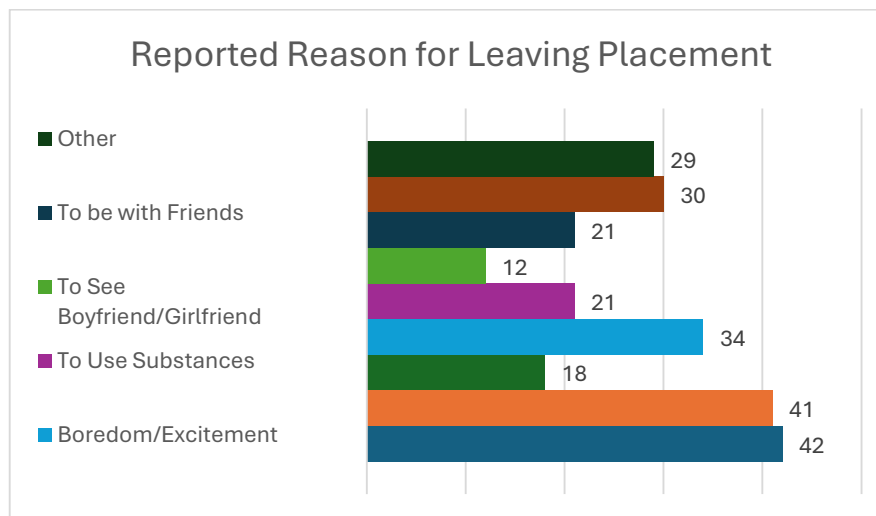
Who did you tell you were going to run?

■ Peer in Placement	73
■ Family	2
■ Friend	17
■ Facility Staff	6
■ DoHS Worker	4
■ Other	5
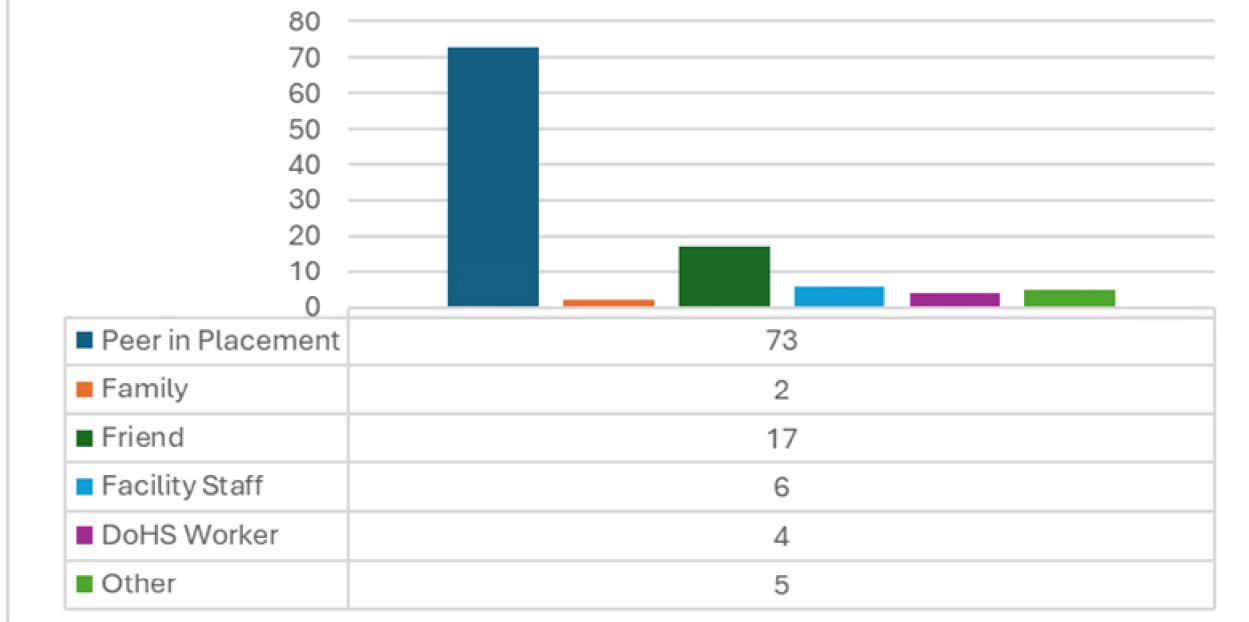
Of the interviewed children, 31 reportedly told no one they were going to leave prior to running. Of the others, some told more than one person. Most of the children who reported telling "another youth" indicated that the other youth was a peer placed in the same facility or may have followed the child and became a run companion.
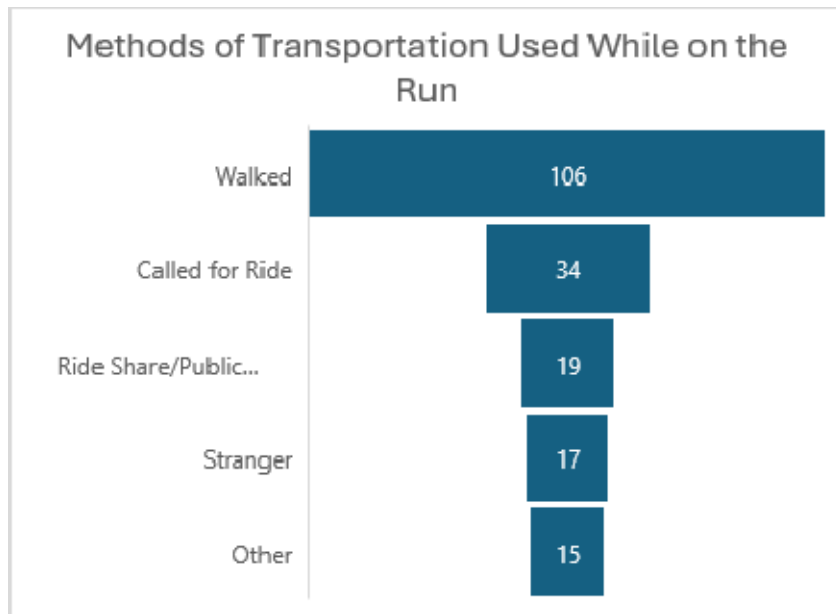
"What made you decide to leave?"

