

Youth Running From Residential Care: “The Push” and “The Pull”

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February 2006

The authors would like to acknowledge the work of Cari Gibons and Wendy Peebles, MSW
Students in the preparation of this document.

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Abstract

The Office of Child and Family Service Advocacy (OCFSA) conducted six focus groups with youth in residential settings in Ontario with the primary purpose of capturing their experiences of running away. Concerns from youth regarding practices and policies in residential settings pertaining to youth who run away were brought to the attention of the OCFSA over the past few years. Furthermore, the OCFSA was concerned about the well being of youth who run away to unsafe situations. The youth participants were recognized throughout the data collection and analysis processes as experts. In so doing, the study facilitated the voice of the youth through use of the youth themselves as the key informants. This study identified why youth would run away, the push and pull factors that contributed to their running, unsuccessful strategies by staff to prevent running, risks youth encountered while they were on the run and strategies to be used to deter future running behaviour. The youth's own words were used to identify common themes which are reflected throughout this paper. We conclude with recommendations which were derived from four common themes which emerged consistently from the youth. These themes were: The importance of engagement in all aspects of programming and treatment; residential settings with a lack of emphasis on incentives; Youth feeling unsafe; and Staff's inability to respond therapeutically when youth are perceived to be at imminent risk.

Over the past number of years, the Office of Child and Family Service Advocacy (OCFSA) has received numerous concerns from youth regarding the policies and practices in residential settings pertaining to youth who run away or are absent without permission. The OCFSA recognises that running away from residential care is a serious issue. These concerns led to a discussion of best practices and a subsequent decision to undertake this field research. Although current literature provides guidelines and a recommended framework to address the issue of running away, it is the practise of the OCFSA to capture and report youths' own perceptions regarding the care they are receiving. Therefore, the objective of this paper is to understand the phenomena of running away from residential settings in Ontario, from the perspective of youth in care. To this end, Advocates conducted six focus groups with youth in five different residential settings throughout the province of Ontario. This paper includes a discussion of the relevant research, an analysis of the themes voiced by these youth, and recommendations for best practice.

Review of the Literature

One way of examining the seriousness of the issue is the consideration of the prevalence of youth running away from residential care. Biehal and Wade citing British studies, state: "While less than 1% of children and young people are looked after, around 30% of those reported to the police as missing were found to be from substitute care, the vast majority from residential placements" (1999, p.367). The Child Welfare League of America claims that "almost half of children in foster or residential care have run at some point in time" (2004, p.8). They also assert that "Children in out of home care have more than twice the likelihood of running away" as children living with their families (p.8). Abrahams and Mungall (1992) found that youth were more likely to run away repeatedly from residential care than from home and were also more likely to travel further and to stay away longer (cited in Biehal & Wade, 1998).

Youth in care can describe many reasons why they run away. The motivation is unique to each individual. However, researchers have suggested that the reasons for running away may be classified as either 'push' or 'pull' factors (Biehal & Wade, 2000; Finkelstein, Wamsley, Currie, & Miranda, 2004., Miller, Eggertson-Tacon, & Quigg, 1990). Push factors are those which drive youth to leave and are generally related to environmental factors in their placements; whereas pull factors are influences outside of their placements that draw youth to leave in order to go to something or someone.

Finkelstein et al.'s 2004 study elaborates on a number of push factors. The youth they interviewed cited boredom with their placement and a lack of programming as reasons why they run away. Youth also stated that they run away when they feel they are inappropriately placed, not receiving proper treatment or have little or no independence programming.

One of the greatest pull factors causing youth to run away from residential placements is the desire to see family and friends (Biehal & Wade, 2000; Finkelstein et al., 2004). Peer pressure is a factor for some youth; other youth who are planning to run away encourage friends in the residence to accompany them (Finkelstein et al., 2004; Miller et al., 1990).

It is also important to highlight the risks that face youth who run away. Although it is suggested that youth who run from care are more likely to stay with friends and family than on the street many youth are exposed to various types of risk, including sexual assault or exploitation, violence, substance abuse, and criminal offences (Biehal & Wade, 1999, 2000; Child Welfare League, 2004; Finkelstein et al., 2004; Miller et al., 1990). Although the majority of youth who run away were found to be older than thirteen, Biehal and Wade (1999, 2000) found that the younger children who run away are often at greater risk during the time they are

out, even though the duration of their absences are shorter. There is no pattern or method of running away that is correlated to particular types of risk exposure. Research findings indicate that there is also very little correlation between the frequency with which youth run away and the type of risk youth may be exposed to in any specific incident (Child Welfare League, 2004; Finkelstein et al., 2004). Biehal & Wade (1999) conclude that because there is no associated pattern to risk, each absence should be treated as equally concerning, no matter how many times the youth has run away or the particular combination of push or pull factors involved in the specific incident.

