

**THE BILL BLACKWOOD
LA W ENFORCEMENT MANAGEMENT INSTITUTE OF TEXAS**

**COMBATING JUVENILE VICTIMIZATION
THE RUNAWAY EXIT INTERVIEW**

A Policy Research Project
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by

Calvin Eugene Wallace

Fort Worth Police Department
Fort Worth, Texas
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ABSTRACT

As we near the end of the 20th century, we are constantly reminded of the fact that our everyday world is expanding. New communication and transportation technology enables us to explore more of the problems of society than ever before. The future depends on our ability to reach out, learn, and broaden our horizons. Yet, for many Texas children, stepping outside their own front doors is a life-threatening act. Additionally, when children attempt to survive on the streets without supervision they are almost certain to become the victim of a violent act (Sells 515). It is the responsibility of every law enforcement officer, every law maker, every civic leader, every neighbor, and every parent to reduce juvenile victimization. This research project is only one tool to the vexing problems created by juveniles who are reported as runaway.

The purpose of this research project is to justify and propose to law enforcement agencies a runaway assessment by means of an exit interview of all juveniles who leave home or school for more than twenty-four hours. This interview will allow the runaway youth to communicate reasons to law enforcement officers the reasons they left home and school. Finally, the juvenile runaway exit interview will offer some benefit in reducing juvenile crime recidivism and victimization. The interview should not be viewed as the definitive answer to reduce crime but a pro-active plan to identify crime that otherwise would go unreported.

One of the conclusions of this research is that the exit interview is an effective tool to aid in identifying the causes of runaways. When the cause is identified as criminal (i.e., sexual abuse, physical abuse, etc.), we as juvenile officers then will have the means to transfer the case to the proper investigative authority. Additionally, officers should make appropriate informal referrals to community behavior modification programs. These referrals could be directed toward all children whether they are a first offender or a repeat offender.

Introduction

The purpose of this policy research project is to affirm that a one on one interview of juveniles who leave home for more than 24 hours is needed to identify the cause of such inappropriate and dangerous behavior. Texas Runaway Laws are specific by definition and address juveniles that leave home for more than 14 days with no intent to return. Law enforcement agencies generally take immediate action to enter juveniles into the NCIC and TCIC systems for location, information, and probable cause for detention purposes. Formal runaway cases are not adjudicated unless the 'fourteen day' limit and intent is met. Juveniles are placed in a legal turnstile by police departments with almost no documentation that explains why he or she left home or became truant. Furthermore, because of this lack of information case investigation fails to identify what crimes were committed by the youth or if juveniles were victimized while in the runaway status (Hartman 29). If case parameters are met and cases are filed the juvenile is placed in the Juvenile Justice System. Juveniles become responsible for their criminal activity which may have been prevented if police intervention were initiated in the early stages of the inappropriate behavior (Palenski 290).

All law enforcement agencies should utilize the data and recommendation contained in this project to formulate a comprehensive policy that require youth who leave home or school without authorization for more than 24 hours to participate in an oral exit interview. This interview should identify parental weaknesses or more serious problems that give cause for further investigation related to the runaway and/or make a pro-active referral to a community behavioral modification program.

Sources obtained to support this research project vary from local police department policy

to state juvenile statutes. These will show an inadequacy in state laws and departmental procedures which service the needs of youth who run away. Additionally, a 13 month survey conducted by the Fort Worth Police Department of 853 juveniles will show many crimes are not being reported. One reason is these youth are not being interviewed upon their return.

This research project will show there are many juveniles who, while in a runaway status, are either victims of crime or perpetrators criminal activity themselves. The author believes that implementation of a required exit interview before closing the runaway report will enable law enforcement agencies both local and nationally to reduce juvenile victimization and eventually reduce overall juvenile crime.

