

# RUNAWAY AND HOMELESS YOUTH PROGRAM FAMILY AND YOUTH SERVICES BUREAU

2016 NATIONAL  
RUNAWAY SAFELINE

CRISIS CONTACTS REPORT



**FYSB** Family & Youth  
Services Bureau

Runaway & Homeless  
Youth Program



## **ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS**

This report was developed by the National Clearinghouse on Families and Youth (NCFY) in collaboration with the National Runaway Safeline (NRS) and the Family and Youth Services Bureau (FYSB).

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# INTRODUCTION

When a teenager sits on his or her bed at home and thinks about running away, where does he or she consider running? What problems at home or at school make running seem like a good option? If they do run, who will help them get to a safe place?

The National Communication System has been helping young people around the United States get to a safe place since 1974. Whether a child is in crisis, a parent is worried about a missing teen, or a young person who has run away needs a safe place to sleep, volunteers are available around the clock to listen and work with contacts to find individualized solutions to their problems.

The National Communication System is a federally funded hotline service that young people can reach by calling 1-800-RUNAWAY or texting 66008. Since its beginning in 1974, the hotline has been operated by the nonprofit National Runaway Safeline (NRS). Youth can contact NRS by phone, chat, email, or online forums through the 1800RUNAWAY.org website. All the contacts received by NRS are confidential.

## ABOUT THE 2016 CRISIS CONTACTS DATA

The data in this report are drawn from NRS's records of contacts by and about youth in crisis during calendar year 2016. When someone contacts NRS about a crisis, a volunteer works with them to understand their concerns and talk through possible solutions. After the contact ends, the volunteer enters data into a tracking software, recording the problems discussed, the solutions offered, and some demographic information about the contact. Since contacts do not always share much information during their conversations with volunteers, the data available are limited, but they provide a snapshot of what thousands of youth in crisis faced during the year.



For example, the 2016 crisis contact numbers illuminate some of the reasons youth reached out to NRS, such as family and relationship conflicts, struggles finding a place to live, and worries about their friends. They also reveal encouraging trends, however, including the fact that an increasing proportion of youth contact NRS before running away. NRS then encourages them to work through their problems before they end up on the street.

Behind each contact is a young person who is scared or worried or feels like they are out of options — but who had the courage to ask for help and, with NRS volunteers' help, make a plan to get to a safe place. NRS and the Family and Youth Services Bureau (FYSB) hope these data will help youth-serving organizations and others who care about young people better understand the youth who need their help and will better equip them to provide care and safety, and understand the importance of runaway prevention and intervention.

# 2016 NATIONAL RUNAWAY SAFELINE CRISIS CONTACTS REPORT

## WHO CONTACTS 1-800-RUNAWAY

In 2016, NRS responded to 29,806 calls, emails, online forum posts, and chat messages from youth ages 21 and younger — either youth seeking help for themselves or a friend — or from adults calling to discuss youth issues.

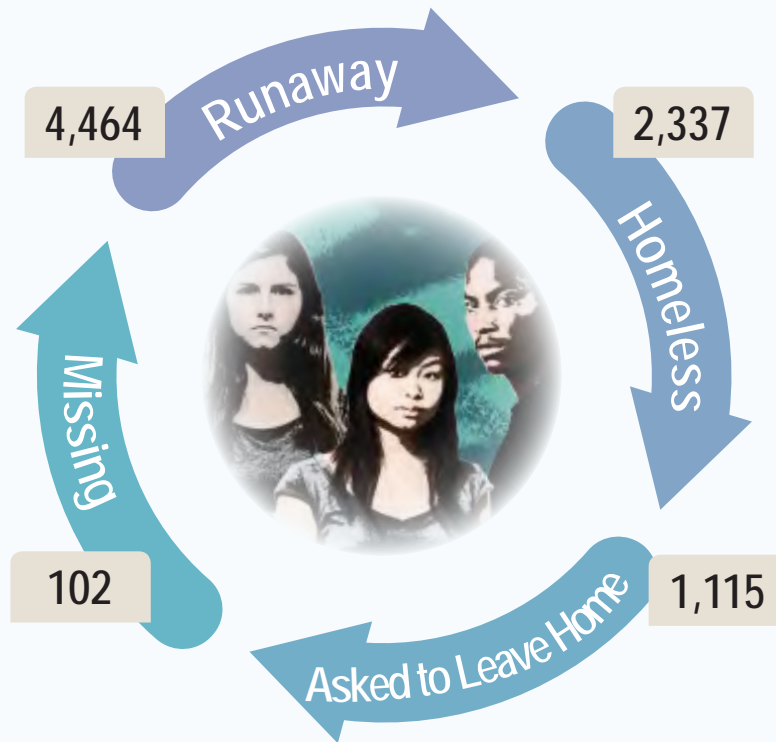
Most of the people who contact NRS are youth, but some are parents, concerned friends, or other adults. In 2016, about 74 percent of the contacts were youth, 9 percent were parents, and 6 percent were friends. According to NRS, youth contacting NRS about their own situations increased 48 percent in 2016, indicating that the service is reaching more youth.

