Blaha, Maureen. "Hitting Home: How the Runaway Experience Haunts Adults." USA Today Magazine, vol. 140, no. 2802, Mar. 2012, p. 42. EBSCOhost, search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=pwh&AN=73785339&site=pov-live.

**Hitting Home: How the Runaway Experience Haunts Adults.**

Blaha, Maureen

USA Today Magazine. Mar2012, Vol. 140 Issue 2802, p42-43. 2p.

LIFE IN AMERICA

"…We need to ensure our nation's at-risk kids have a fighting chance at safe and fulfilling lives as teenagers--and adults."

IN MY PERFECT world, there would be no such thing as a runaway youth. The young people who decide to leave home every day would have the resources available to help them deal with the triggers that cause them to flee their circumstances. Yet, the fact remains that between 1,600,000 and 2,800,000 youth run away yearly in the U.S. Life on the streets is hard as runaways, throwaways, and homeless youth face crime, drug abuse, sexual exploitation, and prostitution, among other concerns. Mental issues and health problems also put youth who are on the streets at risk.

Statistics from a 2010 Urban Institute research brief show that one in five youth runs away before reaching age 18, and of that 20% who do run, half of them run away two or more times. As we examine current knowledge on this problem, one thing noticeably absent from the research is data that reveals the long-term effects on adults who ran away as adolescents. How do former runaways compare to nonrunaways? Do they experience greater health, economic, and legal issues'? If armed with this knowledge, what impact could we have in curbing the runaway crisis'?

The National Runaway Switchboard (NRS) has released the the first national study that addresses this issue: "Runaway Youth Longitudinal Study 2011," which found that adolescents who run away from home experience more health issues, economic woes, and run-ins with law enforcement officials as adults than their peers who do not run away from home. The differences between runaway and nonrunaways in terms of demographics and other risk factors also are highlighted in this study. Our goal is to identify long-term effects of running away from home so we can better educate parents, teachers, and other adults to get involved, address the issues, and ultimately prevent a runaway situation.

The study used a nationally representative sample of more than 15,000 individuals who were interviewed at four points in time over a 15-year span. The data was collected using a clustered school sampling design by the National longitudinal Study of Adolescent Health. Individuals first went; interviewed when they were in grades seven through 12 during the 1994-95 school year, and were reinterviewed the following year for the second wave of the survey. The third wave was collected when the respondents were aged 18-26 in 2001-02. During this wave, they were asked if they ever had run away from home as an adolescent, a key variable in the study. The most recent set of interviews occurred in 2008-09 with a sample aged 24-32. The analysis was conducted by Jennifer Benoit-Bryan of the University of Illinois at Chicago.

The findings denote the serious and long-term consequences that emerge over time among those who run away during their youth. The likelihood of not having a high school degree or GED is 50% percent higher for former runaways aged 24-32 than nonrunaways, with the average former runaway having completed a vocational or technical degree, while the average nonrunaway completing at least some college. Moreover, the annual personal income level of adults who run away from home as adolescents is $8,823 lower, on average.

One of the more surprising statistics is that youth who run away from home have a 51% increase in the likelihood of entertaining suicidal thoughts as an adult, and that runaways are more than three times as likely to attempt suicide.

Youth who run away from home are 44% more likely to have health issues as an adult that prevent them from doing moderate activities (for instance: pushing a vacuum, moving a table, or bowling) than someone who never ran away. Runaways also rate their general health lower than nonrunaways. Former runaways are 53% more likely to report having had a sexually transmitted disease as an adult.

The likelihood of someone being a smoker as an adult is nearly two-and-a-half times greater for former runaways. They also are 67% more likely to use marijuana as an adult However, there is no difference between rates of alcohol use among runaways and nonrunaways as adults.

Respondents who ran away as adolescents are more than two-and-a-half times more likely to be arrested after age 18. However, there is no association found between almost all of the criminal behaviors and running away (with the exception of selling drugs). Selling drugs as an adult is positively correlated with running away as a youth, with a 99% increase in likelihood over individuals who never run away from home.

