Strengthening Connections: Youth and Provider Perspectives on Youth Running from Out-of-Home Placements

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Abstract

In the 2022 legislative session, lawmakers passed House Bill 22-1375 Concerning Measures to Improve the Outcomes for Those Placed in Out-of-Home Placement. This statute required the Office of Colorado's Child Protection Ombudsman to enter into an agreement with an institution of higher education to examine the issue of youth running away from out-of-home placements from a lived experience perspective. This report contains the results of five focus groups, two with out-of-home placement providers, and three with youth ages 12-17 currently residing in out-of-home placement. Providers and youth provided their perspective on (1) What conditions led to running from an out-of-home placement? (2) What efforts were made to locate a child or youth after a running incident? (3) What services were provided to the child or youth after a running incident? and (4) What programmatic and systemic barriers make it difficult to prevent a run from occurring? In addition to the questions required by statute, the results also provide insight into what happens right before a running incident, the impact of childhood trauma on running behaviors, a lived experience perspective on prevention efforts, and the importance of connectedness for youth in out-of-home placements.

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Acknowledgements

Data Sources

Suggested Citation

Note on Language Regarding "Runaway"

The Timothy Montoya Task Force is working to develop common language that accurately reflects a child or youth's experience on the topic of "runaway." For the purposes of this report, language from House Bill 22-1375 will be used to ensure required elements of the bill were fulfilled.

Project Rationale and Description

Project Rationale

In addition to the questions required by statute, the results also provide insight into what happens right before a running incident, the impact of childhood trauma on running behaviors, a lived experience perspective on prevention efforts, and the importance of connectedness for youth in out-of-home placements.

Methods

Purpose of Qualitative Research Perspectives

The primary investigator (PI) used qualitative research methods to capture the lived experiences of children and youth as well as out-of-home services providers on the issue of youth running from out-of-home placements. Although public policies have a direct impact on the lives of children, youth, and service providers who experience running behaviors, their voices are rarely included in research.[17,18] Recent research has explored individual and societal factors that influence running behavior; however, the voices of the children and youth who reside in facilities and the providers who serve them have rarely been explored.

The data collected in this project establishes critical context for policy and practice recommendations. The narratives of the children and youth provide first-hand knowledge of what it is like to experience an out-

Focus Group Protocol

A semi-structured interview protocol was developed to facilitate a rich and robust description of experiences from the participant's perspectives. This included 12 guiding questions for the youth and the providers that were directed toward the main purposes of the study and evaluation questions (see Appendix A). The focus group facilitator reflected participant experiences throughout the focus groups to check for accuracy of what was being said.

In qualitative research, data collection typically ends when saturation is reached, which means no new information is emerging. In this project, saturation was reached after two provider focus groups and three focus groups with children and youth.[20] The focus groups were audio-recorded and transcribed into written form to ensure accuracy of participant quotes. The transcripts were used to code the data into overarching themes. In addition to the PI, two independent qualitative research coders each reviewed transcripts and codes to ensure accuracy of the PI's initial findings.

Key Findings

Each section contains a summary of the narrative provided by the youth and provider focus groups. Direct quotes from the youth participants are in green and provider quotes are in brown. Appendix B provides additional direct quotes for each topic.

The PI began each focus group by asking youth questions from the semi-structured interview protocol about running. In each group youth asked, "you mean AWOLing?" The term AWOL was widely used as common terminology among youth to describe running incidents and behaviors. This term was used regardless of the out-of-home placement during the interviews.

Findings are organized according to each of the four primary questions.

1. What conditions led to running from an out-of-home placement?

> Focus group participants indicated three conditions that led youth to run from the out-of-home placement.
> - x Running from the placement due to dysregulation from triggering events, disconnection from staff, and responses to previous trauma
> - x Running to connectedness and familiarity.
> - x Running due to typical adolescent behavior

Conditions that Led to a Run Running

> "In our facility, we would want to say that all of our staff are doing the right things. Sometimes, that wasn't the case. Sometimes, kids walked away because they didn't feel like staff were as caring as they should have been or were not able to provide the space that they needed, a myriad of things."

