



National Trends on Youth in Crisis in the United States

An analysis of trends in crisis
connections to the National
Runaway Safeline over the
past decade
(2007-2017)



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Table of Contents

Executive Summary	3
Detailed Research Methodology	5
Status of Youth in Crisis	7
Relationship to Youth in Crisis	11
Gender of Youth in Crisis.....	13
Age of Youth in Crisis	15
Race and Ethnicity of Youth in Crisis	17
Time on the Street while in Crisis.....	21
Whereabouts of Youth in Crisis.....	23
Means of Survival for Youth in Crisis.....	25
Issues Raised by Youth in Crisis.....	27

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Executive Summary

THE NATIONAL RUNAWAY SAFELINE (NRS) serves as the ‘go to’ resource for America’s runaway, homeless, and at-risk youth and their families, providing solution-focused crisis intervention and support across the country. Each year, NRS makes more than 100,000 connections to help and hope through our hotline, online, and offline services in our role as the national communications system for runaway, homeless, and at-risk youth. NRS operates the national communication system for runaway and homeless youth on behalf of the Family & Youth Services Bureau (FYSB).

This report provides detailed information about the qualities and characteristics of youth in crisis who reached out to NRS in 2017 as well as how those qualities and characteristics have shifted over time—with short-term (2 years), medium-term (5 years), and long-term (10 years) trend horizons¹. These two perspectives – the current picture of individuals in crisis and their changes over time– provide a nuanced understanding of the youth that NRS assists. The majority of this report addresses the youth served via NRS, but in some cases does include data related to families and adults as well as friends accessing NRS services on behalf of a youth.

After many years of rapid growth in connections from youth in crisis before a runaway episode, **NRS has noticed a shift toward more crisis connections initiated by youth during a runaway episode over the past two years (2016-2017)**. The number of crisis connections from youth asked to leave home and homeless youth in particular has increased significantly (46% and 36% increases, respectively), while connections from youth in crisis (14% increase) have been growing at slower rates. This shift toward connections from youth who have left

¹ A detailed research methodology section can be found in the section following the Executive Summary.

home aligns with similar jumps in whereabouts of crisis connections from youth on the street (31% increase) and in shelters (29%) over the past two years.

NRS has continued to see **more crisis connections about abuse and neglect, a trend that NRS has highlighted in a number of past reports as well.** Across all categories of abuse and neglect, there have been increases of 43% over the past two years, 65% over the past five years, and 50% over the last ten years. Looking at specific categories of abuse and neglect, there were increases across all four sub-categories over the past two years; there has been a 54% increase in neglect, a 48% rise in emotional or verbal abuse, a 33% increase in physical abuse, and a 12% rise in sexual abuse.

NRS is now sharing information on the race and ethnicity of youth in crisis (after beginning to collect these data in 2015). NRS compared the race and ethnicity of youth in crisis who reached out to NRS with that of national data on youth (using the Current Population Study), and NRS found that the youth served are predominantly aligned in terms of race and ethnicity with the population as a whole. There are, however, some small distinctions worth noting; **Black or African Americans and multi-racial youth are somewhat more likely to be connecting to NRS than expected** given their proportion in the general youth population. Whereas, **Caucasians, Hispanics, and Asians are slightly underrepresented among the youth in crisis connecting with NRS** as compared to their actual population.

These research findings help ensure that NRS' understanding of youth in crisis is accurate and up to date, guiding the organization's priorities and programs toward the most effective strategies, resources and services to keep youth safe and off the streets. NRS and FYSB also hope that by sharing this report, the insights and trends will be helpful to other social service agencies, media, and members of the public who are advocating for, and serving, runaway, homeless and at-risk youth.

Detailed Research Methodology

The National Runaway Safeline (NRS) provided records of crisis connections to 1-800-RUNAWAY and 1800RUNAWAY.org for the last 10 years, 2007-2017, offering a 10-year trend horizon for analysis.

The individual numbers calculated in this report are those where NRS specifically provided crisis intervention services. In 2017, these crisis intervention services were mostly provided via the hotline (66%), but were also provided by digital services (33%) that included email, chat and on-line forum connections. In 2017, NRS handled 59,134 hotline crisis calls and 13,605 crisis emails, chat connections or live forum connections for a total of 72,739 crisis connections. In this report, references to the hotline and digital crisis connections will be referred to as “crisis connections”.

Incoming connections can come from runaway, homeless and at-risk youth, their friends, family members, teachers, social service organizations, law enforcement officials, or any other individuals who care about helping today’s youth. Outbound connections are made by NRS on behalf of an individual in crisis to a local shelter, Greyhound Lines, Inc. regarding NRS’ Home Free program, or other local resources.

Absolute and percentage change across years were calculated for each trend period. These data were analyzed using crosstab statistical analysis with z-tests and chi-squares to determine statistical significance using a confidence interval of 95% or above.

All data are significant at the 95% level or above unless the category has a symbol next to the variable name. An “*” signifies that the change is not significant for the two-year trend, a “~” signifies that the change is not significant for the five-year trend, and a “+” signifies that the change is not significant for the 10-year period. The sample size of these categories varies due to the fact that not all

categories are pertinent to providing crisis intervention and therefore, not all data will be collected through every crisis connection.

