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Family Reunification among Two Groups of Runaway Adolescents Utilizing Emergency Shelters

Sanna J. Thompson, Liliane Cambraia Windsor, and Kim Zittel-Palamara

Limited research has addressed reunification of runaway youths with their families following an emergency shelter stay; however, recent studies have shown that those who reunify with their families following a shelter stay have more positive outcomes than those relocated to other residences. This study evaluated differences between two samples of runaway youth utilizing youth emergency shelters in New York (n = 155) and Texas (n = 195) and identified factors associated with reunification among these two groups of adolescents. Less than half (43.7%) of the youths were reunited with their families. Among New York runaway youths, those who had lived primarily with someone other than a parent before shelter admission, were physically abused, or neglected were less likely to return home. Among youths admitted to emergency shelter services in Texas, those with longer shelter stays, living primarily with someone other than a parent before shelter admission, or being pregnant or a parent were less likely to reunify. This study provides valuable information concerning family reunification following shelter service use; however, additional research is needed to delineate youth, family, and shelter system factors that distinguish successful from unsuccessful reunification over an extended period of time.

Family reunification is a term that has expanded in recent years as increased understanding of this complex process has developed. With the implementation of the Adoption Assistance and Child Welfare Act of 1980 (Pub. L. 96-126), the importance of continuity and stability in parent/child relationships was formally recognized (Davis, Ganger, Landsverk, & Newton, 1996). This law made explicit the objectives of placement prevention and permanency planning, and linked family preservation and reunification services to making reasonable effort to keep families together (McGowan, 1990). Rather than family reunification being viewed simply as the physical reunion of children with their biological families (Maluccio, & Fein, 1994), this legislation redefined family reunification as “the planned process of reconnecting children in out-of-home care with their biological families to help them achieve and maintain their optimal level of reconnection” (Maluccio, Warsh, & Pine, 1993).

Reintegrating children and youth with their families is typically associated with child welfare services. However, one population of adolescents often forgotten in discussions of reunification is runaway youths. Their transience and need for suitable housing makes reunification or out-of-home placement decisions necessary. Federally funded youth emergency shelters are required to “develop adequate plans for ensuring the safe return of the youth according to the best interests of the youth” (Missing, Exploited, and Runaway Children Protection Act of 2000, Pub. L. 106-71, pg. 4). Thus, these providers must address issues of reunification with all youth admitted to their facilities.

Runaway adolescents often report family environments that exhibit high levels of family conflict, poor communication, dysfunction, abuse, and/or neglect (Kipke, Montgomery, & MacKenzie, 1993; Kipke, Montgomery, Simon, & Iverson, 1997; Kolbe, 1997; Lawder, Poulin, & Andrews, 1986; Rotheram-Borus, 1993). Many of these families have histories of unstable housing situations, and parents often are characterized as emotionally unavailable and lacking effective parenting skills (Whitbeck, 1999). A sizable proportion of these youth report that leaving home is not a choice; but rather are forced out by parents encouraging them to leave, abandoning them, or subjecting them to intolerable levels of maltreatment (Kurtz, Jarvis, & Kurtz, 1991; Dadds, Braddock, Cuers, Elliott, & Kelly, 1993; Rotheram-Borus, 1993).

Community-based emergency youth shelters are the primary settings for interventions designed to meet the complex needs of approximately 1.5 million youths in the United States who run away from home each year (Finkelhor, 1995; Greene, Ringwalt, & Iachan, 1997). Federally funded emergency youth shelters provide a variety of crisis and custodial services, including individual, group, and family counseling; educational and vocational services; recreational activities; alcohol and drug counseling; and information, referral, and outreach services (Rohr, & James, 1994). The primary focus of these programs is to de-escalate the crisis, establish communication between the youths and their families, attempt to stabilize the home environment, and reunify youths with their families whenever possible. Among youths discharged from these shelters nationwide, more than half (58%) reunite with their parents following a shelter stay (Thompson, Maguin, & Pollio, 2003).