Reported Reason for Leaving Placement

- ■ Other — 29
- 30
- 21
- ■ To be with Friends — 12
- ■ To See Boyfriend/Girlfriend — 21
- 34
- ■ To Use Substances — 18
- 41
- ■ Boredom/Excitement — 42

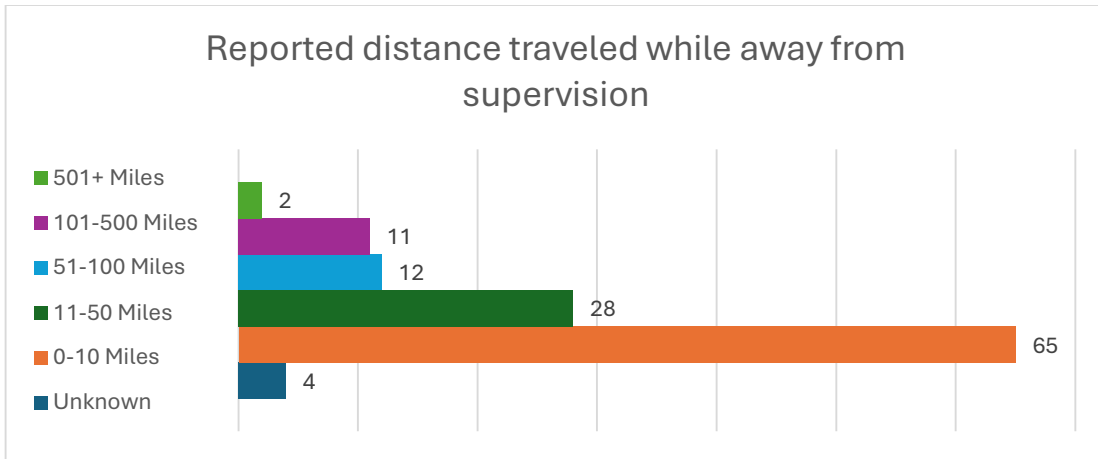| Reported "Other" as Reason for Leaving	
Be with/help peer who also ran	7
Concern over not being able to complete the program	4
Fear of consequences	4
Desire for more independence	5
Apprehension over future placement	4

Perceived problem with placement	3
Anxiety over returning to facility after home visit	2

Many children interviewed gave multiple reasons. Most often, children interviewed described being angry and/or frustrated, often with facility staff or a situation in the placement they ran from. Several children 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 friend/peer.