Adults who ran away in their youth are 76% more likely to be recipients of Aid to Families with Dependent Children, public assistance, or welfare than nonrunaways.

Now, for the first time, we can quantify the detrimental and long-term consequences among youth who run as they move into adulthood. The data in this study makes clear that education and earning power are diminished, mental and physical health arc impacted dramatically, and risky and criminal behaviors are significantly more likely for Conner runaways.

With a clearer picture of a runaway's long-term future, social service organizations such as NRS, advocacy groups, and law enforcement officials can leverage this data to educate at-risk youth and their families before an incident occurs.

Prevention is the key to begin solving the runaway issue, and NRS has a number of resources and initiatives aimed to help keep America's runaway, homeless, and at-risk youth off the streets and safe. Our core impact initiatives include:

\* National Runaway Prevention Month. Each November, NRS, along with the National Network for Youth and other organizations, come together to recognize National Runaway Prevention Month. This campaign is spearheaded by NRS each year to help raise awareness of the runaway and homeless youth issue, focusing on the role anyone can play to help keep families intact and prevent youth from running away.

\* In collaboration with Greyhound Lines, Inc., the Home Free program provides runaways with a ride home. More than 14,000 youth have been reunited with their families free of charge since the program began in 1995. Home Free helps runaways, with their parents or guardians, develop a plan before returning home, and it provides them with resources in the community to help start rebuilding their relationships. The first step for getting help is to call the NRS hotline at 1-800-RUNAWAY or chat online at www.1800RUNAWAY.org.

\* "Let's Talk" is an extensive runaway prevention curriculum for teachers, social workers, and community leaders that helps adolescents build life skills, increase knowledge about runaway resources and prevention, and educate youth concerning alternatives to running away. It also encourages youth to access and seek help from trusted community members.

\* Street Team is a program when; participants can distribute free materials throughout their community and earn rewards for outreach activities. There are no time requirements and members do the outreach on their own schedule. This has proven to be an ideal way for former runaways to give back while also allowing families and advocates a hands-on opportunity to raise awareness in their community.

However, more research is needed to guide policymakers to the most effective points of intervention in addressing the runaway crisis. This is what we need to ensure our nation's at-risk kids have a fighting chance at safe and fulfilling lives as teenagers--and adults.

A Parent's Role in Prevention

No loving parent thinks his or her child will run away, but research shows it happens daily across all sectors of society. The National Runaway Switchboard offers a variety of straightforward tips to help parents better connect with their kids before a crisis occurs.

Pay attention. Listen when your children are talking with you. Do not just nod your head while you are watching television, reading the paper, or using your computer. Don't just pretend to listen. Kids know the difference.

Give respect. Acknowledge and support your child's struggle to grow to maturity.

Understand Your Child. Try to empathize with what your kids are going through. Look at life--at least occasionally--from their point of view. Remember that when you were their age, your ideas seemed to make sense to you.

Do not lecture. Everyone hates to be lectured, especially teenagers.

Do not label. Useless labels only will confuse the real issues that you wish to address.

Discuss feelings. Talk about what it feels like to be a parent. Share with your children the things you need from them. Encourage them to talk about their feelings. When parents share their feelings, children know it is safe to share their own.

Create responsibility. Give your offspring choices, not orders. Help your child to understand the consequences of his or her actions. When punishments need to be administered, try asking your child what he or she thinks would be appropriate. Make sure the punishment fits the circumstances and is consistent with other actions you have taken.

Administer positive praise. Describe your child's positive and negative behavior and how it affects others. Be specific and offer praise to reward good behavior. Positive behavior acknowledged is positive behavior repeated. Try to praise rather than criticize.

Stop hassling. Asking too many questions often shuts off information. Give your child the opportunity to volunteer thoughts and feelings while you show a sincere interest without probing.

Do not always give the answers. You want your kids to be able to find their own answers or solutions to problems. Ask "what if" to help them develop problem-solving skills.

Use teamwork. Work together with your child to identify the problems and find mutually agreeable solutions.