Although runaway youths report a variety of challenges in their homes, recent studies have shown that those who reunify with their families following a shelter stay experience more positive outcomes than those relocated to other residences. In an exploratory study of 70 runaway youths in the Midwest, researchers found that youths reintegrated with parents following a shelter stay reported more positive outcomes in terms of school, employment, self-esteem, criminal behavior, and family relationships than adolescents discharged elsewhere (Thompson, Pollio, Bitner, 2000). In a similar

study of 261 shelter-using runaway youth, short-term outcomes (6 weeks post discharge) were significantly more positive for reunified youth than those discharged to other locations (Thompson, Pollio, Constantine, Reid, & Nebbitt, 2002). Other research also demonstrated that youth who fail to reunify with family have longer shelter stays, increased hopelessness, suicidal thoughts and behaviors, report more family problems, and have a more pessimistic view of the future than those who return to their families (Teare, Furst, Peterson, & Authier, 1992; Teare et al., 1994).

Information concerning reunification among runaway youth and their families is limited, and no published research, to date, could be found that evaluates reunification across multiple sites. A great deal of the research on runaway youths has been conducted in the Midwest (i.e., (Thompson, Pollio, & Bitner, 2000; Thompson et al., 2002; Whitbeck, 1999; Whitbeck, & Simons, 1990), and in large coastal cities (i.e., Kipke et al., 1993; Kipke et al., 1997; Rotheram-Borus, 1993; Rotheram-Borus, Mahler, Koopman, & Langabeer, 1996), but studies in other areas of the U.S. are nearly non-existent. Analyses of the Runaway Homeless Youth Management Information System for 1997 (RHY MIS) show that runaway youth problems, such as suicide, substance use, and physical/sexual abuse vary widely across regions of the U.S. (Thompson et al., 2003); however, very little is known concerning differences in youth and family characteristics or outcomes experienced by youth utilizing shelters in various regions of the U.S. (Teare, 2001). To address this gap, this study (1) examined differences in individual and family factors among two samples of runaway adolescents utilizing youth emergency shelters in New York and Texas, and (2) identified factors associated with reunification among these two groups of youth.

Methods

Sample and Procedures

The data for this study were collected from consecutive entrants to shelters for runaway youths in two comparable mid-sized cities in New York and Texas. These federally funded shelters are similar to other youth emergency shelters offering services to runaway youths across the U.S. (Greene, & Ringwalt, 1997). They concurrently serve ten male and ten female adolescents (12 to 18 years of age) and provide basic crisis and counseling services.

Within 48 hours of the youth's admission to the shelter, these agencies are required to contact each youth's parent or guardian; thus, parental consent for the youth's participation in the study was sought during that time. Youths were approached and recruited for participation only after parental consent was attained. The research project was explained, as was the voluntary nature and confidentiality of their responses. Following the youth's assent, they were engaged in several brief, self-report

questionnaires concerning their personal characteristics and activities, as well as questions related to family and friends.

One hundred fifty-five (n=155) youths admitted to a shelter in western New York state during the data collection period (1999-2000) participated; six refused to participate or did not complete the survey. One hundred ninety-five (n=195) youths admitted to a shelter in northern Texas during 2001-2002 participated; seven refused. Youths often were not approached if they were admitted for a very brief period, as these youths typically were seeking respite from parental conflict or abuse and were returned to parental homes or another long-term residential living situation relatively quickly. Therefore, only those identified by shelter staff as runaways and who were admitted to the shelter for at least 24 hours were recruited for participation.

Shelter staff also collected information on each youth admitted using the Runaway Homeless Youth Management Information System (RHY MIS). RHY MIS is an automated data collection system developed by the Administration for Children and Families (ACF), and its use is required in all federally funded youth shelters nationwide. Shelter staff recorded information during the intake process, during the youth's shelter stay, and at discharge.

Variables

The dependent variable was measured as the placement of the youth at discharge from the shelter (parent's home, adult relative/friend's home, foster care, institutional setting, or "the street"). This variable also was recoded to identify reunification with parent(s) or relocated elsewhere.

Independent variables included demographic, personal, and family characteristics reported by the youth; these were coded as dichotomous or categorical, except age, the number of times the youth ran away, the number of days "on the run," and the number of days the youth stayed in the shelter. Youth demographics (see Table 1) included age in years, gender, ethnicity, and the youth's past living situation before admission to the shelter.