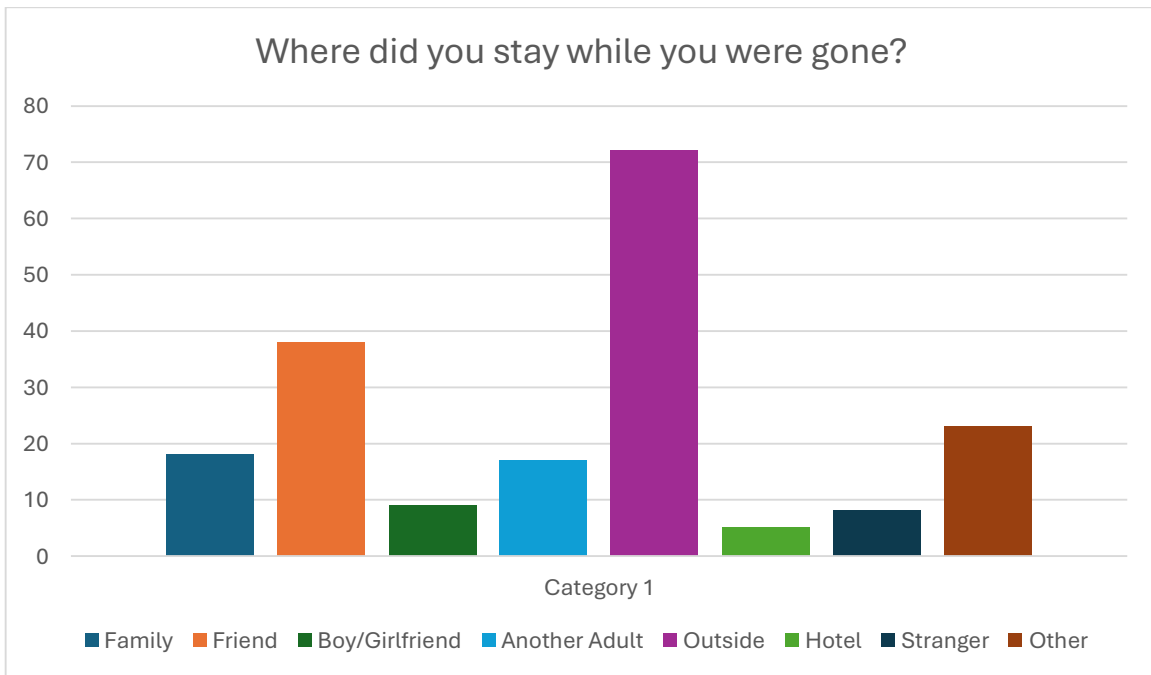**'How did you travel to where you wanted to go?'**

Methods of Transportation Used While on the Run

Walked	106
Called for Ride	34
Ride Share/Public...	19
Stranger	17
Other	15

"Other" Methods of Transportation	
Stole vehicle/bike/skateboard	8
Saw someone they knew and obtained a ride	3
Peer they were with contacted someone	2
Refused to say	2

Reported distance traveled while away from supervision

Distance	Count
501+ Miles	2
101-500 Miles	11
51-100 Miles	12
11-50 Miles	28
0-10 Miles	65
Unknown	4

While most children reported that they walked where they wanted to go, some gave more than one mode of transportation. Those interviewed were asked where they traveled while away from supervision. Most of the youth remained within 10 miles of where they ran from.

'Where did you stay while away from care?'

Where did you stay while you were gone?

Category	Count
Family	18
Friend	38
Boy/Girlfriend	9
Another Adult	17
Outside	72
Hotel	5
Stranger	8
Other	23

"Other" Places Stayed While Gone	
Abandoned Houses	12
Vehicle (abandoned, stolen)	7
Library/Bookstore	2
Shed	1
"No Comment"	1

When considering responses to this question, "places stayed" does 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.

