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POLICE SCIENCE

WHY RUNAWAYS LEAVE HOME

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EDITOR.

Law enforcement agencies today are faced with the constantly increasing problem of the runaway youth. Indicative of the increasing demand for police services in this area is the number of residents reported missing in New York City. In 1950, 6,328 cases were reported. By 1960 the total had increased to 9,555, or one every fifty-five minutes. This represents a 51 percent increase over a ten year period, a period in which the population of the city declined by 1.4 percent.

Of the cases reported in 1960, 5,067 involved runaways. A runaway is intended here to mean a subject under 18 years of age who leaves home without parental consent, and who is reported to the police as a missing person. This police interest in runaways has evolved out of public concern for their safety and welfare and not because they have committed a crime. It is typical of present day trends in law enforcement in which police departments are assuming responsibilities for services that are allied in some manner to their original responsibility of law enforcement. In these cases the object of the police search is to locate the youth and return him to his family.

Most information dealing with delinquency is based on accessible case histories available from juvenile courts and probation offices, after the delinquent behavior pattern is formed. The runaway, on the other hand, represents the youth who has a problem, but in most instances has not developed a definite anti-social attitude. His action is a pre-delinquent indicator, and as such its value should be recognized. If this danger signal is ignored society has lost another battle in its attempt to control crime. The importance of this judgment can be more fully appreciated when consideration is given to the estimate that more than 50 percent of all police work involves youth, and

that 70 percent of all delinquents have run away at one time or other.¹

As each case is reported to police, the reporting person is asked various questions to aid in locating and identifying the runaway. One of these questions is: Why did the subject run away? In over 75 percent of the cases the cause is listed as unknown. Time after time, parents flatly state that there is no valid reason. They infer that some sinister fate has befallen the subject. But police experience has shown that these so-called sinister happenings seldom occur. Why then do children leave home?

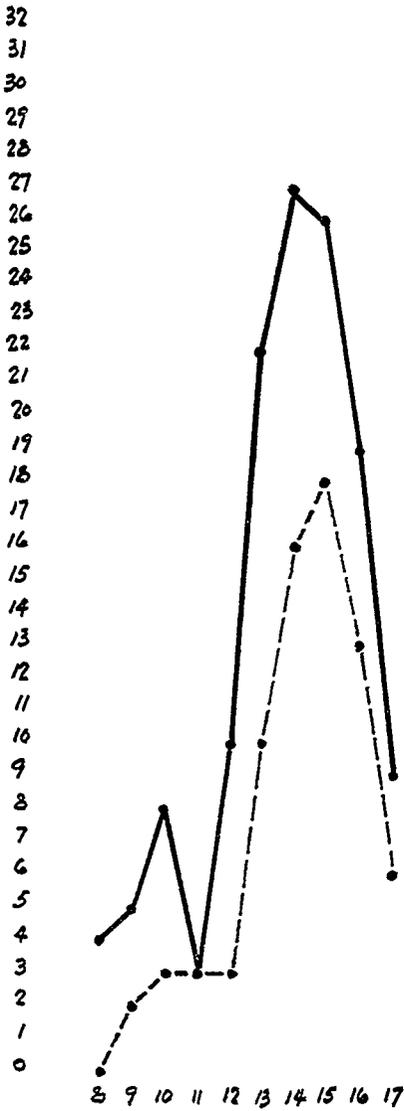
To gain some insight into this problem a study of two hundred sixty-two cases was conducted. These cases originated in six precincts located in the southwest section of Brooklyn, an area comprised in the main of families in the middle to low income range, with the lower middle income group most prevalent. Housing is approximately evenly distributed between one and two family houses and apartment buildings. The major ethnic groups are: German, Irish, Italian, Jewish, and Scandinavian.

It is recognized that the information contained here is not complete since it is impossible to know how many children run away and are not reported. Many previously unreported cases are disclosed when cases reported for the first time reveal prior instances, and when unreported cases are picked up while wandering the streets.

