

# \* \* Midwest Longitudinal Study \* \*

## Of Homeless Adolescents

### Introduction

This report summarizes agency findings from the Midwest Longitudinal Study of Homeless Adolescents (MLSHA), a four-state study of runaway adolescents. This report includes all runaway and homeless young people interviewed between the spring of 2000 and the fall of 2001 (N=455).



### Part I

### Adolescent Characteristics

Of the 455 baseline interviews conducted in the first year of this 3-year study, a total of 55 (12%) were from the Omaha area, 111 (24%) from St. Louis, 60 (13%) from Des Moines, 60 (13%) from Lincoln, 49 (11%) from Wichita, 60 (13%) from Iowa City and Cedar Rapids, and 60 (13%) from Kansas City. Of these 455 respondents, 201 (44%) were male and 254 (56%) were female. They ranged in age from 16 to 19 years old, with an average age of 18.

The majority of the adolescents were White (non-Hispanic) or reported themselves as African-American or Bi-racial (Table 1).

**Table 1 Ethnic Origin of Adolescents (N=455)**

Race/Ethnic Origin	Percent	(N)
White (non-Hispanic)	59.2%	(267)
Black (non-Hispanic)	21.5%	(97)
Bi-racial	11.3%	(51)
Hispanic	4.2%	(19)
Native American	3.1%	(14)
Asian	1%	(3)

Prior to running away, a majority of the adolescents we interviewed had lived in metropolitan areas (61.5%). Approximately 6.6% were from rural communities (less than 2,500 people) or farms (Table 2).

Forty percent of the adolescents reported that they had spent last night in a shelter or a mission (Table 3). Twenty-six percent had spent last night with relatives or friends. Only about 2.4% spent most last night directly on the streets

**Table 2 Adolescent City of Origin (N=455)**

Adolescent City of Origin	Percent	(N)
Big City (100,000 +)	61.5%	(280)
Suburb of a big city	10.8%	(49)
Medium city (50,000 to 100,000)	8.1%	(37)
Town or Small City (10,000 to 50,000)	7.7%	(35)
Small town (2,500 to 10,000)	5.3%	(24)
Very Small Town or farm (less than 2,500)	6.6%	(30)

**Table 3 Location adolescent spent most of week previous to interview (N=455)**

Location	Percent	(N)
Shelter or Mission	40.2%	(183)
Relative's Home	10.5%	(48)
Friend's Home	15.6%	(71)
Foster or Group Home	15.8%	(72)
Abandoned House or Squat	1.3%	(6)
Own Apartment (Paying Rent)	6.2%	(28)
Street (Under bridge, etc.)	2.4%	(11)
Other (car, hospital, detention facility, etc)	7.0%	(32)



## Part II Abuse and Neglect

Physical and sexual abuse by an adult caretaker is often a precipitous event to running away from home. Table 4 indicates adolescent reports of abuse in the household.

Eighteen percent of males and 22% of females were made to go without food or water for a full day and 34.8% percent of males and 48.4% of females report being abandoned for at least 24 hours.

The adolescents in this study report a high incidence of physical abuse. Sixty-eight

percent of male and 73.6% of the female respondents have had an adult caretaker throw something at them in anger, 83.6% of males and 84.6% of females report being pushed or shoved by a caretaker. 72.6% of males and 80.3% of females have been slapped in the face or the head with an open hand, 72.4% of males and 75.6% of females have been hit with some object, and 43.5% of males and 43.3% of females report having been beaten up by an adult caretaker.

Sexual abuse was significantly more prevalent among adolescent girls. A little over one-quarter of the young women reported that an adult caretaker had requested sexual activity and 32.1% reported that an adult caretaker had forced them to engage in sexual activity against their will.