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

Disclosed Activites while Away from Care
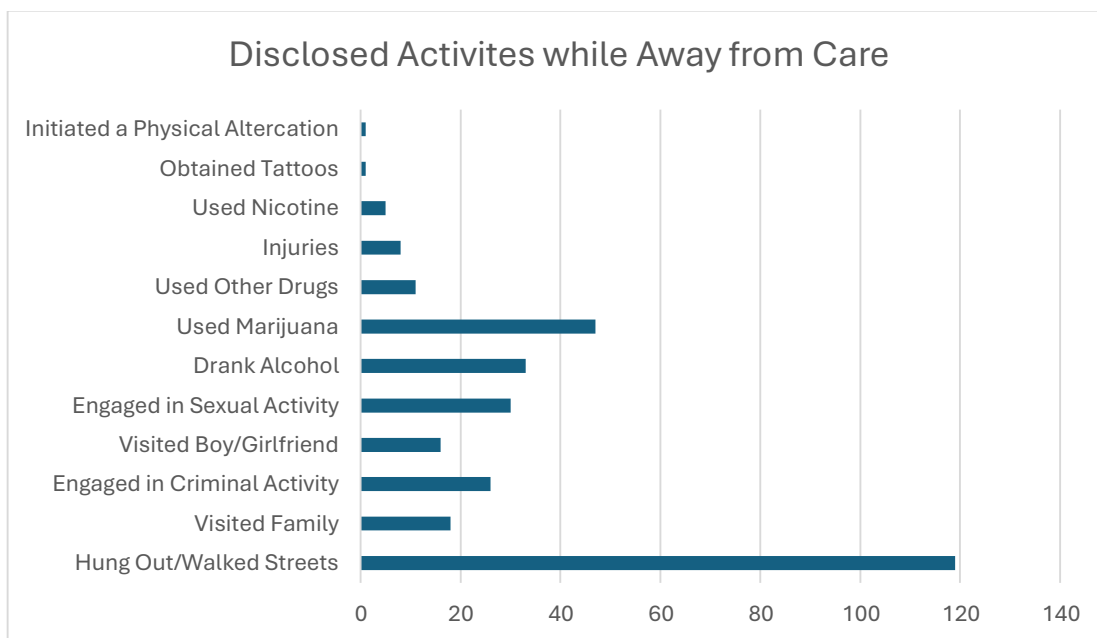
Screening Questions	
Youth obtained goods for engaging in sexual activity	0
Someone else obtained goods for youth to engage in sexual activity	0
Youth engaged in sexual activity with unwanted partner	2
Youth was forced/threatened to engage in sexual activity	2
Youth was forced/required to work in exchange for needed items	0

- *Both youth who reported engaging in sexual activity with an unwanted partner were the same two who reported being forced/threatened to engage in sexual activity.*

Five instances of victimization were reported during the 2023 reporting period. Three children were physically assaulted; one child reported being physically assaulted while trying to sell an individual drugs, one reported being physically assaulted when stealing someone's drugs, and one reported being assaulted, but would not give details and reported they "did not really feel like they were a victim." Two children reported being raped; one by the father of the peer the child ran with, and one reported they were raped but declined to provide details. All instances of victimization were reported to law enforcement and centralized intake.

There was one incident of a child being trafficked into the country. In this instance law enforcement, FBI, NCMEC, and centralized intake were notified. 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.[9] When a youth being interviewed makes a disclosure of trafficking during an interview, Child Locators make a referral to CI 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.

The goal 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.

Many interviewed during this reporting period spoke about feeling free and having a good time while on the run, while others indicated some regret. Those children reporting regrets reported being unhappy with consequences from running, even if the consequence was not a punishment. Others reported being pleased with the change in placement after their run event.