NRS continues to see a trend of contact via digital means among younger people, such as email or online forums and chat messages, as well as an increase among older youth inquiring about the Home Free program, which provides free Greyhound bus tickets to youth seeking to return home.

Contact Relationship		
Youth	21,410	74%
Parent	2,656	9%
Youth's Friend	1,581	6%
Adult	1,337	5%
Relative	1,121	4%
Agency	492	2%
Other	122	< 1%
Police	45	< 1%
Probation Officer	3	< 1%
Total Reported	28,767	100%
Not Reported by Contact	1,039	
Total Crisis Contacts about Youth	29,806	

Note: The conversational and personalized nature of NRS's crisis intervention model, as well as the various digital means by which youth contact NRS, determine the amount of data collection available for each contact. Therefore, NRS crisis staff and volunteers do not necessarily collect information on each data point from each contact. We use the phrasing "percent of contacts" throughout the report, but these percentages are drawn from the number of contacts who provided information on that data point. See the Appendix for more detail.

# Youth Status at Time of Contact



**Total Youth on Street — 7,916**

*Of the 29,806 crisis contacts about youth, 28,129 provided information on this data point.*

In 2016, approximately 36 percent of the crisis contacts were about a youth in crisis, and 35 percent were about a youth who was contemplating running away. Only 16 percent of the contacts were about a youth who had run away from home, and 8 percent were about a youth experiencing homelessness. Altogether, 28 percent of the crisis contacts in 2016 — representing 7,916 youth — were about youth on the street. The 2016 data continue a trend of more youth seeking help before

they are in the dangerous situation of running away or being homeless on the street. In 2011, for example, approximately 56 percent of crisis contacts were about a youth on the street. That year, 37 percent of the contacts were about youth who had run away, and only 13 percent were about youth who were contemplating running. NRS and FYSB hope to see this trend continue, as do other youth advocates.

## Reported Age of Contact

Under 12	265	1%
12	403	2%
13	988	5%
14	1,324	6%
15	2,224	11%
16	4,329	21%
17	6,110	30%
18	2,122	10%
19	1,278	6%
20	910	4%
21	647	3%
Total Reported 21 or Under	20,600	100%
Adult or Not Reported by Contact	9,206	
Total Crisis Contacts about Youth	29,806	

While some of the contacts are adults, most are youth. Of youth ages 21 and under who contacted NRS in 2016, just over half were ages 16 or 17. Contacts from younger children were less common, but 265 children under the age of 12 contacted NRS.



## Contact Gender

Female	15,989	71%
Male	6,177	27%
Gender Nonconforming	208	1%
Transgender	297	1%
Total Reported	22,671	100%
Not Reported by Contact	7,135	
Total Crisis Contacts about Youth	29,806	
Youth is Ward of the State	307	1%
Youth is Former Ward of the State	287	1%
Total Crisis Contacts about Youth	29,806	

## Contact Race

White/Caucasian	8,733	44%
Black or African-American	3,603	18%
Hispanic or Latino	3,200	16%
Not Provided (caller declined to answer)	1,990	10%
Multi-Racial	1,272	6%
Asian	617	3%
American Indian or Alaska Native	217	1%
Native Hawaiian or Other Pacific Islander	103	1%
Total Reported	19,735	100%
Not Reported by Contact	10,071	
Total Crisis Contacts about Youth	29,806	

More girls contacted NRS than boys; 71 percent of contacts in 2016 were from females, and 27 percent were from males. In 2016, 44 percent of the contacts were White or Caucasian, 18 percent were Black or African-American, and 16 percent were Hispanic or Latino.