Historical, Legal, and Theoretical Context

In the past 30 years law enforcement personnel believed the runaway problem was minor in nature and played almost no part in the overall scheme of changing criminal behavior (Hurst 31). This thought process derives from a lack of formal police training and a knowledge of current applications of police procedures. The picture in most cops eyes is that little Johnny gets lost at the county fair or he is with friends and he will come home at some point. The greatest number of juveniles who run away return home within twenty-four hours (Axthelm 64). It is understandable that youth become victimized who remain away from home for more than 24 hours. Recent media reports lead most readers to believe overall crime rates are falling (Star Telegram 11). However, from 1990 to 1995 Texas statistics show a marginal increase of runaway juveniles that were runaway from 30,243 in 1990 to 37,774 in 1995 (Texas Juvenile VCR 90-95). This report also reveals that juvenile arrest statistics are rising significantly in the same period. The most significant increase occurs in the category of assaults on youth.

Police agencies are legally constrained by the Texas Juvenile Probation System from requiring juveniles to report to an authorized juvenile processing center or participate in an juvenile exit interview. Because of this type of legal constraint police agencies have difficulty in developing comprehensive programs which identify crimes against children. Police are technically trained in criminal law and generally trained in civil law (Springer 5). Civil law directs officers in procedures relating to juvenile arrests and most juvenile procedures. Procedures relating to juveniles are often written by non-police employees such as legal advisors. These civil procedures are sometime difficult to understand and conflict with the normal police mind set of probable cause for arrest, detention and prosecution of offenders. Because most police procedures relating to juveniles are civil in nature, they become vague, and are usually incomplete if they are found at all (Springer 117).

Currently in this state there is no definitive or punitive law which addresses the problem of the juvenile runaway. Because we are restricted in how law enforcement officers define a runaway violation and there is no penalty associated with the violation of runaway police can neither write an arrest warrant nor issue a search warrant on the merit of the runaway violation by itself The Juvenile Justice Act of 1974 removed local and state authority from institutionalizing (not detaining) runaways (Schneider, 1985). Because of the current hands off theory this research is very important as it explains not only the problem but a solution if applied on a voluntary basis. If law enforcement continues to ignore the causes of youth runaway then how can we expect those runaways to remain within the mainstay of society's mores in the future?

Review of Practice

Currently when a juvenile returns home after being reported runaway a supplemental information report is completed by telephone £Tom the person who initially reported the youth runaway. After this, the runaway report is closed without further contact from the police unless foul play is determined through this telephone supplement (FWPD 300-2).

In April 1995 a 13 month study was initiated in the Youth Section of the Fort Worth Police Department. This study was conducted by four police officers assigned to this section who successfully recruited 853 of almost 3900 reported runaway juveniles upon their return home (FWPD Statistics).

A survey instrument was written (appendix A) whereas officers interviewed these youth from this instrument to determine several factors, the first of which was to determine and classify why the youth left home. The answers to this question were classified in 15 categories from being pregnant to general family relations. The second question was used to determine if the youth was victimized while on the street. The question was asked "Did anyone hurt you while you were gone"? They classified the answers in yes or no categories. However, if yes, the officer determined if enough information could be obtained to forward the youth's information to the proper investigative section. The third question was utilized to determine whether the youth involved themselves in criminal activity while away £Tom home. To accomplish a truthful response officers asked the youth to respond only in past tense or third person. The question was asked "Did someone you know or heard about commit a crime while you were away from home?" They classified the answers in yes or no categories. However, if yes, the officer determined if there was enough case evidence that could be obtained to forward the youth's information to the proper

investigative section.

The results of this survey relating why juveniles left home or school revealed the following:

1) Eighteen females were pregnant and police officers obtained unwed mother assistance for seven youth.

2) Nineteen females and fifteen males contemplated suicide. Officers referred twenty-one youth to a suicide prevention group and the remaining youth were helped by family members through private organizations.

3) Twenty-two females and eleven males were sexually abused. Officers referred 29 cases to the sexual assault unit for further investigation of which seven were adjudicated. Four cases were unfounded by youth officers.

4) Twenty females and twenty males had a history of family mental health. No cases were referred to behavioral modification groups.