The purpose of this study was to find out the following: to determine the age distribution of runaways; to identify any recidivist patterns; to determine the length of time they remain away from home; and to determine what impels a child to leave home. Information pertaining to three

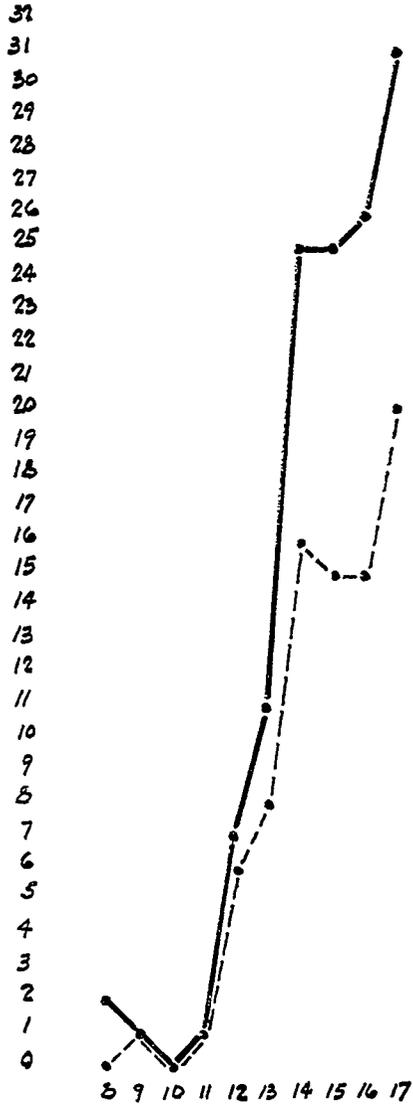
¹ JOHN P. KENNY, *POLICE WORK WITH JUVENILES*, page 5. SHELDON GLUECK AND ELEANOR GLUECK, *UNRAVELING JUVENILE DELINQUENCY*, page 257.

———— = TOTAL CASES
 - - - - - = ADJUSTED FOR RECIDIVISM



BOYS

TOTAL - 133



GIRLS

TOTAL - 129

Figure 1
 REPORTED RUNAWAYS
 (Sample Size = 5.1%)

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10 11 12 13 14 15 16 17 18 19 20 21 22 23 24 25 26 27 28 29 30 31 32