METHODOLOGY

Role of the Office of Child and Family Service Advocacy

The collection of data was conducted under the auspices of the Office of Child and Family Service Advocacy Office in Ontario. The Office is authorized under Child and Family Services legislation in the province to protect the rights and interests of children and families who are receiving or seeking services through the Ministry of Children and Youth Services, anywhere in the Province of Ontario. It advises the Minister on matters that concern children and families. The role of the OCFSA is threefold: to elevate the voice of youth, to intervene when children and youth living outside of their family's care report abuse or harsh treatment, and to ensure that care providers respect the legislated rights and entitlements of children and youth in Ontario. The OCFSA has experience and expertise in conducting interviews with youth, respecting uniqueness in language and development. Residential/group care settings are familiar with the OCFSA due to its regular on-site presence and mandated accessibility to youth.

Interest in the study of running behaviour has been longstanding because of the frequency with which it is reported by youth to OCFSA. Furthermore, Advocates were concerned about the wellbeing of youth who run from residential settings to unsafe circumstances. For these reasons the Office undertook to understand the phenomena of running away from the perspective of the youth.

Research Sites and Participants

The Advocacy Office chose five residential settings in five different regions in Ontario as sites for the project. The settings were approached by the OCFSA and asked to volunteer. The rationale for this type of stratified sample was to ensure that youth's responses were reflective of the different types of geographic areas and community sizes (i.e. rural vs. urban) in the province. The homes were located in the Central West, Central East, North, South East, and Toronto regions. Selection of participants also required that the agencies selected by ones with current experience with youth running away, and that youth who were willing to participate. Four of the settings were group homes for youth in the care of child welfare agencies and one was an open custody facility.

This study utilized focus groups as the primary means of data collection. The youth participants were recognized throughout the data collection and analysis processes as experts. In so doing, the study facilitated the voice of the youth through the use of the youth themselves as the key informants. In total there were six focus groups involving 32 youth. The group composition reflected the gender of the residents in the homes. In one of the residential settings participants were both female and male and were interviewed in two groups, one residential setting was a mixture of both male and female, two residential settings had all female participants and one group was all male. The age range of the participants was 12 to 18 years.

Data Collection Procedures

The role of the Advocate in the group care setting could not be separated from the research role during data collection. Youth participants were familiar with the OSFSA; may have on occasion accessed the advocacy services of the office and were forthcoming in their interactions due to their trust of the Advocate. Focus groups were chosen as the means of data collection to offer peer support and the opportunity for youth to dialogue among each other in the presence of the Advocate about their experiences of running away.

The focus group method offered a richness of information that may not have been available through individual interviews. Two Advocates attended each focus group. One facilitated the discussion and one recorded, as much as possible, the verbatim content of the discussion. There was limited interpretation or paraphrasing and quotes were recorded verbatim. Recording devices were considered too intrusive and their use is not the practice of the OCFSA.

The OCFSA contacted staff at the agencies to set up the interviews. All of the youth living in the group homes were invited to participate by the group home staff. Advocates explained to both staff and youth that the purpose of the focus groups was to gain insight on running away behaviour. Advocates followed a standardized practice of data collection that adhered to the requirements of confidentiality, and the youth's right to choice in their participation.

The interview guide consisted of nine open-ended questions intended to elicit youths' lived experience, perceptions, and their recommended solutions. The results presented below are organized according to the nine questions. Youth directed the focus groups discussions in that the Advocate asked each question which was followed by an open dialogue by the youth. Limited facilitation was required.

The transcripts from each group were analyzed with N-Vivo qualitative research software. Themes were developed that were reflective of the youth's own language and represented their perspective on running away. These themes are presented in the discussion section of this paper and used to formulate the recommendations.

A number of staff came forward spontaneously to give their view points about youth running behaviour. The Advocate on site recorded these comments and they were analyzed separately. The full report (available from the OCFSA) documents the staff perspectives as well.