5) Twenty-one females and eighteen males had family financial problems. Of the 39 cases in this category six families were referred to the United Way relief group.

6) Eighteen female and eighteen males suffered from substance abuse. All 36 cases were referred to Tarrant County Youth Collaboration for Substance Abuse.

7) Twenty-one females and twenty-three males had arguments with step parents. Officers referred all parents and youth to a parenting skills workshop of which 19 families chose to attend.

8) Twenty females and seventeen males experienced physical abuse. Of the 37 cases 11 cases were referred to the family violence unit and five cases were adjudicated.

9) Twenty-three females and twenty-four males were involved as part of a bitter divorce battle. No cases were referred to a support group.

10) Twenty-one females and twenty males had family members suffering from substance abuse. All cases were referred to County Drug Abuse programs. No information was obtainable from drug abuse referrals.

11) Twenty-seven females and twenty-five males had poor peer relations. All cases were counseled by youth officers in this area.

12) Twenty-six females and twenty-eight males left home because they were failing in school. All youth were referred to individual school counselors on a case by case basis.

13) Twenty-five females and twenty-six males were experiencing emotional problems. Three

youth were transported Tarrant County Mental Health and Mental Retardation for counseling.

- 14) Eighty-one females and eighty-two males listed poor shelter. No referral of youth however, 49 parents were assisted by officers assisting in completing applications for housing assistance with the Fort Worth Housing Authority.
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- 15) Eighty-five females and eighty-two males explained poor family relations. Of the 167 runaway cases all were counseled by youth officers in ways of improving family relationships.
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Of the 853 interviews conducted by youth officers 195 cases were referred to community support organizations. Officers referred 40 cases to investigative support units for criminal investigation and 11 cases have been adjudicated at the time of this writing. Fifty-eight percent of these runaway cases were first offenders. Ninety eight juveniles were victimized and thirty-one committed minor thefts while out of the home. One of the most important findings of this study revealed a seven percent runaway recidivism rate of juveniles who participated in the exit interview.

During this same time period several other similar size departments were surveyed. The Fort Worth Police Department juvenile runaway recidivism rate was 21 percent (Swearingin FWPD). Dallas Police Department juvenile recidivism rate was 28 percent (Adams DPD). Austin Police Department recidivism rate was 19 percent (Smith APA). San Antonio Police

Department's juvenile runaway recidivism rate was 17 percent (Yeager SAPD). El Paso Police Department juvenile runaway recidivism rate was 26 percent (Sanchez EPPD). No police department has an exit interview in place with the exception of San Antonio Police Department, whose one police officer contacts juvenile runaways who run away more than five times.

One of the most important findings of this research project is when law enforcement officers show interest and honest concern when interviewing a runaway (and other troubled youth) honesty and interest was returned (Tolan 8). Only seven percent of juveniles participating in the runaway exit interview ran away again. Many youth who participated in the program were recruited as temporary mentors in local presentations to youth groups.

Discussion of Relevant Issues

An important key issue is reducing the amount of juvenile runaways reported to the police and more importantly the amount of the juvenile runaways reported where youth remains out of the home more than 24 hours. Before citizens will support runaway imperatives they must be educated with the statistics, the problems related with runaways, and a means to reduce future problems associated with runaways (Axthelm 29). Such initiatives can be achieved through the support of media productions, an open statistical relationship with other police agencies, and juvenile mentor verbal testimony. Another issue is police department referrals of runaways to community support organizations for identified or related problems youth and their parents were experiencing. This pro-active referral system defines a probable comprehensive solution of problems that may be resolved before judicial systems are involved.

Traditionally, police departments and community supporters in the police environment

remain reactive to crime rates, especially crimes of violence. They continue putting out category (Part I Part II) fires that affect their specific community agendas and throw millions of dollars in the face of zero tolerance, neighborhood crime watches and, citizen on patrol academies (Palenski 290). Although these traditions are very popular trends, they will fade (like "Scared Straight") when rising crime statistics erase or diminish the dollar value spent on such programs. The juvenile runaway exit interview is a very important police initiative in regards to permanently reducing future crime statistics of adults. When youth turn from inappropriate behavior like running away from home and are helped, not incarcerated, the popularity will increase.