## RESOURCES AND CHALLENGES FOR YOUTH IN CRISIS

In keeping with the trend of more youth contacting NRS before they leave home, half of the contacts in 2016 said that the youth they were inquiring about (whether themselves or someone they were concerned about) was at home. Another 15 percent of youth were in company of a friend when they contacted NRS.

### Whereabouts of the Young Person Described in Crisis

Home	9,649	50%
Friend	2,861	15%
Street/Payphone	1,535	8%
Unknown to Contact	1,493	8%
Relative	1,388	7%
Other	806	4%
Shelter	545	3%
School	319	2%
Recent Acquaintance	217	1%
Detention/Police	156	1%
Greyhound	139	1%
Work	56	< 1%
Pimp/Dealer	16	< 1%
Total Reported	19,180	100%
Not Reported by Contact	10,626	
Total Crisis Contacts about Youth	29,806	

## Time on the Street

1-3 Days	2,679	45%
4-6 Days	421	7%
1-3 Weeks	1,106	19%
1-2 Months	740	12%
3-6 Months	521	9%
Over 6 Months	470	8%
Total Reported	5,937	100%
Not Reported by Contact or Not Applicable	23,869	
Total Crisis Contacts about Youth	29,806	

Among youth who were classified as being “on the street,” 5,446 were relying on friends or relatives to survive. (Since contacts could report multiple means of survival, the percentage of youth relying on various means has not been calculated.) When they contacted NRS, 777 youth were relying on personal funds, 715 were relying on a shelter or soup kitchen, and 562 were employed. One hundred eight contacts reported that youth were surviving by panhandling, and 106 youth were forced to trade or engage in sexual activities as a way to meet their basic needs such as food and shelter.

In most cases, the contact did not know whether the youth in crisis had run away previously. Twenty-six percent of contacts said the youth had not run away previously, and 16 percent said they had.

Of the youth who were on the street or suspected missing, 45 percent had been gone for one to three days. Another 7 percent had been gone four to six days, 19 percent had been gone one to three weeks, 9 percent had been gone three to six months, and 8 percent had been gone more than six months.

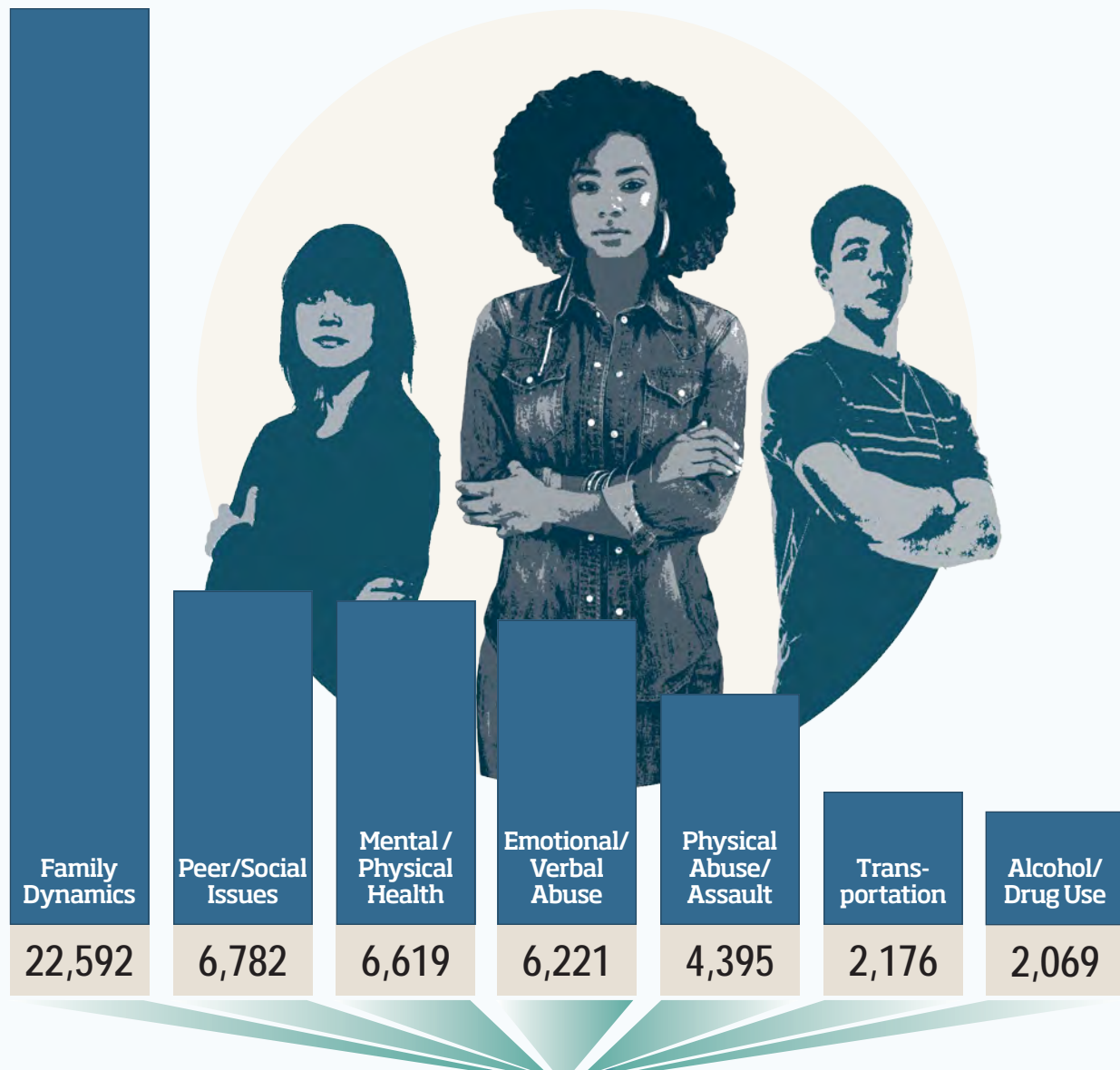
## Means of Survival for Youth on the Street