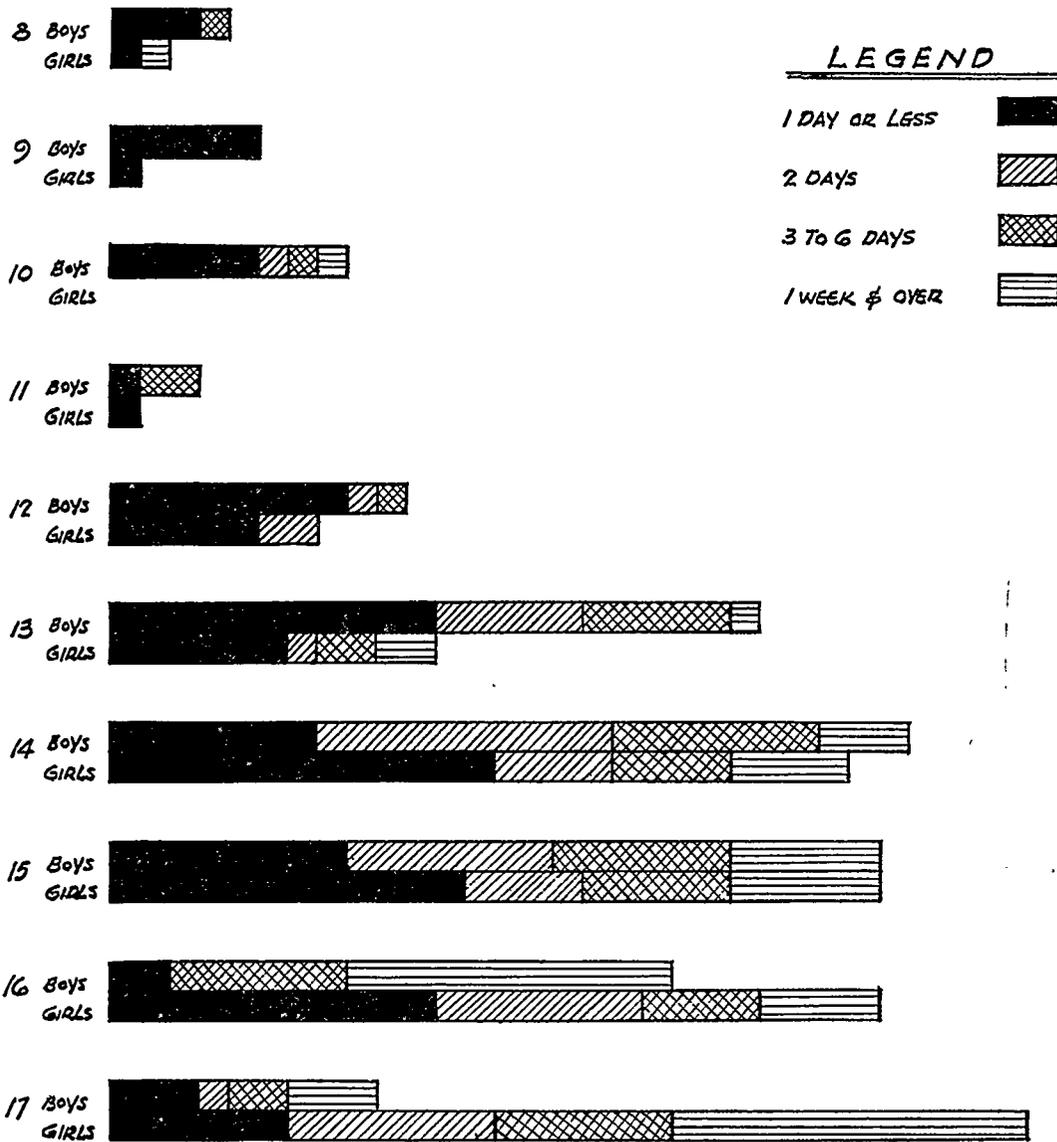


Figure 2
DURATION OF ABSENCE FROM HOME

areas—age, recidivism, and duration—was readily compiled and is illustrated in figures 1 and 2. The remaining area, the motivating factor (figure 3) was extremely difficult. While it is often expedient to state that a subject left home because of a specific reason, as a rule, such a conclusion is inaccurate.

Recognizing that in most cases more than one

factor was involved, the problem became one of determining which one was dominant. In many instances the inter-relationship was so great as to present the problem of which came first, the chicken or the egg.

In defining these factors, the following guide lines were established.

1. Poor home environment

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10 11 12 13 14 15 16 17 18 19 20 21 22 23 24 25 26 27 28 29 30 31 32