Youths were asked to identify specific problems they experienced, such as substance use, educational challenges, depression or suicidal thoughts/attempts, and family difficulties, including physical/sexual abuse or neglect. A series of questions queried each area, which were later coded as whether or not the youth reported a problem in that area. For example, questions associated with education included, "have you had poor grades in school?", "have you ever been told you have a learning disability?", "were you ever been expelled from school?", and "were you ever truant from school?"

Family characteristics were evaluated using the Family Functioning Scale (FFS) (Tavitian, Lubiner, Green, Grebstein, & Velicer, 1987). The FFS consists of 40 items

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that measure five dimensions of family functioning: positive family affect (“People in my family listen when I speak”), rituals (“We pay attention to traditions in my family”), worries (“I worry when I disagree with the opinions of other family members”), conflicts (“People in my family yell at each other”), and communication (“When I have questions about personal relationships, I talk with my family member”). Respondents rated items on a seven-point scale (1 = never to 7 = always), and items were summed for the five subscales and a total score. Internal consistency reliability ranges from $\alpha=.90$ for positive family affect to $\alpha=.74$ for family conflicts (Tavitian et al., 1987).

Data Analysis

Descriptive analyses were conducted across the entire sample, followed by *t*-tests and chi-square analyses to test for significant differences between the two shelter samples. Because of significant differences between the two groups, separate analyses were conducted to identify correlates of family reunification and predictors of family reunification for each group of shelter youth. Variables that were significant in correlation analyses within each group were entered into a separate logistic regression model to determine the likelihood of family reunification while controlling for these variables. Categorical independent variables with more than two categories were transformed into dummy variables and assigned reference categories (e.g., the reference category for ethnicity was European American). In the logistic models, these categorical variables yield exponentiated *B*s or odds ratios (ORs) that reflect the likelihood of a positive response relative to a defined reference category, after controlling for all the other effects in the model. For this study, the ORs reflect the likelihood of an individual or family characteristic occurring relative to youth’s reunification with their family. Partial regression coefficients (*B*) for each independent variable show how much the value of the dependent variable (reunification) changes when the value of the independent variable changes.

Results

Sample Demographics

The overall sample ($N = 350$) averaged about 15 years of age and was predominately female (see Table 1). The dominant ethnicity reported by these adolescents was White or African American, and nearly half had been living with parents at the time they ran away and were admitted to the youth emergency shelter. Youths reported running away an average of 5 times, and more than half of the respondents indicated they had smoked cigarettes, drunk alcohol, and used marijuana.

Differences between Groups

Results of chi-square and t-tests indicated several significant differences between the two groups of runaway youths across individual characteristics, as shown in Table 1. The average age of New York youths was significantly greater than those in Texas, but the proportion of males and females was similar between the two groups. Ethnic differences were significant between the two groups; the greatest difference was in the proportion of African American youths. A greater proportion of youths from New York reported living primarily with parents at the time of admission to the shelter; whereas, a greater percentage of youths from Texas reported living on the streets or in a temporary situation before admission. Significant differences were found between the two groups concerning substance use, as a higher percentage of New York youths reported using alcohol and marijuana. Nearly half of the participants reported truancy or expulsion from school; however, a greater proportion of New York youths reported this difficulty than did those from Texas. The number of runaway episodes for Texas youths was nearly twice that of New York youths, as was the number of days the Texas youths stayed at the shelter. A higher percentage of Texas youths reported being neglected by their family than their New York counterparts; sexual and physical abuse was more frequently reported in Texas than New York.

Table 1. Sample Characteristics

Demographics	Total Sample N=350	New York N=155 (%)	Texas N=195 (%)	X ²
Gender				0.02
Male	154 (44.1)	69 (44.5)	85 (43.8)	
Female	195 (55.9)	86 (55.5)	109 (56.2)	
Ethnicity				28.39**
European American	147 (42.1)	61 (39.4)	86 (44.3)	
African American	132 (37.7)	76 (49.0)	56 (28.9)	
Hispanic	36 (10.3)	14 (9.0)	6 (3.1)	
American Indian	9 (2.6)	3 (1.9)	2 (1.0)	
Asian	3 (0.9)	1 (0.6)	22 (11.3)	
Mixed	22 (6.3)	0 (0.0)		
Living situation before admission				15.78**
Parent's home	158 (45.9)	78 (50.3)	80 (42.3)	
Adult relative/friend	130 (37.8)	56 (36.1)	74 (39.2)	
Foster home	15 (4.4)	6 (3.9)	9 (4.8)	
Institutional program	20 (5.8)	7 (4.5)	13 (6.9)	
Street/temporary situation	21 (6.2)	6 (3.9)	13 (6.9)	