RESULTS - PARTICIPANTS' RESPONSES

1. "What is an AWOL?"

.Even though some of the responses were worded differently, all of the five focus groups were able to identify that an AWOL was an absence from the site without permission or leave.

2. "Why Do You Think Youth AWOL?"

To get an understanding of what motivates youth to run away from residential care, the OCFSA asked the participants why youth run away. Youth described running away due to boredom, relationships with staff, rules being too strict, curfew time being unrealistic, or not feeling comfortable in the home, and some youth spoke about being teased by peers. Others spoke of wanting to see friends or party.

Problems with Placement:

"Because I hate living in this place."

"Stressful – need a break"

"Want to take time to self – Cannot go out of staff's eyesight. Need to get away from everyone."

The residence was viewed as excessively restrictive:

"Because staff don't let us do much stuff – don't let us out for 5 minutes by ourself."

"Feels like custody"

"Suppose to be like home, but it's not."

Boredom:

"Too Boring"

Rules are not fair or unrealistic:

"Expectations are unrealistic."

"Because of the rules. Some staff make rules as they go along; there are different rules for different staff."

"So much rules and pressure"

Curfew is too early or unrealistic:

"If 17 and have to be home by 11:00, that is unrealistic"

"Should not be the same, especially for different ages"

"House would not have as many AWOL if the curfew time was later"

Relationships with Staff:

"Staff aren't our parents - not concerned for us."

"Feel sometimes that staff are on my ass all the time."

"If they're yelling at me, I walk out the door"

Teasing:

"Not because I'm mad, because other people tease me."

"People are making fun of me."

Wanting to See or Be With Family:

"Be with real family."

"AWOL to be with Mom. Haven't seen her."

"If they take away your home visit."

Wanting to See Friends or Party:

"AWOL because not enough time to be with friends"

"To see our friend – go out and party like normal teenagers do."

3. "Do youth plan ahead to AWOL?"

The next question raised the issue of whether youth plan ahead or whether their decision to run away is spontaneous. Some of the youth said that their decision to AWOL was planned:

"All of us planned to AWOL, just to get on staff's nerves."

"If I know I'm not coming back, I'll start making plans for where I'm going. I'll find a place and pack my stuff."

Others spoke about their decision to AWOL being spontaneous:

"Just walk out the door"

"Sometimes not planned, just get mad and leave"

And some youth spoke about the nature of the decision varying, depending on the situation:

"Sometimes, depends on how I'm feeling."

4. "What do staff do to stop a youth who is about to AWOL?"

Youth were able to describe a variety of measures that staff would attempt, to stop youth from running away.

Talking to youth:

"Try to stop you from leaving – talk you out of it."

"Talk to you. Tell me I'm going back to my old life."

"Say stuff: 'What's the point of doing this? You'll get in more trouble.'"

Blocking the door:

"Sit with chair in front of door until you have calmed down."

"They'll block the door if I tell them I'm walking."

Using restraints:

"If danger to self – high/drunk – block or restrain."

"Restrain. Was restrained once in the back of a car."

"Restrain, drag back to house by arms. Happened first day here."

Using threats:

"Go ahead. – I'll give you an hour. Call the dogs on you."

"Want to go to jail?"

No intervention:

"Most of the time they let us walk out the door."

"Sit on couch – don't do anything."

Following:

"Follow us."

"Follow me – sometimes hold me."

Calling the police:

"In my situation staff call the police immediately. Others, wait 24 hours."

5. "How do staff ensure the safety of youth?"

It is important to note that youth in all groups had difficulty responding to this question directly and instead focused on how unsafe they felt either while running away or in relation to staff responses to their leaving.

Youth offered a variety of strategies staff use to try to ensure their safety:

“Follow people.”
“Tell you to put on winter coat.”
“Staff say: ‘Be safe.’ - They ask us to call to make sure we are okay.”
“Ran once with no shoes and coat. Staff brought shoes and coat.”
“[A staff member] will stop if he sees you and picks you up.”
“Has to be brought back due to suicide risk.”

Several of the youth indicated that staff do not make them feel safe, even though no specific question was asked to elicit this response. However, youth were determined that the Advocate understand their frightening experience while on the run. These experiences may have been precipitated by concerning residential policies.

“If winter, don’t care if in socks. Frostbite. Lock shoes.”
“Freezing – walking down road . . . takes blanket off – just in t-shirt/pj bottoms, pair of socks – I was cold.”
“Lock doors and don’t let us come back in the house.”