Youth participants noted times where they did not feel respected or understood by staff and ran as a means of removing themselves from that situation. Some youth recalled instances where they felt unsafe with staff and ran in order to-1.4 (r3.1 (d)2.30(aff)p41 (u)2.1 (n)2r3.1 (d)2.307(u)-0.7 (1 (c)-2e)-3.1 (lt9.4 (c)-4.1 (i)-2.3 (p7 (

"We also operate a facility up in [a location on an interstate]. There is a huge truck stop, so that is a huge…i

work. We

> "In my personal opinion, I feel like they're treated a lot worse than they should be. Like you can't change your clothes. You can't wear shoes. You have to wear your slides. You have to only wear scrubs. You can't wear your personal clothes. You'll be separated, so you won't be with the unit. Which I totally, like, I get they're trying to follow protocol."

> "We would do a debriefing with the youth and ask, 'How did we miss it? Were there things that we missed? Was there something that happened on the direct care side of things? Was there a phone call?' So really trying to debrief our own processes, as well, like, 'How did we miss this?' because we do. I mean, the reality is kids give us signs sometimes and we miss them, and so just learning from them both internally but also externally, including those external people, too. You know, 'Is there something that the team knew that we didn't know?' That could happen, as well, the communication or something that may have been talked about with the youth and wasn't shared with the facility."

> "Those two processes, that physical and mental debriefing are so important because if we don't do that, if we don't find a way to talk about the behavior and then make a plan to correct it, we'll continue to see it over and over again because that response is what they're used to. A lot of these kids have run away, and that has been their coping skill because they're running from that unsafe environment, or they're running to go to somewhere else, and so when they get here, when something happens, their first response is that running. It's about figuring out what causes that stimulus, and then addressing it appropriately to make sure that they know that this isn't a safe behavior; while you have this coping skill, it is not an appropriate one and it's a negative, unsafe that can result in damage to you."

Youth also indicated that the degree of connectedness they felt with providers had an impact on their ability to psychologically and physically regulate after returning to their out-of-home placement. Some youth felt re-traumatized based on the nature of their interactions with law enforcement. Some youth felt staff helped them process their experience and re-integrate quickly while others felt they were mistreated upon their return to the placement. Regardless of how they were initially treated, youth reported connectedness to individuals helped them reintegrate into their programs.

> "The first time I AWOL-ed, [law enforcement] brought me back, and one of the staff drove me back. [Law enforcement] escorted me to an outing van and escorted me out of there, and drove me back. I got separated on sunlight. I got restrained, and put in seclusion. They were not letting me breathe. I said just let me breathe. Like get out of my face, put one of the lower restraints on the floor. And they were like, Seclusion. Put her in seclusion. I just said, "Please get off me. Like, let me breathe, Get off of me." And they're like, She's dangerous. I calmed down because one of my trusted staff came to tal alal-6.7 (t)0.5 (m)-6.5 (e)-3.1 (.)0.9 (-5.1 (a)-2.(m)-6.5 S(h)w-6.5 (t)-5.1 (1 (t)7.8 (o)-6.7 003 Tv

"Then when a kid does return that they're welcomed back into the program… they're offered the opportunity for food, to shower or bathe, change clothing. And it should never be consequential in nature as far as upon their return. Yes, there might be something that we're going to talk about, but then it's not going to that's not going to happen when they return. First things first, is, 'We're

Consequently, providers were constantly in the position of having to justify their decisions. For example, one provider recalled a time where they followed a youth in a snowstorm because the youth left without warm clothing. The provider felt death could be imminent if the youth was left exposed to the elements. Based on the facility's "hands off" policy, the staff member was concerned about how their actions would be interpreted and that they could face adverse professional consequences.