Demographics	Total Sample N=350	New York N=155 (%)	Texas N=195 (%)	χ^2
Youth a parent/pregnant	34 (10.3)	18 (11.6)	16 (8.3)	1.0
Ever drank alcohol	180 (60.2)	79 (69.9)	101 (54.3)	7.2**
Expulsion from school	153 (43.9)	88 (56.8)	65 (33.5)	32.9**
Neglected	77 (22.1)	47 (30.3)	74 (37.9)	12.3**
Physically abused	79 (22.6)	24 (15.5)	55 (28.4)	-2.50
Sexually abused	31 (8.9)	4 (2.6)	27 (13.9)	-3.30
Reunified with family	153 (43.7)	66 (42.6)	87 (44.6)	44.87**
	Mean (SD)	Mean (SD)	Mean (SD)	t-test
Age	15.3 (1.7)	16.0 (1.5)	14.8 (1.7)	7.07**
Number of times ran away	4.9 (11.*)	3.4 (3.5)	6.1 (15.6)	-1.97*
Number of days away from home	5.52 (17.1)	3.9 (2.4)	7.6 (23.4)	-2.05
Number of days in shelter	12.53 (13.7)	9.3 (6.7)	15.4 (17.3)	-2.17*

* $p \leq .05$, ** $p \leq .01$

Predictors of Family Reunification

New York Runaway Youths

Correlation analyses showed that the following variables were associated significantly with reunification among youths in New York: youth's age ($r = -.17$, $p = .03$) last living with parents or others ($r = .30$, $p = .001$), physically abused ($r = -.17$, $p = .03$), neglected ($r = -.16$, $p = .04$), and total score on family functioning scale ($r = .24$, $p = .003$). The logistic regression model for New York youths, as shown in Table 2, indicated that youths who had lived primarily with someone other than a parent before shelter admission were 32% less likely to reunite with parent(s) (OR = .68). Youths who reported they had been physically abused by a parent were 26% less likely to reunify (OR = .74); those who reported neglect also were less likely to return home (OR = .55).

Table 2. Logistic Regression Model to Predict Family Reunification among New York Youth

Predictor Variables	<i>B</i> (<i>SE</i>)	Odds Ratio	p-value
Youth age	-.08 (.07)	.92	.20
Primarily resided with parents	-.39 (.11)	.68	.001
Youth reported physically abused	-.30	.74	.03
Youth reported neglected	-.59	.55	.01
Total family functioning	.01 (.004)	1.01	.11
Model chi-square (df)	41.71	(5)	.000
Nagelkerke R square	.15		

Texas Runaway Youths

Variables that were correlated significantly with reunification among youths admitted to emergency shelter services in Texas included living with parents or others at admission ($r = -.17$, $p = .02$), length of stay in the shelter ($r = -.26$, $p = .001$), whether the youth was a parent/pregnant ($r = -.23$, $p = .001$), had been expelled from school ($r = -.16$, $p = .03$), physically abused ($r = -.21$, $p = .004$), sexually abused ($r = -.15$, $p = .03$), or neglected ($r = -.16$, $p = .02$). The logistic regression model of Texas youths, as shown in Table 3, indicated that for each day youths stayed in the shelter, they were 3% less likely to reunify (OR = .97), and youths that had lived primarily with someone other than a parent before shelter admission were 32% less likely to reunite with parent(s) (OR = .68). Youths who were pregnant or identified themselves as parents were 90% less likely to reunify (OR = .10).