6. “What do staff do to prevent AWOL?”

The purpose of this question was to understand preventative strategies that are used in residential settings to deter youth from running. Youth reported a variety of strategies and expanded on the effects of these strategies.

Locking up coats:

“First they locked up my coat.”
“In the winter they take your jacket.”

Locking up shoes:

Youth spoke about staff locking up shoes as a deterrent for AWOL. Some of these youth said that if they were going to run away, staff would give them their shoes. Their impression of the practice of locking up their shoes was mixed.

“Shoes and coats all locked up when we walk in the door. Have flip-flops or slippers in the house.”
“I like the rule, because when they get their shoes back they just AWOL again.”
“In winter you could go out in bare feet. Staff thinks if you’re stupid enough, it’s your own consequence.”
“One of my friends AWOLed without shoes and had really disgusting feet when he came back.”

Talking to youth:

“Prime worker talks about what would happen if I leave. When it comes down to thinking about AWOL, that’s what I will think about.”
“If you are new, they will try and talk you out of it.”
“Staff get frustrated. They try to talk you out of it, but once you have been AWOL several times they will point to the door.”

No prevention:

“If you’re known as a runner they will just let you go.”

7. “What are the consequences for AWOLing?”

All youth described some type of consequence upon returning to the residence.

Police involvement:

Some youth spoke about the effects of the police being contacted:

"You leave and don't come back. At a certain time, they put in a MPR." [Missing person's report]

"I'm on probation. If I'm gone after 8:00, I'm in jail."

Grounding and loss of family visits:

Youth spoke about being grounded to the residential setting or, loss of community access and family visits:

"No community access."

"Grounded for 10 days."

"No outings, depending on how long you were gone"

"Can lose visits."

Bagging:

Youth spoke about having some or all of their personal property taken. A common practice in some of these residential settings is "bagging":

"All stuff out of room."

"Take your stuff and put it in garbage bags or boxes and in laundry room."

"One of my AWOL's I got it back 30 days later. Every morning I was allowed to take out one outfit for the day and put it back. It depends on how long you are gone."

Losing levels or points:

"Get dropped (program)"

"Have to pay \$5 because staff had to use their own car."

"Do more chores"

Barriers added and increased supervision:

"Block on window."

"Watch you for a couple of days."

8. What kinds of things do youth do when on AWOL?

Youth spoke about seeing their family or friends, traveling to other communities, smoking, doing drugs, sexual activity or simply just going to clear their heads. Although youth identified behaviours that adults may consider as risk taking, they themselves did not consider these to be risks.

Walking or going to the mall:

"Go for a walk 3 to 4 hours."

"Mall – chilling"

Seeing family:

Youth spoke about going to see family or not returning from home visits.

"Was with family and didn't want to come home."

Seeing friends:

"Go to a friend's house."

"I go . . . to see my boyfriend."

"Hang out with friends."

Smoking or using drugs:

"Went to woods, had smokes."

"Drank, smoke weed."

"In and out of group homes. Was AWOL 26 times in 6 months. Sold drugs, did drugs, aggressive, beat up people."

Engaging in self-harming behaviours:

"Cut themselves."

"I messed myself up pretty bad."

Exposure to other risks:

"Fall in river."

"Try to hitchhike."

"Hang out with friends and race cars."

Engaging in sexual activity:

"Go to the park, sit there, make out with some guy."

"Go to guys' houses. Either drink, smoke, do drugs, sleep with them."

"5 months AWOL. Went into prostitution, escorting, stripping, had Pimp."

9. "What do you think would be effective in stopping AWOL's?"

There were a variety of suggestions from youth about how they could be prevented from running away. Some youth said that if they were given the opportunity to have more walks or an increase in their community time, this would decrease the chances of them going on an AWOL:

Community Integration and family visits

"Let us go for walks for 1/2 hour."

"Other option is to walk with staff."

"Let us go on more outings."

Youth spoke about a progressive increase of community time as being effective.

"1-1 staffing for the first 7 days. Staff are a little bit on you until you can prove you're independent. After 7 days, you get 15 minutes in the court. If you screw up, you don't go back to the beginning. Community time is a progression; 15 in court, 15 minute out of court, one half hour, 1 hour; 2 hours with a call and check in; 3 hours CT."