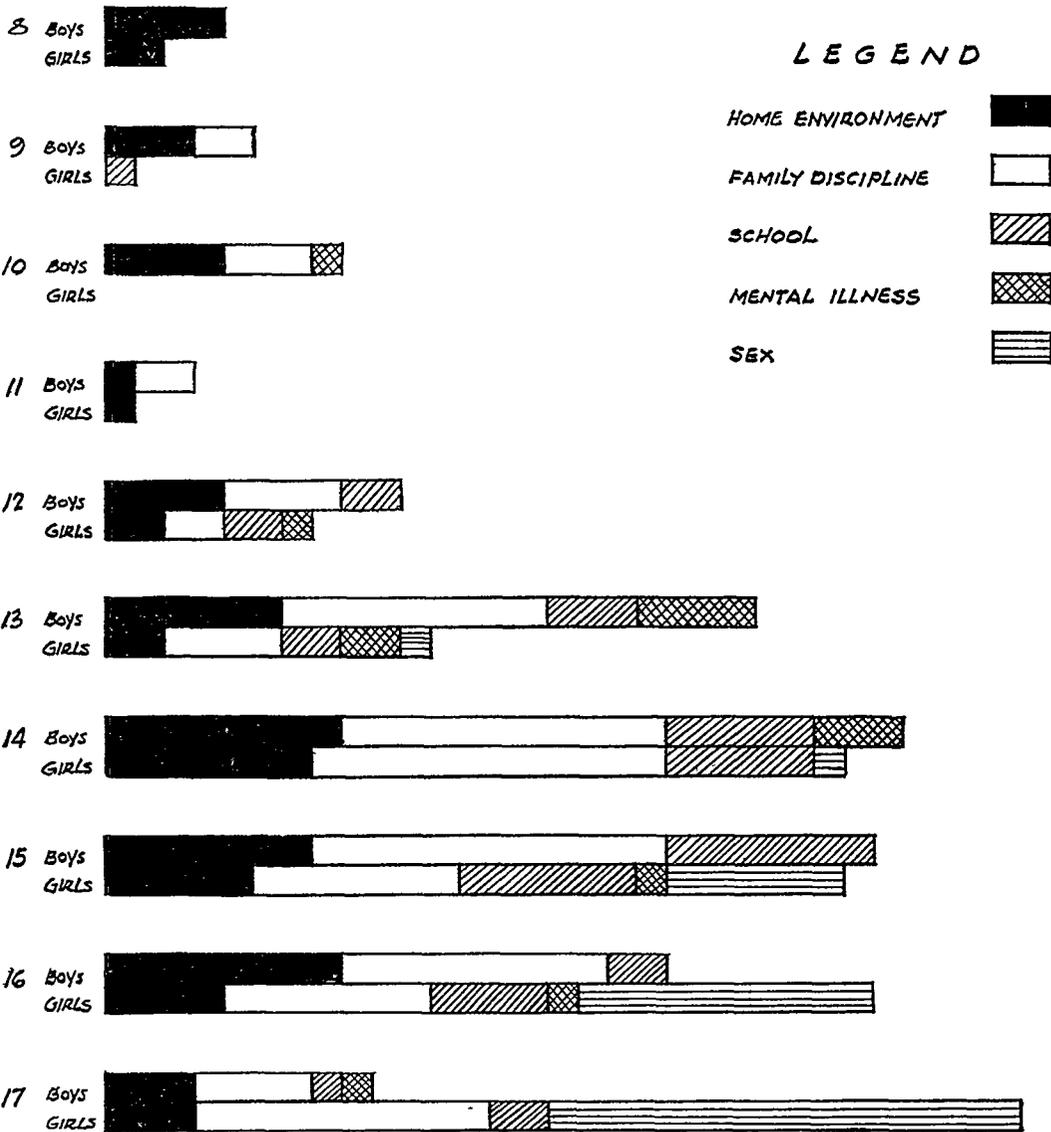


Figure 3
DOMINANT FACTORS

- | | |
|---|--|
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> A. broken home B. neglected home C. immoral conditions | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> C. selection of friends and hangouts D. adventurous spirit E. family prejudices and culture patterns |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> 2. Family discipline—all more or less common family problems A. keeping late hours B. disobedience and stubbornness | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> 3. School 4. Mental illness 5. Sex A. married |

B. became pregnant

C. resided with a member of the opposite sex for more than one day

The inclusion of a sex factor should not be interpreted to mean that the sex drive per se causes runaways. It is generally accepted that sexual promiscuity does not normally manifest itself in teenage behavior. In most instances, it is the result of a deteriorating environment; therefore it is a product of a combination of the other factors. However, sex is included here because of the importance society places on it. The extent to which each of the other factors contributes is unknown, but a poor home environment was evident in most known cases. Although no mention is made of sex in the boys' group, it probably played some minor role, but remained undetected.

