

# National Runaway Switchboard

## Media Information Kit

The federally-designated National Communication System for runaway and homeless youth since 1974.

- Between 1.3 and 2.8 million runaway and homeless youth live on the streets of America.
- One out of every seven youth will run away sometime before the age of 18.

*24 hours a day, 7 days a week, 365 days a year*

*Any time of the day or night*

*Helping youth and families*

*One phone call at a time*

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# Agency Overview

## Mission

The National Runaway Switchboard's mission is: to keep America's runaway and at-risk youth safe and off the streets.

## Vision

The National Runaway Switchboard will become a household word. NRS will be the leading voice and resource provider for at-risk youth and their families. Through cutting edge intervention strategies, NRS will provide the resources and support necessary to keep youth off the streets. We will increase our call volume to better ensure that we are reaching all the youth and families who need our services. These crisis intervention and referral services will be supported by an ever-growing set of innovative prevention and education programs designed to improve problem behaviors and situations before youth become runaways.

## Purpose

The overriding purpose of the National Runaway Switchboard remains to link youth to family members or community-based resources and youth/their families to community-based resources that can help them find other services.

The National Communication System is funded through the Runaway and Homeless Youth Act. To best meet its goals, the National Runaway Switchboard operates a toll-free, confidential, non-sectarian crisis intervention hotline for at-risk youth, accessible 24 hours a day, 365 days a year. Hotline services are provided by a corps of more than 150 specially trained volunteers who are supported by a professional staff.

## Statement of Need

According to the Children's Defense Fund, 1,234 youth run away from home every day of the year. It was estimated in 1998 that one-half of America's youth are at moderate risk for unsuccessful transition into adulthood.

A multitude of factors support this conclusion: a society in which violence is an every day occurrence within families, schools and communities; the breakdown of family communication and structures and the inability of schools and communities to step in to support the family as a total; drug/alcohol use and abuse; teen pregnancy and the resulting problems that are inherent when children give birth to children; the hopelessness that many teens express about their futures and those they love; and last, but not least, their self-esteem and confidence in their own ability to cope and/or succeed.

Never before have so many serious issues plagued children at such young ages. Young callers to the National Runaway Switchboard often express frustration, rage, or an inappropriate apathy in response to events that are happening to them and those they love. These are overwhelming times for youth who often have no one in whom they can confide.

As a national hotline for youth, we hear many first-time disclosures. A hotline offers one of the last bastions of anonymity and the ability to talk with someone day or night. At times, reassurance is all that is needed. At other times, fears are eased once the child has voiced his/her concern out loud. And sometimes, our vast database of resources helps youth feel they are no longer alone in dealing with their problems.

For over 34 years, the National Runaway Switchboard has worked on a national level to help runaway, homeless and other youth in high-risk situations come to grips with problems.

## Goals

The goal of all National Runaway Switchboard services is to relieve the problems of youth and strengthen family relationships by:

1. Assisting youth to develop options and determine a plan to address their problem(s).
2. Encouraging action toward solving problems while building support systems.
3. Ensuring referrals to resource agencies while developing channels of communication.

All services are accessible 24 hours a day, seven days a week, 365 days a year and are provided by skilled staff and a specially trained volunteer corps committed to assisting youth and their families.

## Impact

The results and benefits of National Runaway Switchboard services can be summarized into three categories:

**Prevention:** Education, advocacy, and working with youth who recognize their need for assistance before a crisis occurs.

**Intervention:** Providing neutral channels of communication through which youth can talk through their problems and develop their own plan of action.

**Referral:** Identifying agency resources for youth and their families in the communities from which they are calling.

Each caller receives individualized attention and support. We strive to make a positive impact on each caller's situation that is appropriate to the identified need.