**Table 4: Neglect and Abuse by Adult Caretaker**

Neglect or Abuse	Percent Total (N=454)	Percent Male (N=200)	Percent Female (N=254)
Made you go the day without food or water.	20.3%	18.0%	22.0%
Abandoned you for at least 24 hours	42.4%	34.8%	48.4%*
Threw something at you in anger	71.0%	67.7%	73.6%
Pushed or grabbed you in anger	84.2%	83.6%	84.6%
Slapped you on head or face with an open hand	76.9%	72.6%	80.3%*
Spanked you on the butt with their hand	72.3%	72.1%	72.4%
Hit you with an object	74.2%	72.4%	75.6%
Beat you with fists	43.4%	43.5%	43.3%
Verbally or Physically threatened with a weapon	22.4%	26.4%	19.3%
Wounded you with a gun or knife	7.5%	8.5%	6.7%
Ever asked you to do something sexual	19.5%	9.5%	27.4%**
Ever forced you to do something sexual	22.3%	10.0%	32.1%**

\*\*Significant at the .01 level, \* significant at the .05 level



### Part III

## Reasons for Running Away and Time on Their Own

Using a general coding scheme of the open ended reasons the adolescents gave for leaving home most recently (Table 5), not getting along with family members was the most frequently reported reason (31.4%). Nearly 16% reported they were kicked out of the home, 7.7%

reported conflict over rules or restrictions and 21.5% reported abuse as the main reason for leaving the home.

When the adolescents were asked if they had ever been kicked out of their home by an adult caretaker in charge 63.0% indicated they had. Forty percent reported they had been stopped from going home by an adult caretaker and 60% indicated they could not go home now if they wanted to. On average, adolescents reported leaving home seven times after the first time leaving home.

**Table 5 Adolescent primary reasons for leaving home (N=455)**

Reason for leaving home	Percent
Adolescent did not get along with family	31.4%
Adolescent kicked out of home by caretaker	15.6%
Other reasons (economic distress, mental health, removed, etc.)	13.8%
Adolescent didn't follow rules	7.7%
Physical abuse by family member	21.5%
Family abusing alcohol/drug	4.6%
Left to be with friends	3.5%
Bored/For fun	1.8%



### Part IV

## Life on the Streets

Once on their own, runaway adolescents become acquainted with other street youth. As Table 6 indicates, a majority of the study adolescents have friends who have run away (70.7%), sold drugs (70.7%), or used drugs (87.8%). In addition, many of the adolescent's friends have engaged in deviant subsistence strategies. Seventy-seven percent of the adolescents report having a friend who has shoplifted, 60.9% have a friend who took money or something from someone else, 53.6% have friends that have threatened someone with a weapon, and 42.7% have a friend who has assaulted someone with a weapon.

In addition to affiliating with deviant peers, the adolescents themselves engage in deviant subsistence strategies. There are few legitimate means of self-support for teenagers

who must rely solely on street life for subsistence. Sixty-nine percent of the males and Thirty-two percent of the females broke into a house or business and took money. In addition, 63.8% of the males and 36.2% of the females have dealt drugs to obtain money.

However, not all runaway adolescents engage in deviant subsistence strategies. Some have not been out long enough to run out of money and some still have ties to home or relatives for support. Forty-five percent have borrowed money, while 18.7% received an allowance. Thirty-six percent reported they had a steady job and 53.4% reported earning money through chores or odd jobs.

Association with deviant peers and engaging in risky subsistence strategies place runaways at risk for serious victimization while on their own. As Table 7 indicates, 9.1% of the females and 13.4% of the males have been beaten up once; 21.7% of the females and 22.4% of the males have been beaten more than once. Female respondents were significantly more

likely to report unwanted sexual attention and sexual assault, with twenty-nine percent of the young women reporting at least one sexual assault. Twenty-eight percent of the males and 25% of the females have been robbed at least once. Approximately fifty-six percent of the males and 40% of the females have been threatened with a weapon at least once and 33% of males and 17% of females have been assaulted or wounded with a weapon. Besides overt victimization, basic needs often go unmet. Thirty-four percent of males and 26.4% of

females were forced, on more than one occasion, to go a day without eating.