Table 3. Logistic Regression Model to Predict Family Reunification among Texas Youth

Predictor Variables	B (SE)	Odds Ratio	p-value
Primarily resided with parents	-.39 (.15)	.68	.01
Number of days in shelter	-.03 (.01)	.97	.004
Youth pregnant or a parent	-2.28 (1.1)	.10	.04
Expelled from school	-.04 (.22)	.96	.87
Youth reported physically abused	-.13	.88	.53
Youth reported sexually abused	-.50	.61	.12
Youth reported neglect	-.35	.70	.36
Model chi-square (df)	34.49	(7)	.000
Nagelkerke R square	.26		

Discussion

The findings of this study comparing runaway youths in two areas of the country demonstrate the effect of youth's characteristics and family factors on the likelihood of reunification following an emergency shelter stay. The results are notable in that less than half of the adolescent participants in both shelters were reunited with their families (NY = 42.6%, TX = 44.6%). While no data are available that provide rates of reunification for this population of adolescents, one study of runaway youths utilizing shelter services nationwide found that approximately 58% were reunited with their parents (Thompson et al., 2003). These rates are comparable to reunification of children placed in foster care, group homes, or residential treatment centers. For example, "returning home" was the stated reason for 60% of those discharged from foster care in New York (*Year 2000 Annual Report to the Governor and Legislature*, 2000), and 37%

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were discharged to parental homes in Texas (*Legislative Data Book*, 2002). These estimates suggest that reunification among runaway youths is similar to that for other child welfare populations.

Various explanations account for the relatively small percentage of youth who reunite with families. One possible explanation may be a reflection of the parent's ambivalence concerning their child's return. Parents may struggle with whether or not bringing their runaway adolescent back into the home is in the best interest of the child and other family members. This indecisiveness may affect their motivation to work toward achieving reunification (Fein & Staff, 1993). Parents also may experience pessimistic attitudes toward their child and experience less attachment due to their child's past negative or "acting-out" behaviors (Robertson, 1992; Whitbeck, Hoyt, & Ackley, 1997).

Another explanation for only half of the youths reunifying with family may be that the adolescent fears continuing conflict, neglect, or abuse. Nearly one quarter of the youths in this study reported being physically abused and/or neglected. Among runaway youths in New York, physical abuse and neglect were primary predictors of not returning home. These negative home environments not only motivate them to run, but increase tension when reunification is attempted (Kennedy, 1991; Kurtz, Hick-Coolick, Jarvis, & Kurtz, 1996; Tyler, Hoyt, & Whitbeck, 2000). Youths experiencing abuse and neglect within the home may fear re-abuse and reject efforts to return to these unhealthy family environments.

It is notable, however, that among runaway youths from both shelters who had been living with their parents at the time they ran away were more likely to reunify. This suggests that youths who have had continual contact with parents are more likely to have relationships that promote reunification. From a socialization perspective (Whitbeck, 1999), prosocial bonding with parents, even if tenuous, encourages youths to return to their families rather than continuing transience. Some research has suggested that parents of runaway youths assume little responsibility for the events or problems that led to the child's runaway episode (Safyer, Thompson, Maccio, Zittel-Palamra, & Forehand, in press); thus, youths who return home may be a reflection of the youth's concern about their relationship with the family and a demonstration of their desire to overcome conflict and difficulties in the relationship (Ringwalt, Greene, Robertson, 1998).

Other factors also appear to play a role in reunification but differ between the two sites. In this study, youths from Texas who stayed at the shelter for a shorter period of time were more likely to reunite with their families. It is likely that youths with brief shelter stays are those who run away due to a conflict or crisis event with their parents, rather than experiencing long-term, on-going difficulties (Maluccio & Fein, 1994). For these adolescents, shelters can provide respite while helping to re-establish

communication, resolve conflict with the family, and address the crisis event (Greene, et al., 1997). Conversely, youths with extended shelter stays are exposed to additional services, such as life skills training, government benefits, health care services, and information and referrals to medium- or long-term transitional living programs (Dalton, & Pakenham, 2002). These youths are more likely to be transitioned into out-of-home residences, such as Independent Living Programs (ILP) that offer life skills and employment training, educational assistance, counseling, and peer support (Kinard, 2002).

The most significant predictor of family reunification for Texas runaways was not being pregnant or a parent. Research has shown that mothers of childbearing daughters treat their children less affectionately than do mothers of non-childbearing adolescents. Mother's harsh treatment toward her child has been correlated with high financial stress and extensive time spent caring for her daughter's child (East, & Jacobson, 2003; Jaccard, Dodge, & Dittus, 2003). The conflicts generated by the teen pregnancy and child bearing may increase the difficulties in reuniting pregnant youths with their families as parenting youths may require other living situations (Whitbeck et al., 1997). Thus, transitional living arrangements or other forms of stable housing may be more appropriate for these youths than reunification with family (Shane, 1989).