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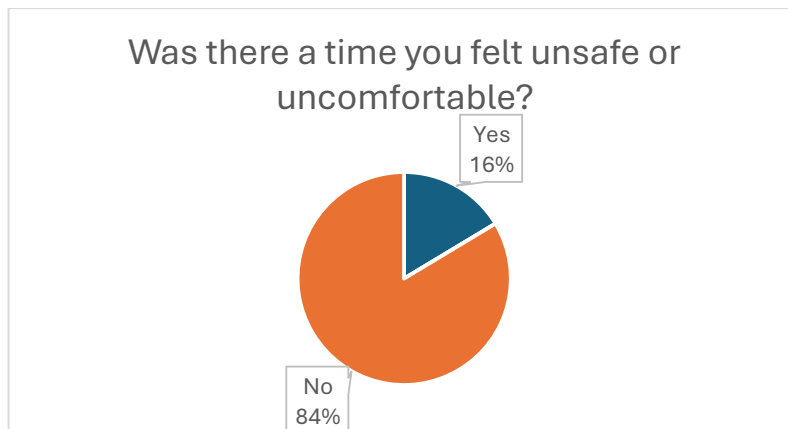
'How comfortable were you with the choices that you made?'

How comfortable were you with the choices you made?

Very Comfortable 33%

Not Comfortable 43%

Somewhat Comfortable 24%

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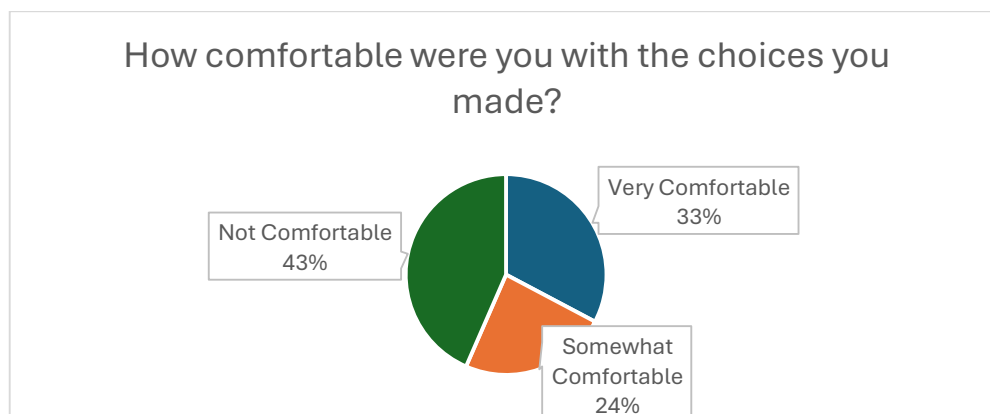
[9] The Library of Congress. (n.d.). *H.R.4980 - 113th congress (2013-2014): Preventing sex trafficking and ...* Congress.gov. Retrieved June 2, 2022, from https://www.congress.gov/bill/113th-congress/house-bill/4980

The purpose of the question was meant to be an additional screener, intended to catch instances in which children on the run felt uncomfortable or unsafe. Most children answered this question as if the Child Locator had asked: 'Would you do it again?' or 'Do you regret it?'

'Was there a time you felt unsafe or uncomfortable?'

Was there a time you felt unsafe or uncomfortable?

Yes 16%
No 84%

'Was there a time you depended on a stranger?'

Was there a time you depended on a stranger?

Yes 33%
No 67%
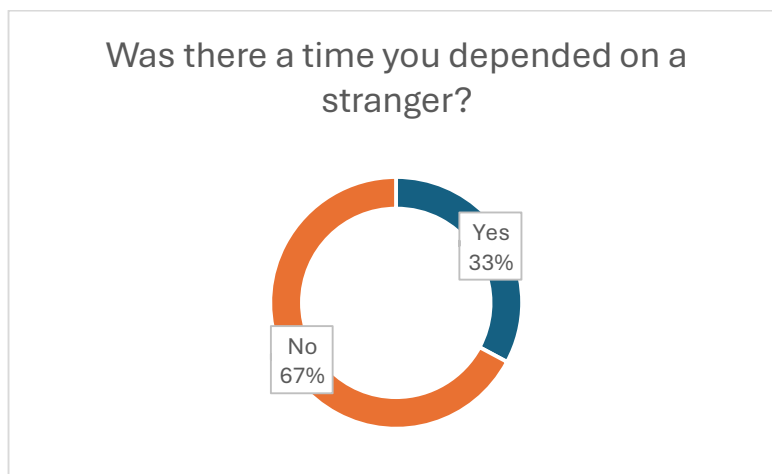
Items/Services Reported to be Obtained from a Stranger	
Ride	18
Food/Drink	10

|	
Place to Stay	8
Use of a Phone	8
Drugs	8
Money	7
Nicotine	6
Directions/Advice	2
Alcohol	1
Blanket	1