## Statistics

It is estimated that between 1.3 and 2.8 million kids are living on the streets each day where they will be exposed to drugs, disease and prostitution. Five thousand of them will die this year as a result of assault, illness or suicide (General Accounting Office, 1989). The National Runaway Switchboard handles an average of 115,000 a year. National Runaway Switchboard statistics document many of the issues disclosed by callers:

**During 2004**, callers cited the following as primary issues/concerns:

<b>Family Dynamics</b> (divorce, remarriage, problems with siblings, extended family)	36%
<b>Peer/Social</b> (pressure from friends, gang issues, dating and relationships)	13%
<b>Abuse</b> (neglect, emotional mistreatment, physical abuse, sexual abuse)	10%
<b>Youth Services</b> (relationship with social worker, placement in alternative housing)	10%
<b>School</b> (problems with teachers/administratin, suspension, expulsion)	8%
<b>Mental Health</b> (depression, suicide, counseling or therapy, concerns and referrals)	7%
<b>Alcohol/Drug</b> (by youth, friend, parent, family member, treatment concerns)	5%
<b>Transportation</b> (use Home Free Program)	2%
<b>Health</b> (physical ailment, pregnancy, STDs, including HIV/AIDS)	2%
<b>Sexuality</b> (homosexuality, bisexuality, sexual concerns of self or others)	2%

## Portrait of a Runaway

It is important to understand that runaways are not “bad” kids. They are not running *to* something, but away *from* something. They believe their home situations to be so awful that living anywhere else is better; even if this means living on the streets. Their home situation usually involves a multiplicity of problems as opposed to one isolated problem.

Anyone may run away from home when home or school situations become “unbearable” to them. And it is important to understand that a youth’s reason for leaving is unique to that individual. There is no such thing as a “typical” runaway. These kids come from every kind of neighborhood, rich or poor, suburban, rural or urban. There is no differentiation between race or religion. **One out of seven children will run away sometime before the age of 18. In a recent study by the Research Triangle Insitute, 2.8 million families reported a runaway experience the previous year (1995).**

While we may be able to identify one major problem the youth in crisis may be experiencing, it does not occur in isolation. The multiplicity of problems may involve family conflict, school pressures, substance abuse, sexual identity pressures, or pressure from peers. Lack of communication, stability or support from families, schools and/or peers can magnify even the smallest problems resulting in depression or suicidal thoughts. Often, the only option a youth in crisis sees is his or her ability to escape or run away.

Many runaways leave home more than once. The first time they run, they typically stay within 300 miles of their homes, usually with friends or relatives. As the length of time away from home increases, these youth often flee to urban areas where they can “blend in” with other kids and are therefore less likely to be noticed by authority figures. They tend to hang out at fast food restaurants, shopping malls and video arcades. They live in abandoned buildings or underneath highway bridges. In warmer climates, they may spend their days and nights on the beach.

As bad as things may have been at home, runaways soon find life on the street can be even worse. Most leave home without understanding the daily problems they will encounter once they have run away: they only seek to escape the problems in their current situation. And it doesn't help when television and movies romanticize life on the streets. It's not a Tom Sawyer adventure, as runaways find out all too soon.

The most basic problem faced by runaways is getting money for food and shelter. The longer a runaway is on the streets the greater the struggle for survival. Youth under the age of 16 have difficulty finding and keeping jobs. They may start by panhandling for change, but eventually, a runaway will most likely turn to illegal means to survive: many will become involved in prostitution, pornography, drugs, stealing, and other crimes.

## **The National Runaway Switchboard: Youth and Family Services**

### ***Crisis Intervention Calls***

The National Runaway Switchboard offers a broad spectrum of services to various populations. Those in most urgent need of help are usually runaways, kids who are already living on the street. They usually call when they are looking for a place to stay. The National Runaway Switchboard has thousands of local and national resources--shelters, medical aid, counseling, etc.--in our database.

Sometimes a runaway will just want to talk and sort things out. One thing National Runaway Switchboard volunteers do not do is tell the caller what to do. Through an active listening model, volunteers help youth identify their problem or issue and then develop a plan of action.

By the end of each call, the youth has:

- ▶ Received caring support
- ▶ Identified the issue of concern
- ▶ Discussed options to resolve the problem
- ▶ Selected a plan
- ▶ Attained support through referrals to community-based agencies

The message is clear and simple: kids very often need help. Staff and volunteers are experienced providers who have the capacity to work with youth and their families from every geographic, educational, economic, and racial/ethnic segment of our society.