Identification of differences between these two participating shelters in diverse regions of the U.S. should encourage agencies to develop policies and services that target the specific issues of youths in their unique communities. For example, youths accessing shelters in New York were older; thus, transitioning them to independent living situations may be more appropriate than for the predominately younger adolescents in Texas. In addition, abuse and neglect among runaway youths in New York was associated significantly with not returning home. These shelters, then, must be particularly focused on evaluating the youth's abuse history and targeting interventions that might address these issues while the adolescent remains in the shelter. Certainly, reunification strategies must take these issues into account. Comprehensive family evaluations are warranted before the adolescent is returned home (Whitbeck, et al., 1997). If family reunification is preferable, a treatment plan tailored to the specific needs of the whole family, not just the runaway adolescent, should be developed (Teare et al., 1992). Interventions should be ongoing, family-based, and facilitate the adolescents' developmental needs and promote improved family functioning (Safyer, et al., in press). Youths and their parents must be involved in intervention strategies aimed at halting the progression of negative interactions and learn strategies to improve relationships once the youth is reunified with the family. Returning youths to the environment from which they ran, without attempting to change that environment, typically leads to continued

familial problems and youths running away repeatedly (Baker, McKay, Hans, Schlange, & Auville, 2003; Whitbeck et al., 1997).

Given the magnitude and seriousness of the problems among runaway youths and their families, child advocates recommend reunification only for low risk families or for families that have shown significant progress and cooperation in changing dysfunctional behavior (Gelles, 1996). As shelter providers play a pivotal role in reunification strategies, they must determine whether or not the child is returning to a precarious, fragmented, even abusive family with few community or extended family supports available. Runaway shelters must assess these issues and initiate systematic investigations of abuse before an appropriate discharge location can be determined. Shelters currently adhere to policies that focus efforts on finding stable housing, rather than "reunification at any cost" (Runaway and Homeless Youth Act, 2000 - P.L. 106-71); thus, providers must work with parents and youths concerning issues important in reunification decisions (Adams, & Adams, 1987).

Limitations

It is important to keep in mind the limitations of this study when reviewing the results. Although the two groups of youths were recruited to provide homogeneous and comparable samples, it should be noted that youth participants were from disparate regions of the country. Separate analyses were conducted, and both agencies were federally funded shelters with very comparable programs; however, some programmatic disparity is inevitable and cannot be accounted for in this study. The samples do not appear to be biased, as demographics of youths in this study are similar to statistics of youths using federally funded shelters nationwide (Thompson, Maguin, & Pollio, 2003).

These data also are youth self-reported, which cannot be independently verified. The inherent difficulty is due to the retrospective nature of the information being queried and the subject's reliability, especially concerning sensitive issues. Adolescent participants may have under-reported various characteristics they believe have a negative connotation (Safyer et al., in press), such as parental abuse, neglect, or number of runaway episodes. Thus, these high-risk behaviors may be more extensive and problematic than the results demonstrate. Highly sensitive assessments of physical abuse, sexual abuse, and neglect also are needed. In this study, shelter staff members collected information about these issues using non-standardized methods, using clinical judgment to determine appropriate timing, and questions to gather this sensitive information. In addition, the research team asked structured questions concerning these issues. While these various methods intended to produce reliable information, the short-term stays of many of the youths and the highly sensitive nature of the material make the results of these self-report measures somewhat questionable.

Despite the limitations, this study addresses a gap in the literature concerning family reunification following youths' admission to emergency shelter services. Further research is needed, however, that delineates youth, family, and shelter system factors that not only address reunification strategies, but also distinguish successful from unsuccessful reunification over an extended period of time. Few studies have been conducted that identify effective post-service intervention options aimed at improving successful reunification; even less research has focused on youths who do not reunify with their families. Thus, future research efforts demand employment of longitudinal methods to evaluate strategies best suited to improve family reunification efforts and identify intervention options to meet the continuing needs of these youths and their families.

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