Few children reported feeling unsafe at any time during their time away from supervision even in situations that Child Locators would consider risk-taking behavior: accepting rides from strangers, hitchhiking, or accepting a place to stay from a stranger. Due to this, the Child Locator Unit added questions specifically centered on safety to ask about whether there are times during which children felt unsafe or uncomfortable and whether they are depending on strangers for needed items while away from supervision.
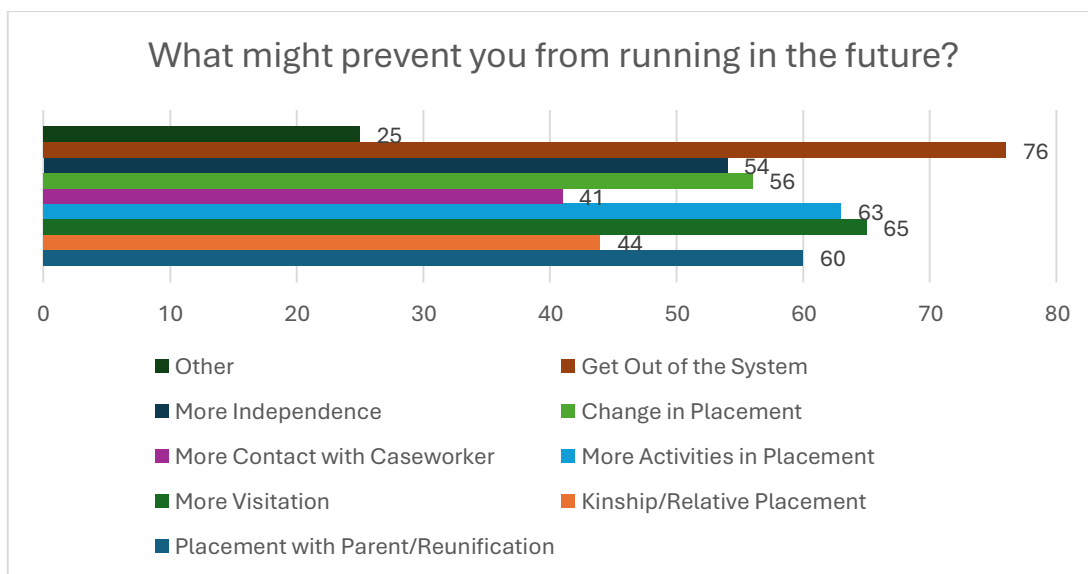
'What made you decide to return?'
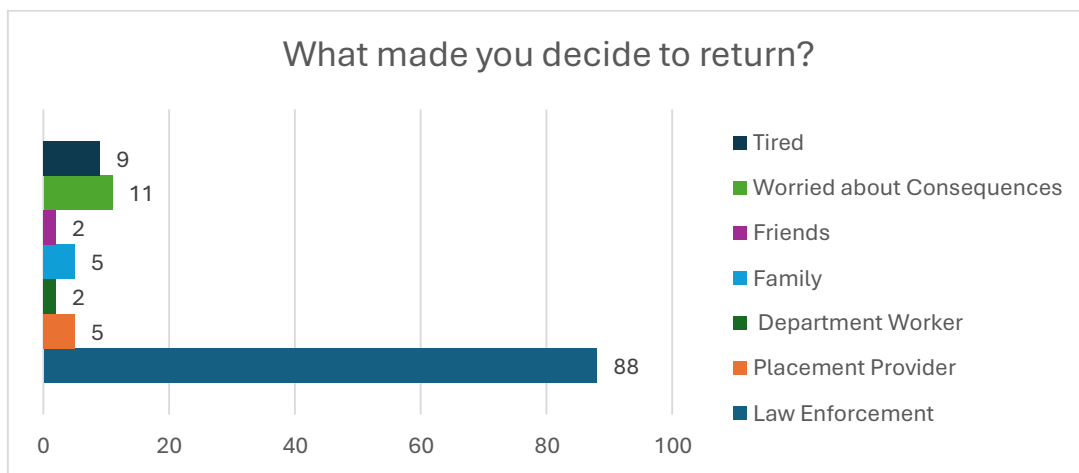
Most children do not choose to return but are instead found by law enforcement, often after being reported by others. Others return on their own after a short time away and verbalizing that a break from the environment was needed. The "other" reasons given for children returning included: the child was cold, the child never planned to be gone long, the child had calmed down or was ready to return, and the child was bored.