Youth stated that if they had more access to family visits, they would be less likely to take off:

"Negotiate for home visits"

"Family contact"

"Anger walks"

Youth referred to "anger walks" and suggested that if they were given the opportunity to go for walks to attempt to reduce their anger, this would be an effective strategy to reduce their desire to run away:

"Anger walks part of the management plan."

"If they trust you to come back they will give you anger walks."

Incentive Strategies

Youth expressed the opinion that the level system should be more conducive to earning community time:

"Have to be on orange level or higher to go for a walk. Orange cannot be reached. Too hard. Each colour should take 2 days."

"Trust us. You should have community time at all levels."

Youth suggested that a change in curfew time would reduce the impetus to AWOL:

"Reasonable time for teenagers. It should be at staff discretion for 13 to 17 - Different expectations for different ages. Thirteen year olds should not be out late."

Staff Behavior

Youth described staff behaviour that may decrease the likelihood of youth running away:

"Listen to you more often."

"When people upset, they should listen to us."

"When I was upset, staff stopped me from hitting my head against wall."

"Trust us."

"House has changed on a daily basis. We get input into the changes."

"Doing what they tell us they are going to do. CAS workers tend to tell us what we want to hear; then when it comes down to it, it doesn't happen. – False promises. If I wanted that I would be at my mom's house, not here."

"There should be more group homes with the same idea as this one. All girls have our own programs. They treat us like humans."

DISCUSSION

The Youth Perspectives on AWOL

Why Youth Run Away - Push factors

In responding to the questions, youth identified a number of factors that they felt drove them to run away from their residential placements. Youth in the focus groups explained that they had concerns about their care at the group home and needed to get away. This highlights the need for residential settings to provide appropriate programming and develop positive and supportive environments that provide youth with a sense of support, comfort and safety. It also speaks to the need to involve youth in their plans of care to ensure that they are placed appropriately and are receiving supports and treatment that are appropriate to their needs.

Being bored was another contributing factor which youth cited. This complaint is consistent with the findings of Finkelstein et al. (2004) and VanderVen (2004) both of whom reported that youth who ran away spoke about a constant feeling of boredom that was more acute on nights or weekends during summertime. Staff spoke about the importance of engaging the youth by understanding and participating in areas of interest to youth. This will be experienced as empowerment by youth. The OCFSA heard from both youth and staff about the importance of engaging youth in decisions made about them including programming and treatment planning. Youth who feel cared for and listened to by staff feel more understood and have a greater sense of attachment (Kurtz, Lindsey, Jarvis and Nackerud, 2000). These factors counter the 'push' to freedom with a 'pull' to a caring, safe and interesting place to live.

Youth complained that the expectations of their residence were restrictive and it did not feel like 'home.' Some of the youth interviewed by Finkelstein et al. (2004) and by Biehal & Wade (2000) identified difficulty adjusting to a more structured environment as the reason they ran away. Incidences of running away can be more acute in residential settings that restrict

access to the outside or require youth to be under constant supervision (Finkelstein et al., 2004). Many youth in the present study spoke about feeling that staff were intrusive and stressed the importance of having time in the community to feel a greater sense of autonomy.

Unrealistic or unfair rules were common responses to the question about why youth run away. Studies have shown that in the early adolescent years, youths' attitudes towards rules and authority become progressively more unfavourable (Levy, 2001). It has been suggested that the more involvement an adolescent has in the process of establishing the rules, the more they will abide by them (de Winter & Noom, 2003). Rules that youth could participate in setting include those related to consequences, incentives such as curfews, recreation and community activity. As an example, many residential settings consider breaking curfew to be a form of running away. Many youth would prefer that returning late be treated differently with alternative consequences. Research has shown that youth's obedience to rules is more likely an internal acceptance of the rules rather than a compliant response to authority (Levy, 2001; Smetana, 1988 cited in Finkelstein et al.).

During the focus groups, few of the youth spoke about a positive connection to the staff. Youth spoke of conflictual relationships with staff and viewed some staff as rigid and inflexible in their approach. Biehal and Wade (2000) concluded that homes with a high rate of youth running away were often characterized by little leadership from senior staff, low staff morale, and a sense of helplessness in staff's ability to protect residents or have control over youths' behaviour. This echoes the experience of the OCFSA. Those homes that have low levels of runaway youth were noted to have strong leadership, a clear sense of purpose, and high staff motivation for negotiating boundaries with the youth (Biehal & Wade, 2000). This highlights the importance of building positive relationships between staff and youth.