Distribution by Sex and Age. Contrary to popular belief, the runaway problem is not confined to boys. Today, girls are leaving home in ever increasing numbers. In fact they now run away as frequently as boys. Their age pattern is also similar to boys until the age of 16. At age 12, both groups exhibit a rapidly increasing rate which continues until a peak is reached at age 14 to 15. At 16 a change occurs; the number of boys who left home declined sharply, while the number of girls increased slightly. The decline continued for boys at 17 but the trend was sharply upward for girls.

Recidivism. A definite recidivist pattern was established in the boys' group at age 12. By 13 a peak was reached, which was maintained through 15. Thereafter the degree of recidivism decreased.

A significant pattern was not apparent in the girls group until 14, but unlike the boys, this pattern gradually increased with age.

Duration. Both groups were usually absent from home for one day or less through age 12. However, some were away for longer periods, but these were the recidivists. The tendency to remain away for longer periods began with the 13 year old group and increased with each succeeding group. Again, these were recidivists.

Dominant Factors. Poor home environment was by far the most influential factor in the 8 to 12 age groups. Most of these homes were poorly maintained with little attention and guidance given to the child. They were in fact the so-called "hard core" families, those which ultimately breed delinquency. In many instances, the runaway could best be described as a second generation delinquent.

Although the matter of family discipline encompasses a large area, it may be described in part by calling it "growing pains". When a subject enters puberty, mental and physical changes take place. These changes coupled with increasing contacts outside the family circle create many problems. When these problems are not intelligently resolved, the child is apt to run away from the problem and from home. From 13 on, family discipline was the most important factor. But, as earlier stated, there is no black or white in so far as causation is concerned. Rather there is a gray area overlapping environment, discipline, and school.

The next important factor was school. Starting at 12 and continuing through 15, both groups experienced increasing school difficulties. This was characterized by truancy, poor grades, and misconduct in school. While it was true, in most instances, that the child from the neglected home experienced difficulty in school, he was not listed under the school factor. His poor social adjustment did not begin in school but in the home. Therefore, the cause was assigned primarily to the home even though the effect may have been more obvious in school. Of course, here again we have a grey area rather than a black or white one.

By 16, the mentally defective student was in a hospital, and the uninterested student had quit school. This probably accounted for the decreasing importance of the school factor and for the overall decline in the number of boys reported missing in the 16 and 17 year groups. This left the "side-tracked" boy who ran away because he temporarily neglected his school work. Again we have a grey area.

As stated earlier, cases in which sex was a factor generally came from a poor home environment. These girls were also recidivists. Many of them had quit school and were unemployed at the time they were reported missing. Some eloped and were married, others could not obtain marriage licenses, while some were pregnant.

While the problem of the runaway youth is steadily increasing in New York City, the alarming factor in this trend is that there has not been a corresponding increase in the population. More families are moving to the suburbs than are migrating to the city.

It may be argued that this upward trend is the result of the influx of low income families and the exodus of the more stable middle income families.

But there is no evidence to substantiate this contention in the cases studied here. The vast majority of these runaways came from the middle income group.

The parents involved actually did not know their children. With few exceptions they were the parents who professed not to know why the youth left home. They readily believed that the acts of their son or daughter were the work of an evil Svengali, the influence of neighbors children, or the fault of the school system. But never the result of parental apathy.

Many parents today are so absorbed with their own individual desires and problems that they have little time to consider their childrens needs. They tend to rely on church, school, and civic groups to guide each child. Ultimately, they pursue a policy of appeasement in the home rather than maintain family discipline. In effect these parents

want society to be their baby-sitter. This increasing reliance on community services, and parental emphasis on individual rights rather than responsibilities in the training and education of their children has to a large extent weakened the family and contributed to the growing delinquency problem.

If crime prevention programs are to be effective, it is imperative that the family recognize the early signs of maladjustment in children. The runaway is one of the most visible problem indicators. Like the oak that grew from the acorn, the runaway is often the seed of the future felon. In its embryonic stage the problem can frequently be corrected by the cooperation of law enforcement agencies and the parents, therefore it is essential that parents be informed of the inherent consequences of such acts and be advised of the assistance and remedies available to them.