Friends/Relatives	5,446
Unknown to Contact	2,617
Personal Funds	777
Shelter/Soup Kitchen	715
Employment	562
Panhandling	180
Engaging in Survival Sex	106
Detention/Police	99
Sex Industry (18 yrs +)	65
Stealing	59
Selling Drugs	31
Total Means of Survival Reported	10,657

## Youth History of Running Away

Unknown to Contact	11,955	58%
No	5,444	26%
Yes	3,284	16%
Total Reported	20,683	100%
Not Reported by Contact	9,123	
Total Crisis Contacts about Youth	29,806	

# Issues Identified By Contact



**64,631 Total Issues Reported**

*The data do not specify whether youth experienced these issues at home or on the streets. A full list of issues reported can be found in the appendix.*

## ISSUES AND SOLUTIONS

NRS volunteers are trained to take a conversational problem-solving approach with the youth and others who contact NRS during a crisis. Contacts often mention more than one issue during a conversation, and volunteers often provide multiple options or strategies contacts could take to address those issues.

The most-often mentioned issues in 2016 were family issues, including problems with parents or guardians or a conflict with family rules. Contacts mentioned family dynamics 22,592 times. Peer/social issues were mentioned 6,782 times; this category can include problems with friends, acquaintances, or relationships. Emotional/verbal abuse was mentioned 6,221 times.

To assist youth in crisis and others who contact NRS, the organization's volunteers draw from a database of about 10,000 resources nationwide, in addition to NRS-specific services. Each contact comes to NRS with an average of 3.1 problems, and the volunteer on the line discusses an average of 3.6 options. These options may include housing, seeking help from a family member or police, legal services, or other support hotlines. They may also include offers to set up a conference call with a parent, a referral to youth services, or a free Greyhound bus ticket home through NRS's Home Free program.

## Options Discussed with Contacts

National Runaway Safeline Services	28,243
Family Member	11,234
Police	10,950
Friend	9,824
Alternative Youth Housing	7,464
Adult	6,999
Social Services	5,081
Legal Services	4,989
Child Abuse Reporting	4,011
School Personnel	3,393
Self Help or Support Hotlines	3,182
Mental Health Professional	2,777
Home Free Program	2,120
Independent/Transitional Living Program	1,879
Social Worker/Case Worker	1,182
Health Professional	804
Juvenile Court Services (MINS/CHINS)	730
Missing Children Numbers	586
Faith/Religious Organization	558
United Way	493
Total Options Discussed	106,499



## Here are the number of contacts who took advantage of some of NRS's key services and referrals in 2016:

### Total referrals given: 21,788

NRS volunteers may refer contacts to agencies and organizations in their database of about 10,000 resources nationwide.