Ensuring the safety of youth and monitoring peer on peer interactions needs to be a constant focus in residential settings. Teasing was mentioned as a reason for running behaviour. Feeling unsafe due to bullying, stealing, fighting, physical abuse, sexual misconduct and racial harassment were further reasons cited by the youth in a study by Finkelstein et al.'s (2004). Youth who are vulnerable to harassment by peers need to be identified to ensure they are provided with additional staff supervision and support to ensure their safety. Programs should focus on anti-bullying strategies to deter this behaviour.

Why Youth Run Away - Pull Factors

Biehal and Wade's research (2000) found that, as youth move into their adolescent years, the desire to be with family tends to lessen and they more often run away to see their friends. However, several of the youth the OCFSA interviewed were clear that the reason they ran away was to see their family. In fact, the pull of family was cited slightly more often than the pull of friends. Increasing opportunities for youth to visit their family and friends legitimately may help to reduce the incidence of youth running away.

Youth complained about having limited or no access to family members, worried about how their families were treated by service providers and were concerned about a lack of proper communication between the youth's families and service providers. This is consistent with literature which notes the importance of communication between service providers and families and the lack of attention to such details (Garfat, 1990). In recognition of children's rights (United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child, Article 5) and in order to provide an optimal standard of care which will diminish youths' desire to run away, it is important for residences both to build positive relationships with families and to maximize the opportunities for youth contact with their families.

Very few youth indicated that they ran away in order to use drugs. However, this emphasizes the need for debriefing youth about their motivation for running away. If they are honest in their responses or if there are other indications that drug use is an issue, information about risks associated with substance use should be provided.

Overall, many more push factors than pull factors were identified by youth as the impetus for them to run away. However, as Biehal & Wade (1999) explained, push and pull factors can be intertwined with each other. The pull factors come from individuals' family histories, relationships, and networks outside of their placements, while push factors arise from within their placements, but are related to their relationship history and their expectations about relationships.

The Experiences of Youth Who Run Away

Similar to other studies (Finkelstein et al. 2004, Biehal & Wade, 2000), the youth who were interviewed in the present study spoke about engaging in a range of activities while away from their residences. They spoke about seeing their friends, smoking, taking drugs, engaging in sexual activity and prostitution, other self-harming behaviours or simply just going to clear their heads. These activities were not given as reasons for leaving (Pull factors). It would appear that youths' desire to run away is more often related to concerns related to the group care environment, i.e. push factors and that the activities that they undertake are related to the concerns or opportunities of the moment, rather than a rationale for leaving. This highlights the importance of residential agencies focusing on quality of care with emphasis on meaningful youth engagement.

Another important point which emerges from the youths' responses to this question is that they were frequently engaged in risky behaviours, even though those opportunities did not necessarily pull them to run away. Youth may leave to seek out excitement that their placement can not offer (Biehal & Wade, 2000). Some youth may commit offences, either on their own volition or through peer pressure (Biehal & Wade, 1999, 2000). One of the pull factors reported was engaging in sexual activity or prostitution (Finkelstein et al., Biehal & Wade, 2000). Reports of youth who prostitute indicate they were enticed into doing so after being admitted into residential care (Biehal & Wade, 1999; Finkelstein et al.). This finding from the youth in this current study is similar to those in other studies and reinforces the importance of sensitively debriefing with youth when they return, assessing the risks to which they were exposed, and determining their motivations for leaving. This will enable service providers to work to address the youths' concerns and minimize both the frequency of future occurrences AND the exposure to risk and engagement in risky behaviours when they are absent.

Spontaneous or Planned Decision to AWOL

This question was asked in order to determine if the decision to run away was in response to an immediate crisis or whether it was a decision which involved planning and preparation. Some of the youth said that their decision to run away was planned. If staff were able to determine the signals of a youth planning to run away, they could focus on strategies to deter or prevent it. Other youth spoke about their decision to run away being spontaneous, which suggests their motivation was more likely due to push factors from the residential settings. When Staff can predict that a youth is about to run away this provides the opportunity for preventative strategies or providing alternatives to the youth. Staff who confirmed with the Advocates that they were able to make these predictions, attempted to intervene and this is reflected in youth's descriptions of the staff responses, when they stated that staff would try to talk them out of leaving.