Once on the streets, youth often encounter gangs and even become gang involved for protection and support. About 58% of the study adolescents reported they were aware of gangs in their area. Thirty-three percent have been threatened by gangs on at least one occasion. Over half (53.0%) have been asked to join a gang and 15.0% reported presently belonging to a gang.

**Table 6 Adolescent affiliations with Deviant Peers (N=455)**

Have any of your close friends ever...	Percent	(N)
Run away	70.7%	(318)
Sold drugs	70.7%	(319)
Used drugs	87.8%	(395)
Been suspended or expelled from school	83.6%	(381)
Dropped out of school	74.5%	(339)
Shoplifted	77.1%	(349)
Broke in and took things from house/store	45.8%	(206)
Took money or something from someone else	60.9%	(271)
Sold sexual favors for food or place to stay	20.1%	(85)
Been arrested	80.7%	(361)
Threatened someone with a weapon	53.6%	(236)
Assaulted someone with a weapon	42.7%	(192)
Severely beaten someone	60.4%	(276)

**Table 7 Victimization on own (N=455)**

Victimization on own	Percent Male		Percent Female	
	Once	Several	Once	Several
Beaten Up	13.4 (27)	22.4 (45)	9.1 (23)	21.7 (55)
Robbed	13.4 (27)	14.9 (30)	9.8 (25)	15.4 (39)
<i>Asked to do something Sexual**</i>	<i>11.0 (22)</i>	<i>10.5 (21)</i>	<i>10.2 (26)</i>	<i>33.5 (85)</i>
<i>Sexually Assaulted **</i>	<i>1.5 (3)</i>	<i>2.0 (4)</i>	<i>15.7 (40)</i>	<i>13.8 (35)</i>
<i>Threatened with Weapon**</i>	<i>11.9 (24)</i>	<i>44.8 (90)</i>	<i>17.7 (45)</i>	<i>22.0 (56)</i>
<i>Assaulted with Weapon **</i>	<i>13.9 (28)</i>	<i>18.9 (38)</i>	<i>7.9 (20)</i>	<i>9.1 (23)</i>

\*\* Statistically significant at .01 level



## Part V

### Adolescent Sexual Behavior

The adolescents in this study have also engaged in early and risky sexual behaviors. Ninety percent have had sexual intercourse at least once. Of these the majority had experienced first sex between 13 to 16 years old

(Table 8). The median age at first intercourse was 14 years old. Sixty-four percent of those sexually active had two or more different sex partners in the year prior to their interview.

Of those who reported engaging in intercourse during the past 12 months 62% reported using condoms. Of these condom users, 65.3% reported always using condoms, 13.7% reported using condoms often, 11.8% used them

about half the time, and 9.2% seldom used condoms.

**Table 8 Age at first intercourse (N=410)**

Became sexually active at...	Percent	(N)
10 and under	4.9%	(27)
11 to 12	12.0%	(49)
13 to 14	40.2%	(165)
15 to 16	33.7%	(138)
17 to 19	7.6%	(31)

Twenty percent reported that they have had a sexually transmitted disease (STD). Forty-five percent of youth in the study indicate they were worried about getting AIDS. Table 9 indicates concern for HIV infection. Of those who reported being worried about getting AIDS 20.7% of the young women said they were “a little worried” about getting AIDS. Approximately a quarter of the males and almost a third of the females said they were “somewhat worried.” Sixty-four percent of the males and 51.4% of the females were very concerned about the possibility of contracting the disease.

**Table 9 Adolescent worry about getting AIDS (N=205)**

Degree of worry	Male	Female
Very	63.8% (60)	51.4% (57)
Somewhat	25.5% (24)	27.9% (31)
A little	10.6% (10)	20.7% (23)

Forty-six percent of the young women we interviewed have been pregnant at least once and 31% of the young men report they have impregnated someone. Nearly half of the women who have ever been pregnant have been pregnant two or more times (Table 10). Only eleven of the young men in the sample report that they have gotten someone pregnant more than once.

