TODAY'S RUNAWAYS

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[Assignment: In Maya Angelou's autobiography, *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*, she writes about a time in her life when she was a street kid. It was a very important, largely positive experience. What is the situation of kids in the street today, and how is the situation similar or different than what Angelou describes?]

(1)   In Maya Angelou's *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*, running away means freedom. Our views of running away have changed drastically, making the book appear somewhat dated. If to Maya Angelou running away seems like taking a little vacation, then to us it might well be taking a horrible permanent vacation. That she would be homeless crosses Angelou's mind only briefly. She spends days admiring the streets, arcades, and library. When she comes up with a place to spend the night, a relatively clean car with no wheels, her biggest fear is that rats might sneak in through the floorboards and eat off her nose. If only the runaways of today had problems like this to deal with.

(2)   More than one million runaways roam the street of America's major cities. They come from every socio-economic, ethnic, and racial group. Rich, poor, black, white--the streets don't discriminate. "There are children everywhere. Block after block . . . female prostitutes [walk the streets]. Some are as young as 12 years old, dressed in G-strings, stiletto heels and not much else. They're bizarre caricatures of little girls playing dress-up as they work to turn 8 to 10 tricks a night" (Hersch 31).

(3)   Runaways are kids who are away from home overnight without the permission of their parents or guardian. The biggest question people have about runaway youth is *why*? There really isn't one specific answer. Kids now, as well as in the past, run away for a variety of reasons. Some are kicked out because the family's finances are inadequate or because the parents just can't handle the adolescent. Runaways are drawn to the bright lights of big cities, are searching for work, or just want to get away from home. Young people run away because they feel alone and isolated. They desperately want to avoid the tension in the home. Many leave their families because they feel they are responsible for the problems in the home. They think that by running away the situation will somehow improve. Sometimes, the home turns out to be a more dangerous place than the streets for runaways. A sample study done on kids who go to shelters showed that "[approximately] 36 percent run away from physical and sexual abuse; 44 percent from other severe long-term crises; and 20 percent from short-term crises such as divorce, sickness, death and school problems" (Hersch 31).

(4)   Usually, the decision to run away is spur-of-the-moment. Many return home within a week. This supports the idea that teens don't plan out their exit. They leave when they can't handle a particular situation. Many kids experience the urge to run away when parents start setting limits and denying wishes. Most often these children run away to a neighbor or relative for a few hours or a day. They're usually back by

dinner time. According to Pete Axthelm, studies show that nearly 80 percent of the teens who run away for the first time are within 300 miles of home.

(5)   It's false to assume that teens run away to seek adventure or to "find themselves." The children of the '60s ran away to find excitement. Kids today run away from a place and life in which they were abused, rejected, or unhappy. The best reasons for running away come from the runaways themselves.   A 16-year-old boy, James, said, "My father totally ignored me after he got married again. He acted like I was a burden   • to him, like he just didn't want me around. One day we had an argument and he told me I could just leave, so I did" (Hughes 64).   Maria, a runaway since eighth grade said, "My parents say I'm crazy because if I'd stayed home I'd probably have my own car by now . . . But what's a car worth if your parents don't think you're worth anything?" (Axthelm   65)

(6)   Whatever abuse may have driven them from home, these "throwaways" are often perceived as "bad kids." Jed Emerson of San Francisco's Larkin Street Youth Center said that 68 percent of the calls the center makes to parents of the child end up with this response, "You keep the kid" (Axthelm 64). Most of these teens just act like "hard" kids. "[They pose] as predators so they will appear less like prey" (Axthelm 64). These kids have so many problems. They are usually highly stressed and exhausted. They have to cope with the dangers in the streets and fight severe emotional problems at the same time. A 1983 study by David Shaffer and Carol L.M. Caron of the New York State Psychiatric Institute on youths in shelters showed that "30 percent were categorized as depressed, 18 percent as antisocial and 41 percent as both depressed and antisocial.   Furthermore, 25 percent had attempted suicide, and an additional 25 percent had actively contemplated suicide" (Hersch 32). They have a dark and desperate future yet they continue to think of themselves as invincible.   And like most kids, they don't think beyond tomorrow.

(7)   Runaways will do anything to survive. These kids are the prey of pimps, drug dealers, and other people who will use them for their own gain. Pimps wait at bus stations, watching for young, vulnerable runaways, ready to offer them the world. Because of this, "one out of three kids is lured in prostitution within 48 hours of leaving home" (Axthelm 66). For male runaways, hustling proves to be quite lucrative. Boys can make $75 to $200 a night. Businesses won't hire a 15 year-old boy, so the boys talk themselves into believing that hustling isn't that bad. "Twenty-five bucks for 10 minutes sounds like a lot of money to kids" (Hersch 32). Matt, a male prostitute, created a different personality for himself while he was turning tricks; it helped him cope with what he was doing. As Matt said, "With Johns, my name is Michael . . . By being a whole different person, I can keep from hating tricks so much" (Axthelm 66-67).

(8)   The good news is that outreach and shelter workers are worried about the futures of runaway teens. They are working to implement a program to educate these kids about AIDS and to teach them how to protect themselves. Shelters and agencies are willing to try anything that might work to save these kids.   Paul Shane, a writer for the American

Orthopsychiatric Association thinks "supportive developmental, educational, and training programs should be evolved to provide these youth with skills for employment and independent living" (Shane 213). Some shelters have 24-hour-walk-in access and a wide range of counselling services. Shelters are available around the clock for youths who need to get away from abusive families. These shelters help them find favorable alternative arrangements. The goal of the shelters is to reunite the young people with their families. "In 1987, federally funded centers reported that 53% of the youth seen in these programs returned home" (Hersch 66).

(9)   Maya Angelou was lucky; she got out. Others aren't so lucky. While living on the streets Maya learned how to drive, curse, and dance. Today, runaways learn how to sell their bodies to survive and how to do enough drugs to get rid of the guilty feelings for selling themselves. The sad truth is that although they're struggling to survive on the streets, they would have been struggling to survive at home too. It's also sad to acknowledge that people tend to dismiss this problem of runaway youth, saying that it can't happen here. But given the complications of growing up today, the complications Maya didn't have to deal with back then, it can happen to anyone anywhere.

Works Cited

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