Youth Perceptions of Staff Responses

Staff response can be characterized as intervention, prevention (short or long term) or consequences (post-vention). Understanding how youth perceive these various responses to AWOI behaviour can guide best practice in this area.

Intervention Measures

The OCFSA gathered information about the methods that residential programs utilize to attempt to stop a youth who is about to run away, and youth perceptions of those intervention measures. Youth spoke about staff trying to talk them out of leaving, being physically stopped (through restraints or other measures), being blocked at the door, and staff leaving with them and following them. Staff spoke about the necessity of having to restrain or block the door if they viewed the youth at imminent risk, however they would also consider other factors such as age, whether the youth has a developmental disability and mental health issues. The decision whether to stop a youth from running away, under what conditions and the means to be utilized should be a part of a youth's plan of care and treatment. These plans should be reviewed with the youth and their input should be considered. Physically stopping a youth by such means as using physical restraint should only be done when all less-intrusive measures have been attempted (i.e. de-escalation) and when the youth's running away would be considered an imminent risk of harm to the youth or others. Staff may stand in front of a door and attempt to discourage a youth from running away. However, they may not physically stop the youth unless they determine there is a serious risk and then staff will need to follow government-approved practices. Phoning the police may be necessary if the youth is at risk of serious harm to self or others or is in breach of court-ordered conditions, although doing so may undermine the youth's trust in the staff (Finkelstein et al., 2004; Krueger, 2000; Maier, 1987).

Following the youth may be helpful in demonstrating concern and in trying to ensure the youth's safety. However, if staff following a youth on the run, prompts the youth to engage in risky behaviour in order to get away from the staff (e.g. running through traffic) it may do more harm than good. Judgements need to be made based on the individual situation.

Prevention Measures

As already noted, research has tended to focus on long-term strategies for prevention and less on short-term remedies. When Advocates asked youth about strategies used by staff to prevent youth from running away, youth spoke about staff locking up their shoes and coats as preventive measures. In speaking with both staff and youth, it is a common understanding that the locking up of shoes and coats is not a consequence, but a measure to deter running away. This is a decision that needs to be considered very carefully indeed, especially in extreme weather conditions. It could become a serious safety concern. OCFSA learned that some youth who ran away without shoes suffered from frostbite.

Some of the youth spoke about staff "trying to talk them out of" running away. Most of these comments did not reflect ongoing strategies, but an immediate response to an impending departure. If a youth is about to run away, it is imperative that staff use their de-escalation skills to assist the youth with alternative problem-solving strategies, so that the youth is better able to exercise self control. Child and Youth Workers cannot always prevent a youth from making an unsafe decision, however through positive interactions, youth can be empowered to make the best decisions (Krueger and Powell 1990, cited in Krueger, 2000). Staff must have the skills to recognize the different stages of escalation and to choose the most appropriate verbal approach to respond to the situation (Krueger, 2000; Maier, 1987).

In Biehal and Wade's (1998) and Finkelstein et al.'s (2004) studies, service providers suggested that youth could be deterred from running away by restricting them to their room or from going outside the facility and by providing close supervision. The staff realized that although they restricted the youth, these methods were generally not effective and they could not physically force the youth to stay.

Consequences

When youth were asked about the response of the group home staff once they returned from running away, they explained that they received consequences which included loss of community time, loss of points or levels, and the removal of personal property. None of the youth spoke about a debriefing with staff or any form of counselling upon return from running away. Research has demonstrated that youth benefit more from a caring, sensitive response from staff that reflects concern rather than a punitive approach (Biehal & Wade, 1998; Finkelstein et al., 2004; Vollmer, 2005). Vollmer (2005) described his experience in a residential group home thusly; "repression, punishment, and consequences for those who acted up and privileges for those who superficially performed well characterized our daily living" (p.178). Some punitive measures can actually be counterproductive and reinforce negative behaviours (Biehal & Wade, 1998; Finkelstein et al., 2004). This is reflected in the comment of a youth who spoke about consequences making it worse. Nonetheless, some behaviour management strategies can be effective if they focus in the short term on managing risk and in the long term, through a supportive and positive approach, on helping youth learn skills to manage their own behaviour. A combination of strategies including debriefing, counselling, activities, rewards and consequences (e.g. loss of community time for a short period of time) may be effective (Finkelstein et al., 2004; VanderVan, 1998) Communication is also very important. There must be coordination and communication among all parties involved with the youth (Biehal & Wade, 1999; Miller et al., 1990, de Winter & Noom, 2003). By having an open dialogue with youth, they feel their needs are being heard and that they have a say in their treatment. The form of intervention employed must take the youth's perspective into consideration if it is to be effective (Maier, 1987; Miller et al. 1990).