**Table 10 Number of Pregnancies**

Number of Pregnancies	Male (N=53)	Female (N=107)
1	79.2% (42)	55.1% (59)
2	17.0% (9)	31.8% (34)
3 or more	3.8% (2)	13.1% (14)

Forty-two percent of the young women report miscarriage as the outcome of their first pregnancy, and 10% report their pregnancy ended with an abortion. Approximately 47% report either carrying the child to term or planning on doing so if still pregnant. Approximately 18.7% report keeping the baby themselves; 4.7% report that they both kept the baby, and 6.5% indicate they gave the baby up for adoption (Table 11). Thirty-three percent of the young men reported miscarriages and 19.6% report that the woman they impregnated had an abortion. 19.6% more report the mother had kept the baby, 5.9% indicate they both had kept the baby, and the remaining 3.9% report that the outcome of the pregnancy has not yet been determined.

**Table 11 Pregnancy outcomes**

Pregnancy outcome	Percent male (N=51)	Percent female (N=107)
Miscarriage	33.3% (17)	42.1% (45)
Abortion	19.6% (10)	10.3% (11)
Mother kept baby	19.6% (10)	18.7% (20)
Father kept baby		1.9% (2)
Both kept baby	5.9% (3)	4.7% (5)
Family member kept baby		3.8% (4)
Still pregnant	17.7% (9)	11.2% (11)
Given up for Adoption		6.5% (7)



## Part VI Adolescent Substance Abuse

As Table 12 indicates, the majority of runaways have used beer (69.6%), hard liquor

(66.3%), and marijuana (67.8%). The numbers decrease dramatically for hard drugs. Twenty percent have used crank or other amphetamines, 15.8% have used cocaine, 22.6% have used hallucinogens, and 9.5% of the respondents have admitted to IV drug use.

**Table 12 Adolescent Drug Use (N=451)**

Adolescent reports ever using	Percent	(N)
Beer	69.6%	(314)
Hard liquor	66.3%	(299)
Marijuana	67.6%	(305)
Crank/other amphetamine	20.5%	(92)
Cocaine	15.8%	(71)
Opiates	9.1%	(41)
Hallucinogens	22.6%	(102)
Barbiturates	9.3%	(42)
Inhalants	6.2%	(28)
Any IV drug use	9.5%	(43)



## Part VII Help Seeking Behaviors

While in the home and on the street adolescents had frequent interactions with professionals providing services to youth in high-risk situations. Some interactions are mandatory (i.e. probation officer), while others are voluntary. Table 13 reports those professionals the adolescents talked with at least once in their lifetime. Sixty-eight percent of adolescents report they have talked with some kind of welfare worker. Eighty-two percent talked with a school counselor at least once and 41.3% talked with a probation officer. Seventy

percent talked to a mental health counselor and 38.3% a substance abuse counselor. Fifty-nine percent report they sought help from agencies that help runaways, and 15.0% called a national or local runaway hotline.

**Table 13 Sources of help utilized by adolescents (N=446)**

Sources of help utilized	%	(N)
Welfare worker	67.7%	(308)
School counselor	82.2%	(374)
Probation officer	41.3%	(184)
Mental health counselor	69.2%	(315)
Substance abuse counselor	38.3%	(171)
Religious organization	29.6%	(132)
Agency that helps runaways	58.7%	(261)
National or local runaway hotline	15.0%	(67)



## Part VIII

### Mental Health and Diagnostic Disorders

Thoughts of suicide were frequent among these youth as displayed in Table 14. Approximately fifty-six percent of the adolescents reported thinking about killing themselves all of the time or sometime in their life. Of those ever reporting suicidal thoughts, 5.1% report having thoughts of suicide all of the time, and 50.8% report having thoughts of suicide some of the time in the twelve months prior to their interview.