> "You burn relationships all over the place where you're operating, and I think the hardest part, like I'll share an example. We had a 13-year-old young person go out in [a major snow storm], or whatever blizzard that we had, and he left in sweatpants and flipflops. I went out in my own car, and I was contemplating, "What do I do?" I was at the point where my career was on the line, you know what I mean? If he wasn't going to get into my car, I mean, as a mom, I was like, 'I cannot leave this kid out here for any amount of time.' Fortunately, he doubled back and made it back to the facility before I did in a car, so I didn't have to make that decision, but I had to think about that. All of us have been put into a situation now that you have to think about all of the things about the youth, and what you feel as a human being is in their best interest versus how it's going to be interpreted. We became super hands-off, and if kids walked away, we followed them to the perimeter, we called law enforcement, and felt really horrible about the dangerous situation we put them in, and so there is just that reality."

> "Kids have rights, yes they do, but we have duties. We have obligations to keep them safe. And that's really where we're all coming from. And the default is that we are doing something wrong, and it strikes me that if any of our own children ran away, it would be them doing something wrong. And yet – so they are placed out of the home for some difficult circumstance and, all of a sudden, what would be a mistake on their part becomes a mistake on our part."

> "If you block egress for child, you're guilty of violating their rights. And for the program you got an institutional abuse finding on that if it's determined that you blocked an egress. And so, many of us have taken to allowing kids egress and just walking around with them. For hours."

Providers and youth reported a shortage in providers as a major problem for preventing youth from running from a placement. The youth reported feeling this shortage on a personal level when they are in need of attention (e.g.,

"What helped me when a staff stopped me from running was kind of the same thing about what I have and what I don't utilize but can utilize. They said, 'Why give up all this nice stuff just because you want something different that you could get at a later time?'"

"We'll have a kid that has had a really bad family therapy session or a bad phone call or something and gets really upset. And so, that fight or flight kicks in and the go to is to flee in many situations, but our staff really work hard to try and intervene and just, you know, get their brain and their body back to a place where the adrenaline and the cortisol isn't just pulsing through them. Often times when the staff are able to get their body just regulated, those compulsive urges to just take care just kind of gone. Then we can further process. But I've seen many, many situations where as soon as we get the kids body back to a state of regulation that impulsive urge really just dissipated".

"I actually just had this happen with a kiddo this past weekend where he wanted to leave after a bad phone call with dad and leaned on myself because I was his therapist to really try and encourage him – or pull him out of that headspace of wanting to run. And a lot of times it's a battle within themselves on what they're going to do. I've seen it a lot where they try and lean on kind of us as their safe space to support them."

Connectedness with Providers/Staff

As demonstrated above when a provider successfully talked a youth out of a run, connectedness with a provider emerged as a strong running prevention strategy. Youth described staying where they feel safe, seen, heard, and valued. Youth indicated that taking a short walk with a staff member is all they needed to calm down, process, and return to their program. However, as discussed previously, staff shortages significantly limit providers' ability to establish and maintain the kinds of connections with youth that allow staff to anticipate when youth are heading toward dysregulation and a potential run.

"I just want to point out like this lovely staff on the left here. I look forward to her smile every single morning. Like even if she's [the staff] going through something, she will always come into work with

Appendix B: Additional Focus Group Participant Quotes by Topic

Topic I: What conditions led to running from an out-of-home placement?

Conditions that Led to a Run: Running

Triggering events, disconnection with staff, and responses to previous trauma

Triggering Events

"Often in our facility, it happens when a kid gets bad news, or gets told no to something that they're really wanting. We see kids run for numerous reasons, whether it being caught for doing something they weren't supposed to be doing, being held accountable, or even a phone call with a future placement that doesn't go well. Often, they're super dysregulated and not necessarily thinking about their future; it's in that moment, what's going on."

"The majority of any clients who have actually run, and it's because they've gotten bad news from their team or they've got extension or it's like it's now side factor, they got bad news and we had nothing to do with it."

