Portrait of the North American Runaway:  
A Critical Review

Gerald R. Adams and Gordon Munro

Received January 11, 1979

Runaway behavior has been viewed as a psychopathological problem by many. However, a review of the available research literature questions this perspective. An examination of the reported psychological profile of runaways suggests no clear relationship between personality and runaway behavior. Further, a multiplicity of factors can be noted which are potential causal agents for running away. These factors range from sociocultural values to school problems. Runaway research is shown to be methodologically limited by several factors, but the data are suggestive. Also, the authors conclude that future research on this growing social problem might utilize an "alternative values" or "deindividuation model" in generating testable hypotheses about runaway behavior.

INTRODUCTION

Since the 93rd Congress passed the Runaway Youth Act in 1974, a growing body of literature is appearing on runaways in America. A conservative estimate of runaways during 1973 approached 700,000 according to Raphael and Wolf (1974). For instance, during this period of time in New York City...
alone, 14,171 runaways under 18 years of age were reported to police, of whom 8,000 were females (Raphael and Wolf, 1974). Although one might assume running away would be a male behavior, research by Shellow, Schamp, Liebow, and Unger (1967) and Gottlieb and Chafetz (1977) suggests many young girls likewise run away. However, female adolescents who do run away are likely to be assisted by a boyfriend who provides financial and psychological support for their behavior. Therefore, one can conclude from this research and others (e.g., Brennan et al., 1975; Opinion Research Corporation, 1976) that runaway behavior is likely to occur among adolescent boys and girls, although the interpersonal dynamics of such behavior may be different for girls than boys. Case studies illustrating these dynamics and the social psychological process of running away have been vividly portrayed in such texts as *Got Me On The Run* (Bock and English, 1973), *The Runaway Generation* (Wein, 1970), *Runaways: America's Lost Youth* (Raphael and Wolf, 1974) and *Separating Parents and Adolescents: A Perspective on Running Away, Schizophrenia, and Waywardness* (Sterlin, 1974).

Libertoff (1976) reminds us that running away is not a new phenomenon and presents evidence that the runaway child in America played an important role in the growth, discovery, and economic development of this country. However, one may question if such behavior is currently more costly than beneficial to society. Indeed, the passage of the Runaway Youth Act would suggest that Americans view such behavior with concern and see the necessity for wide-range social intervention. Perhaps this concern is best illustrated by noting that the *National Directory of Runaway Programs* for 1976 listed 130 runaway houses (centers) operating in 42 states (Brenton, 1977).

**PSYCHOLOGICAL PROFILE OF THE RUNAWAY**

Running away has been defined, historically, as a behavioral manifestation of psychopathology (Riemer, 1940). In fact, the American Psychiatric Association has officially endorsed the "runaway reaction" as a specific mental disorder (Bock and English, 1973). Numerous investigations comparing runaway and nonrunaway youth can be found which tentatively support this position. For example, Jenkins and Stahle (1972) indicate that runaways are typified as insecure, unhappy, impulsive children who as adults are likely to have emotional problems. Beyer (1974) reports that runaways are more likely than their nonrunaway siblings to have lower self-esteem and show greater signs of depression. Bartollas (1975) and Bassis (1973) present evidence that many runaways see their personal life as an unmanageable and misunderstood problem. Further, runaways have been found to have lower self-regard than their nonrunaway peers (Brandon, 1974; Wolk and Brandon, 1977). Unfortunately, we cannot positively state that these factors are antecedents to, or consequences...