### ***Message Delivery***

Oftentimes, a runaway wants to send a message home to family members, but isn't ready to speak to them directly. The National Runaway Switchboard will deliver the message for them and, if requested will deliver a return message as well. Parents too can call and leave a message for their child. However, unless the child knows that a message is waiting, chances are good that he or she will not receive it. That is why it is so important that parents tell their child's friends have him or her call the National Runaway Switchboard, or that parents make sure that the youth has the National Runaway Switchboard's phone number before leaving.

### ***Mediated Calls***

Once the reality of their situation hits them, many children decide they want to return home but are unsure how their parents or guardians will react upon their return. Other times, they want to be able to communicate with a parent, but want it to be positive without the conversation ending up in a screaming match. That is where mediated calling is helpful. Initiated by the youth, a volunteer places a call to the parent or legal guardian and helps the two sides reach an understanding and work out an acceptable plan for return. By establishing up front that the conversation must not resort to destructive behaviors, such as name calling, positive results can be realized.

### ***Home Free Program***

In mid-October 1995, the National Runaway Switchboard entered into a partnership with Greyhound Lines, Inc. whereby the National Runaway Switchboard became the administrator of Greyhound's Home Free program. In existence since 1987, Home Free was previously administered on a local level by police departments who had the authority to take kids to a Greyhound bus station and access a one-way bus ticket for youth. There were multiple problems with this type of administration, i.e., youth were often

reluctant to approach police officers to access help; there was no way to statistically document usage of the Home Free program on a nation-wide basis; there was no screening mechanism in place to verify the youth's status as a runaway and/or their destination; no support services were available or offered to runaway youth or their families to resolve some of the issues that had initially created the need to run; and there were no referrals offered to support the reunification process.

The partnership of comprehensive National Runaway Switchboard services with Greyhound Lines, Inc. means that transportation is a viable option for runaway youth. Home Free has since proven to be a successful intervention to reunite families. Once a youth has voluntarily concluded that s/he wants to return, a conference call to the legal guardian is placed. During the conference call, National Runaway Switchboard volunteers work with the family to reestablish communication, to ensure that the family wants their child to return home, that a runaway report is on file with the local police department and that the parent gives permission for the youth to ride the bus. During the conference call, agreements are often negotiated to determine resolution of some of the problems that initially created the need for the youth to run and community-based referrals are offered to assure on-going support for both youth and family members.

The combined services work well. Since our partnership with Greyhound Lines began, more than 10,000 tickets, worth over \$950,000, have been issued to runaway youth.

### ***Runaway Prevention Program***

Since 1994, the National Runaway Switchboard Runaway Prevention Program has been available to schools, community-based agencies, and police departments across the country. The curriculum guide with its accompanying video consists of three lessons: addressing who runs away and why, the lifestyle of a runaway, and how to reach out for help.

Information about the National Runaway Switchboard Runaway Prevention Program has been made available to approximately 40,000 agencies, police departments, and schools. It is also available on the internet at the National Runaway Switchboard website: [www.1800RUNAWAY.org](http://www.1800RUNAWAY.org).

### ***Kids Call Program***

Once again, preventing kids from running away by providing them with the skills necessary to develop viable alternatives should start at an early age. That's why the National Runaway Switchboard started the Kids Call program. Through the Kids Call program, the National Runaway Switchboard will speak to a classroom or children's group via speaker phone. National Runaway Switchboard volunteers or staff will

answer questions such as: “How long are runaways gone? What makes someone run away? What can I do instead of running away?”

### **Volunteer Opportunities**

As a non-profit organization, we depend heavily on volunteers. Our dedicated volunteers include “liners” in Chicago, who answer the calls from youth and families, and community support volunteers across the country. Locally, approximately 150 volunteers of every age and socio-economic background complete 36.5 hours of specialized training to provide telephone support to callers from across the country.

Nationally, we rely on informal partnerships to help share the mission of the National Runaway Switchboard. These opportunities include, but are not limited to:

- posting and distributing posters and brochures;
- contacting and developing relationships with local radio stations to ensure PSAs are aired;
- coordinating or promoting educational programs within schools and other youth-based organizations; and
- coordinating, directing, or conducting education and advocacy programs within community organizations.