"I definitely think that that's a pretty big factor. But I also think, since that is their team, sometimes their families call and tell them. We had a kiddo a few weeks ago that mom called and said a Dependency and Neglect case was open on her. And we didn't know that, and the kid was upset for a long time and finally it came out. Even just their families. But I do think the teams often tell them information that w (n t)-5o (n t)-52.5 (-5287 (w)-5.6s1t)-3.c55.1 (ha.68lt-5.1 (hi)-2.4 (ng)k (d)2.1n)1hing1.3 (

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Disconnection with Staff

"There is some staff that make it to where the youth that are causing the issue are their one priority.

feeling safe and secure in a place really scares them, and so, they want to go back to what they're feeling comfortable with."

"I think sometimes they're just self-sabotaging, too, like they know that they have a safe place in here and they're cared for, but then they get scared that they'll have to leave eventually so they want to sabotage themselves. They want to run away and act out to ensure they don't leave anytime soon."

"I feel like some could just be scared to come into a facility like this one. Not that there's necessarily anything to be scared of but some people might just be scared and want something different and run."

"It's just really across the board because sometimes kids can take off and they seem calm and regulated and seem like things are fine. Other times they'll take off as a result of some sort of trigger that occurred and they get really emotional and upset."

Conditions that Led to a Run: Running

Connectedness and Familiarity

"There was a time where I was planning an AWOL, where I was going to find somebody's phone, to run back to a home that I was previously at. I was going to call. I was gonna, come pick me up. I want to come home. It was never my plan to like go to Walmart or anything. I was just trying to find a cell phone so I can get a ride to my house. I wanted to go home. I wanted to see people that haven't seen in a while, and I'm just like, miss you guys, pick me up."

"My sister, for instance, she's ran to, I guess, her friend's house just so it's away from family, and she can just sit there and think. Or she just goes somewhere where it's peace and quiet."

"Some kids can go on passes and just stay and not come back. It doesn't necessarily have to be like they go on the pass and then they run away. It can just be they go on the pass with their family and then they just stay with their family and don't come back."

"They [peers] sometimes just want to go home. I know a bus place not that far from here, like in town over there. One night me and [another youth] went AWOL. But then the cops came and I had to say I'd give up."

"We broke into a house. Oh, and when we have the opportunity to drink, and we have the opportunity to smoke, we're gonna do it. There was like a whole tray of alcohol sitting inside so I broke in and I stole the alcohol. I stole the iPad. I stole shoes. And we went out, and we got drunk. That's how I go when I go AWOL."

"I need to leave this place. I need to get back home."

"There's running from something and running to something…friends, drugs, the families, probably in that order…"

"I think it's discussed most within the population of like the trafficking youth. I think a big reason for that is, these traffickers know substances to keep those kids under control. Right? They know if the kid would go into placement or even run away from them that after a few days they start showing like withdrawal symptoms and they're going to run right back. I think the substance abuse stuff, it causes a lot of those conversations too. And those are the kids that we see having those conversations the most in our care, are the traffic youth."

"What they know is coping, right? They know to go and use substances, they know to go and find a place where they can do the things that make them feel good in the immediate."

Conditions that Led to a Run: Running as Typical Adolescent Behavior

"I notice that every time I've seen someone run from a home or a facility they've always went to a store for some reason. I don't know why. Maybe it's that feeling of being free and being around other people that have that same opportunity of just being free and doing their own thing."

"They [peers] usually go down the street to the skate park, somewhere to hang out with other people."

Youth Who do not Understand Consequences of Typical Adolescent Behavior: Intentional Running

"Some people end up getting chased by animals, apparently fighting bears. Laying on the side of a foothill for the night. Going to Walmart, and dyeing their hair in the Walmart bathroom. Sprinkle in some hanging out with some random homeless people under the bridge. Some people got touched by hobos. And, you know, and get drunk, but they ha(t)-3.1 8.8 (bo)-8.8 (s) Tc 0.00nd h, aotnkathryh4 Tc T

my clothes because if my behavior isn't on point, I don't get my clothes. I was, I was just kind of angry about that."

"I guess being locked down, not being able to have freedom."

Topic II: What efforts were made to locate a child or youth after a running incident?