**Table 14: Thoughts of suicide in lifetime (N=455)**

	Percent	(N)
All of the time	5.9%	(27)
Some of the time	49.9%	(227)
None of the time	44.2%	(201)

A large number of adolescents reported trying commit suicide at some point in their lives (36.5%, N=168). Of these adolescents, roughly seventy percent made multiple suicide attempts (Table 15). In the twelve months prior to their interview, roughly forty percent of these youths have tried to commit suicide.

**Table 15: Number of suicide attempts in lifetime (N=168)**

	Percent	(N)
Once	29.2%	(49)
2 to 5	44.0%	(74)
6 to 10	12.0%	(20)
11 or more	14.8%	(25)

The MLSHA includes measures that allow for diagnostic assessment of conduct disorder, major depression, posttraumatic stress disorder, and substance abuse and dependence.

On all measures the incidence of these disorders among the study population was significantly higher than incidence amongst the general population.

Conduct disorder relates to a repetitive and persistent pattern of behavior in which the basic rights of others or major age-appropriate societal norms or rules are violated. Criteria for

conduct disorder include aggression to people or animals, destruction of property, deceitfulness or theft and serious violations of rules. At the time of their baseline interview 54% of males and 33.7% of females met the diagnostic criteria for current conduct disorder.

A Major Depressive Episode is defined by a period of at least 2 weeks during which there is either depressed mood or the loss of interest or pleasure in nearly all activities. In the current study, 34.2% of males and 40.5% of females have ever met the diagnostic criteria for a major depressive episode. In the year prior to their interview 22.5% of males and 27.3% of females met the criteria.

The essential feature of Posttraumatic Stress Disorder is the development of characteristic symptoms following exposure to an extreme traumatic stressor. To meet criteria for PTSD the event must have evoked a response of extreme fear, helplessness or horror, must include persistent reexperiencing of the traumatic event, persistent avoidance of stimuli associated with the trauma and numbing of general responsiveness, persistent symptoms of increased arousal, and the symptoms must be present for 1 month or more and must cause significant distress or impairment. In the current study, 23.5% of males and 45% of females met the diagnostic criteria for ever having posttraumatic stress disorder.

Substance Abuse is defined as a maladaptive pattern of substance use leading to clinically significant impairment or distress, as manifested by recurrent substance use resulting in failure to fulfill major role obligations, recurrent substance use in situations which it is physically hazardous, recurrent substance use related to legal problems, or continued substance use despite having persistent or recurrent social or interpersonal problems caused or exacerbated by the effects of the substance, occurring within a 12-month period. In the current study, 48.7% of males and 40.1% of females met the criteria for ever having substance abuse disorder.

Twenty-nine percent of males and 23% of females met the criteria for substance abuse disorder in the 6 months prior to their interview.

Substance dependence disorder is related to the physical dependence related to substance use. Thirty-two percent of males and 29% of females met the criteria for ever having substance dependence disorder. Eighteen percent of males and 14.5% of females met the criteria for having substance dependence disorder in the 6 months prior to their interview.

**Table 16: Diagnostic measures (N=429)**

	Percent Male	(N)	Percent Female	(N)
Conduct Disorder**	54.0%	(102)	33.7%	(82)
Major Depression (ever)	34.2%	(64)	40.5%	(98)
Major Depression (last 12 months)	22.5%	(42)	27.3%	(66)
PTSD (ever)**	23.5%	(44)	45.0%	(109)
Substance abuse (ever)*	48.7%	(91)	40.1%	(97)
Substance abuse (last 6 months)	28.9%	(54)	22.7%	(55)
Substance dependence (ever)	31.6%	(59)	28.9%	(70)
Substance dependence (last 6 months)	17.6%	(33)	14.5%	(35)

\*\* Statistically significant at .01 level

\* Statistically significant at .05 level