Suggested Prevention and Intervention Strategies

Youth offered a number of suggestions about effective means of preventing and intervening in attempts to run away. Their recommendations for intervention included: staff attempting to de-escalate youth, suggesting alternatives, and providing opportunities for the youth to take walks in order to calm down. Prevention strategies suggested by the youth include: increased access to the community, achievable goals for earning increases in levels and privileges, curfew times appropriate to the age of the youth, increased contact with their families, and input into decision-making. They want workers to be honest with them and follow through on their commitments. Youth also spoke to the importance of developing staff's listening skills so that youth have the sense they are being heard. Being treated with respect and dignity in an environment in which youth feel cared for is also extremely important (Krueger, 2000; Maier, 1987). Staff whom the Advocates spoke with had similar suggestions which focused on teaching alternatives to running away, strategies for empowering the youth, counselling, ensuring safety and determining the risk factors for individual youth. Staff highlighted the importance of individual assessments to ensure that appropriate resources are accessed to address youths' needs. Staff interviewed by Finkelstein et al.(2004) also spoke of the need to assess the suitability of the placement for youth who chronically run away. One of the ways agencies respond to the issue is by trying to find more appropriate placements for these youth, either to provide more structured and therapeutic settings for them or to work towards returning the youth to their homes.

CONCLUSIONS & RECOMMENDATIONS

What emerged from this study is the primary importance of appropriate placement opportunities, meaningful programming, ongoing therapeutic involvement, youth engagement, contact with families, and the creation of residential environments in which youth feel they are cared for, their voice is heard, and they are respected. Four common themes emerged consistently from the youth: the importance of youth engagement in all aspects of programming and treatment; residential settings that are too restrictive and lack emphasis on incentives; youth not feeling safe and staff's inability to respond therapeutically when youth are at imminent risk.

Many agencies are diligent in their efforts to establish such environments. The results of this study are most likely representative of the experiences of youth in agencies who are unable to establish environments that are engaging, empowering and respectful. There are at present no legislated standards that ensure quality of care in residential settings. There is also a lack of information or guidelines about prevention strategies to be used to deter youth from running away or interventions that are effective in the understanding and management of youth upon their return. Youth were able to identify throughout this study why they would run away from residential settings, the push and pull factors that contributed to their running, successful and unsuccessful strategies employed by staff to prevent running; the risks they encountered while on the run and strategies to be used to deter future running behaviour.

Throughout this dialogue, young people have described their "lived experience" related to running away from residential settings and accordingly recommendations based on this lived experience are offered in the following areas:

Engagement

1. Engage youth in a meaningful way in every aspect of planning and programming to promote their active participation in both their care and the activities of the residential setting.
2. During the admission to a residential setting, determine the youth's usual problem-solving strategies and history of running behaviour and negotiate with the youth preventative and alternative strategies.
3. Maximize family engagement in all aspects of the youth's care to diminish the "push" and "pull" of out of home placement.

Incentives for Youth

1. Negotiate with youth developmentally appropriate incentives as part of their care plan.
2. Create a level system that is meaningful and realistic in its expectations of youth behaviour and that serves as a deterrent to running away.

Feeling Safe

1. Provide support and supervision to staff that encourages therapeutic relationships, active listening, conflict resolution skills, risk assessment, safe behaviour management strategies and youth engagement.
2. Offer opportunities for youth to discuss their running experiences to enhance understanding and prevention.

Imminent Risk

1. Limit the use of intrusive measures for those circumstances in which youth are at imminent risk.
2. Use de-escalation techniques and crisis-management strategies to respond to youth preparing to run-away.
3. Provide guidelines to staff regarding “blocking”, “following”, and “bagging” to ensure respectful interactions that promote dignity.

For some staff and some providers of care, these recommendations will be obvious and will reinforce the practices they already undertake. For others, such as these agencies willing to take the risk to examine their practices and understand the perspective of the youth that are running away from their placements, the recommendations provide some minimal guidelines for reducing the incidence of AWOL behaviour.

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