In the opinion of this author the cost of such a program would be minimal when compared to the long term benefits to the community. A youth focused community policing effort might be started by a juvenile judge calling together youth leaders, community leaders, local youth advocate leadership, administrative and line police officers in a conference or symposium aimed at identifying all the issues and problems police and runaway youth face.

A cost analysis of a typical juvenile runaway exit interview and referral program can be determined by the enclosed outline of man hours spent as conducted by the Fort Worth Police Department. No departmental funds were budgeted for this project.

The juvenile runaway exit survey cost analysis outline is as follows:

- 1.) An additional case load of five cases (interviews) was added to four officers per working day. Each runaway exit interview lasted approximately 30 minutes.

- 2.) There was no field investigation required. When probable cause for supplemental investigation was related to criminal offenses the juvenile was introduced to a detective from that unit and the case was then transferred to that unit.
- 3.) When a particular problem was identified that could be addressed by a community service organization the youth and/or parent was referred to that agency. It should be noted no referral was made to a private service or a service that would charge the youth or parents for their support.

The proposed exit survey may minimally impact the following police department performance measures: police department youth officer case assignment load, criminal arrests, property crime cases closed, drug arrests processed, hours of training needed, and community support organization's involvement in cases.

The purpose of this research project has been to justify a comprehensive intervention program which would reduce juvenile runaway recidivism and assist families to resolve issues identified as a result of the exit interview. The juvenile runaway exit interview is only one proposal and local success in reducing runaway recidivism should generate enough interest that other departments would adopt the research as a positive tool in reducing long term crime statistics. This proposal should be thought of as a comprehensive Juvenile Crime Prevention Initiative.

The problem is a lack of available information related to why youth run away (USDJ 4). This program would create an additional case load for officers working runaway calls. Also, the

tracking of compliance, notification of parents, and referral coordination would consume staff resources. The exit interview is not a quick fix or simple solution, because the problem is very complex. Juvenile runaways will always be considered low priority by police when compared to more obviously threatening calls, therefore, adding additional low priority solutions such as the exit interview to an already stressed resource base may increase frustration rather than solve problems, in the short term. In the long term, however, the exit interview program should justify its continued existence.

In conclusion the juvenile runaway exit interview involves a commitment of personnel resources, and a cooperative agreement/working relationship between a number of public and private agencies. It also requires the cooperation with community service organizations and volunteers. Police referrals made solely from the exit interview addresses but not limited to parental skill enhancement, drug and alcohol intervention, and housing placement applications.

Juvenile crime including runaway is rising sharply every year. There is no answer on the horizon as to the reason juvenile crime continues to rise while adult crime continues to fall in most categories of crimes. If the reason or reasons can be identified through an extended survey analysis such as the one proposed society will benefit by fewer juvenile runaways and the reduced overall juvenile crime rate. The more runaway children a community has is an indication that more children are in trouble with no opportunity to grow except in what the street may offer.

If these recommendations are adopted the juvenile exit interview can forecast and identify future juvenile and adult crime trends. For example, if the majority of youth who run away because of sexual abuse in the home then we should assume future sex offender offenses will increase in the community. Also, the survey instrument itself will assist community service

organizations in justifying their imperatives and initiatives as a database resource in identifying variable weaknesses in the home. The task for the individual agency is to move from talking about youth focused community policing to initiating it and expanding existing efforts. Youth runaway programs is a comprehensive, pro active partnership with law enforcement. Youth and the community will benefit if introduced through established community leadership.

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FORT WORTH POLICE DEPARTMENT RUNAWAY
EXIT INTERVIEW

1. Why did you leave home or school?
2. Did you have any trouble with anyone while away?
3. Did someone you know or heard about commit a crime while you were away from home?
4. How did you eat and how did you get around?
5. Will you participate in our referral programs?