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

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

- Very Involved 16%
- Somewhat Involved 26%
- Uninvolved 58%
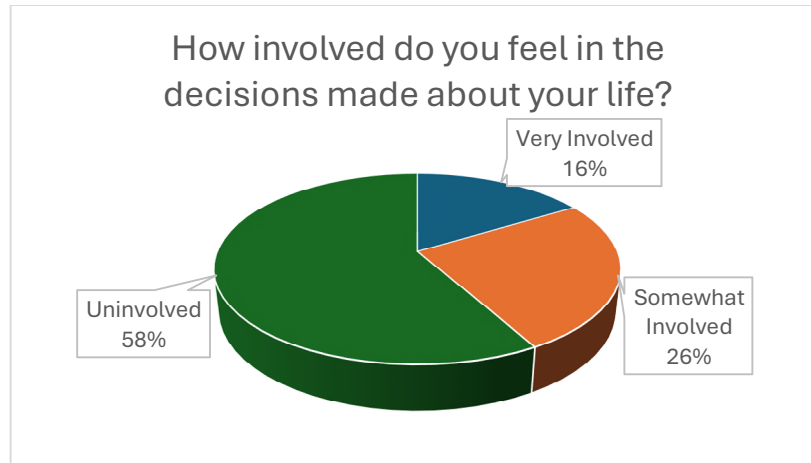
Some children interviewed reported they feel as though no one is considering their thoughts and feelings prior to making decisions that impact their lives. Many children interviewed verbalized that they liked their BSS worker and felt their worker had their best interest in mind. Others report that often decisions are made without their BSS worker providing an explanation (e.g., why contact with a specific relative is not permitted).

'What could prevent you from running in the future?'

What might prevent you from running in the future?

- Other: 25
- Get Out of the System: 76
- More Independence: 54
- Change in Placement: 56
- More Contact with Caseworker: 41
- More Activities in Placement: 63
- More Visitation: 65
- Kinship/Relative Placement: 44
- Placement with Parent/Reunification: 60

"Other" Responses Given that Would Prevent Future Runs	
Ability to use/access coping skills	6
Approaching adulthood	3
Someone to talk to	3
No answer given	3
Not going to run again	2
"if my friends would quit dying"	1
"cutting off my feet"	1

"having something to look forward to"	1
"I don't want to return to detentions"	1
"being placed on home confinement with ankle monitor"	1
"not having to share my space"	1
"being placed in my home county"	1
"if staff would sit and eat meals with us"	1

A wide variety of responses were received. Most children interviewed gave multiple responses to this question. Most often, children reported "getting out of the system" or placement with parent/reunification" as preventive measures, followed closely by "more visitation." Some children expressed feeling as though there are "too many kids in their placement." Several interviewed verbalized that they needed a break from being in their placement facility and ran "just to get away," while remaining in the area of the facility and returning on their own once they had
calmed down.

Other Observations

Several foster children were interviewed who had been involved in a child protective services case in which their parents' rights were terminated and had 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 support. Likewise, children placed in residential placements through juvenile court are rarely permitted to have their friends on their contact list. This also cuts them off from what many of them believe to be their main supporters. Child Locators have observed that children without strong connections and supports 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 child to run away from care or "pull" a child towards an external factor which also results in runaway behavior.

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 children 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.

2024 Initiatives

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

Child Locators are also interested in understanding the discrepancies between the statistics gathered for West Virginia's foster children and with national statistics provided by NCMEC. The Child Locator Unit will compare its data to research from other states on runaway and missing foster children and will also look to see if there are answers within the demographics of the children taken into custody of the DoHS.

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