### Referral resources conference calls for youth: 2,436

When appropriate and requested by the youth, NRS facilitates a conference call between an agency or organization and a youth seeking help.

### Messages taken: 71

For families that are not yet ready to communicate directly, NRS offers a message relay service between parents or guardians and children.

### Conference calls with parents or guardians: 519

When parents or guardians and children are ready to talk, an NRS volunteer may facilitate a conference call and stay on the line during the call to provide support. Youth must also have a conference call with their parent or guardian before receiving a Home Free ticket.

### Home Free tickets issued: 398

Through the Home Free program, Greyhound offers free bus tickets to youth who are ready to return home.

In addition to these services, NRS collaborates with and makes referrals to other national hotlines. In 2016, the NRS transferred 53 cases to the National Center for Missing and Exploited Children, which assists in the location and recovery of missing children across the U.S.

## HOW YOUTH FIND NRS

The majority of contacts — 67 percent — said they found NRS through the internet. Another 11 percent learned about NRS through word of mouth.

NRS volunteers have seen an increase in the percentage of people who contact them through online means as well. Digital connections have increased in recent years and now make up almost half of all NRS crisis contacts. According to NRS, email alone was up 109 percent in 2016 over the previous year — for a total of 6,586 crisis contact emails in 2016.

While phone calls accounted for 51 percent of crisis contacts in 2016, another 16 percent came through NRS's online chat service, 11 percent were through forum posts, and 22 percent were through emails. NRS also allows people to contact them via text, but the text service directs people to call or contact them online, so text messages are not included in the crisis contact figures.

Anecdotally, volunteers have found that online chat contacts — which continue to grow in popularity, especially with younger youth — take longer to address than phone calls due to the time it takes for people to read and type responses to chat messages. As the share of contacts made via chat increases, more volunteers will likely be needed to ensure NRS can continue to give each person in crisis the time and attention they deserve.

## How Contact Learned About NRS

Internet	11,082	67%
Word of Mouth	1,880	11%
Referred by Social Service Agency	1,200	7%
Previous Call	1,195	7%
NRS Partner Organization	322	2%
Phone Book/Directory Services/I&R Line	235	1%
School	196	1%
Law Enforcement	164	1%
NRS Promotional Material	156	1%
Public Service Announcement	55	< 1%
NRS Runaway Prevention Curriculum	4	< 1%
Total Reported	16,489	100%
Not Reported by Contact	13,317	
Total Crisis Contacts about Youth	29,806	

## Means of Contact

Phone Calls	15,112	51%
Chats	4,772	16%
Emails	6,586	22%
Forum Posts	3,336	11%
Total Crisis Contacts about Youth	29,806	100%

# APPENDIX

## National Runaway Safeline Crisis Contact Data for 2016

Data reflect crisis contacts to the National Runaway Safeline during calendar year 2016. Since the data only apply to people in crisis who contacted the Safeline, they are not statistically representative of all runaway youth and youth in crisis. The margin of error has not been calculated.

**For additional statistics, please visit [1800runaway.org/runaway-statistics](http://1800runaway.org/runaway-statistics).**



### Youth Status at Time of Contact

Youth in Crisis	10,177	36%
Contemplating Running	9,934	35%
Runaway	4,464	16%
Homeless	2,337	8%
Asked to Leave Home or Prevented from Returning Home	1,115	4%
Suspected Missing	102	< 1%
Total Reported	28,129	100%
Total Youth on Street	7,916	28%
Not Reported by Contact	1,677	
Total Crisis Contacts about Youth	29,806	

### Reported Age of Contact

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Issues Identified by Contact	
Family Dynamics	22,592
Peer/Social Issues	6,782
Emotional/Verbal Abuse	6,221
Mental Health	5,431
Physical Abuse/Assault	4,395
Economics	3,217
School/Education	2,957
Neglect	2,446
Transportation	2,176
Alcohol/Drug Use	2,069
Youth/Family Services	2,036
Health	1,188
Judicial System	1,187
GLBTQ	863
Sexual Abuse/Assault	812
Exploitation/Trafficking	259
Total Issues Reported	64,631



## Key Services

Total Referrals Given	21,788
Messages Taken	71
Conference Call with Parent/Guardian (includes Home Free)	519
Referral Resources Conference - Youth	2,436
Transfer to National Center for Missing and Exploited Children	53
Home Free Tickets issued	398
Total Crisis Contacts about Youth	29,806

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