Contacting Law Enforcement after a Run

"We end up waiting and waiting for that moment where we could, I guess, prove or justify lethality or imminent danger, and we end up putting ourselves and our kids, our staff and our kids in a more unsafe situation by doing that because the waiting is just as dangerous as intervening. Not doing something can often be worse than doing something, so trying to wait around until we're going to get in trouble before we stop them, even though we know we should be stopping them, and then we end up in a worse situation is not really the wisest intervention in my opinion."

"Sometimes the police, they look at the kiddos file and their diagnosis and their history and make a really quick decision on whether the kid is high risk or not and don't always take into account the fact that we worked hours and hours with these kids. We know these kids. We know their families. We know the background. It can be very difficult and challenging too, when you're sitting here telling a police officer like, 'This kid is high risk. We need to –you know, you need to be looking for

"With our population right now, we have numerous youth that are on clinical precautions and have been for months, that if they get a hold of the wrong type of lid or the wrong piece of plastic off of a container, they've got lacerations and cuts all over their bodies. We're working with kids right now that are so out to self-

"When possible —especially if the police brought the client back or if they came back just checking in with them. If they're able to process before going back into the milieu, then great. If they're not, we still at least need to be like, 'Are you going to be able to be safe in the milieu?' Just at least, you know, making sure they're not in any sort of headspace that's going to negatively affect the of the milieu before we bring them back there."

"It's not that we even want them [law enforcement] to be the ones intervening. Often, I'm noticing their techniques and theirs is very compliance-based, and they don't intervene in a way that we would as a trauma-informed facility, so it's not a positive thing whenever we have [law enforcement] being the ones bringing back our kids, or in physical management with our kids. I don't think I've had a time where I've felt very positive or comfortable with the way they intervene, which

Topic V: Opportunities for Prevention: Consequences and Connectedness

Fear of Consequences

"The consequences, because like you'd lose your privilege for the day, three days. Lose being able to go places. You got all your stuff taken out of your room."

"When I see people who are going AWOL I remind myself I want to go home. I also want to see my family. So I just look on the bright side and don't AWOL."

"If you go AWOL for two hours, right, so two hours you're just walking around, but like that doesn't add up to three days. Like why would you go AWOL for two hours just to have to lose everything for three days?"

Connectedness to Providers

"The staff will talk me out of it."

"Last night like a staff stopped one of the kids from going AWOL. The staff said, 'No, you're not going to go out that door.'"

"I would say the biggest thing that helped our kids stay put was when they were connected to enough staff that they felt cared about."

"I think we see this very frequently. I think we probably see this more than the kids talking about it and then actually running. Our staff are really trained in de-escalation and processing and co-regulation. And they're able to verbally tell us if they're wanting to run and verbally tell us why, then doing those things to help co-regulate and bring the kid back down has been a huge help."

"I would also say that when a young person tells you they're going to run away, when they're thinking about running away they're looking for – that's a lifeline. They're asking for help. The people that run away typically don't tell you. You might see warning signs but there won't be an outward…yeah. My experience is that when a young person says, 'I'm really thinking about running away', he's looking for permission to stay and perhaps different support, better support, in the program that he is in or she's in."

"I agree with that. I've seen that a lot too. Like, I've had a client that would literally just say, "I'm going to run," and he'd get down to the end of the hallway but then he'll turn around and make sure staff was – but he never got out of the building. He just wanted to make sure we were following him. So I do feel like there's a lot of just following him around, processing, trying to process within an encouraging them to make the right decisions. And whether that's in their best interest."

Credibility

Credibility refers to the importance of viewing each participant as an expert in their life and experiences.[35]

Transferability

Transferability is the extent to which the results of can be applied in other contexts.[36, 37] The quality of transferability depends on the evaluator's ability to describe the evaluation process and findings for the reader to determine its applicability to their context.[38] In this report, findings were represented with direct quotes that support the findings.

Dependability

In qualitative research and evaluation, the concept of dependability is related to whether the data collected is stable over time.[39, 40] This was achieved through documenting all decisions made by the evaluator to the Colorado Action Lab Staff, the Office of Colorado's Child Protection Ombudsman, and the Timothy Montoya

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