NRS uses a simplified version of the definition of runaway youth and youth asked to leave home (throwaway) developed by the Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention (OJJDP). NRS defines a runaway as a youth up to age 18 who left home without permission of a parent or guardian. NRS defines a youth asked to leave home as any youth who was forced to leave home by a parent or guardian. Please see the following section on Status of Youth in Crisis for more categories of youth in crisis tracked by NRS.

The definition of runaway used by NRS is a slightly simplified version of this definition from the OJJDP¹ of a runaway episode as one that meets any one of the following criteria:

- A child leaves home without permission and stays away overnight.
- A child 14 years old or younger (or older and mentally incompetent) who is away from home chooses not to come home when expected to and stays away overnight.
- A child 15 years old or older who is away from home chooses not to come home and stays away two nights.

The OJJDP defines a throwaway episode (referred to as youth asked to leave home throughout this report and in all subsequent communications) as one that meets either of the following criteria:

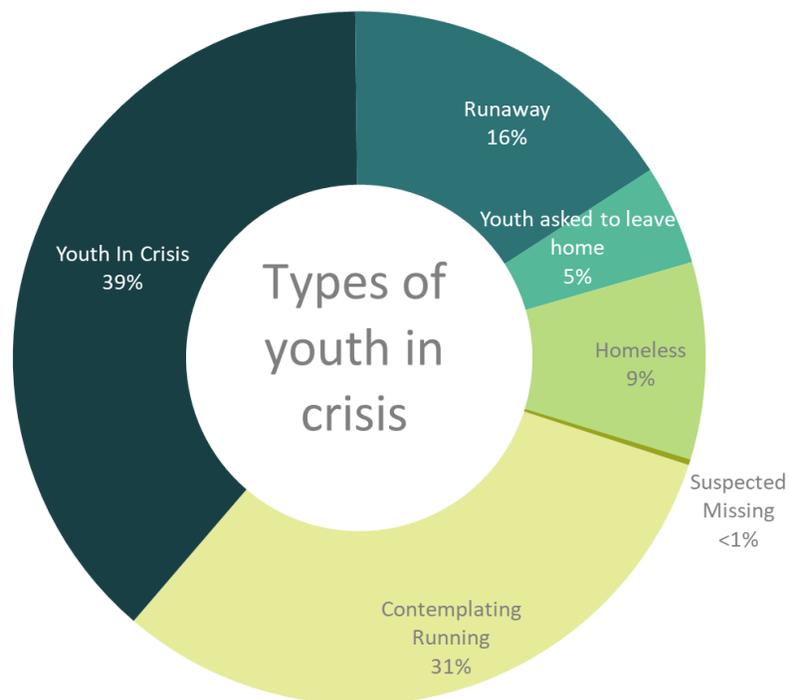
- A child is asked or told to leave home by a parent or other household adult, no adequate alternative care is arranged for the child by a household adult, and the child is out of the household overnight.
- A child who is away from home is prevented from returning home by a parent or other household adult, no adequate alternative care is arranged for the child by a household adult, and the child is out of the household overnight.

¹ Second National Incidence Studies of Missing, Abducted, Runaway, and throwaway Children (NISMAART-2), Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention, Office of Justice Programs, U.S. Department of Justice, 2002; <http://ojjdp.ncjrs.org>.

Status of Youth in Crisis

One core dimension of youth served by the National Runaway Safeline (NRS) is their current crisis situation. The table at the bottom of this section provides a detailed overview of how NRS defines each of these categories. In 2017, the two largest groups of youth in crisis served by NRS were youth facing an issue or problem other than running away from home and youth contemplating running away from home, for a combined 70% of connections. This indicates that **many youth are reaching out for help earlier in the stages of a potential runaway episode**, and that support may help youth address issues without resorting to leaving home. **NRS also provided a support system for a sizeable number of youth who are runaways, have been asked to leave home, or are homeless (a combined 30% of youth).**

Chart 1: Types of youth connecting to NRS in 2017 (n=24,811)



Over the past two years, NRS has seen significant increases in connections from youth in crisis across almost all categories—with the exception of the very small category of suspected missing. **Over the past two years, there was a sizeable increase of 45% in connections from youth in crisis, which was also the largest single category of youth in crisis in 2017.** While they made up a minority of total youth in crisis in 2017, there have also been increases in connections from youth who were asked to leave home, and those who are homeless (46% and 35% increases, respectively) over the past two years. **Growth in connections from the relatively large group of youth contemplating running away has been on an upward trend** with an increase of 14% over the past two years and 73% over the past five years.

Chart 2: Trends in types of youth connecting to NRS (n=73,159 combined for 2017, 2015, 2012, and 2007)



NRS tracks trends in the general situation of youth in crisis who reach out, categorizing them into one of six groups: youth contemplating running away, youth in crisis, runaway youth, youth asked to leave home, homeless youth, or youth who are suspected missing. The table below describes how NRS distinguishes between these six types of youth in crisis (see table 1).

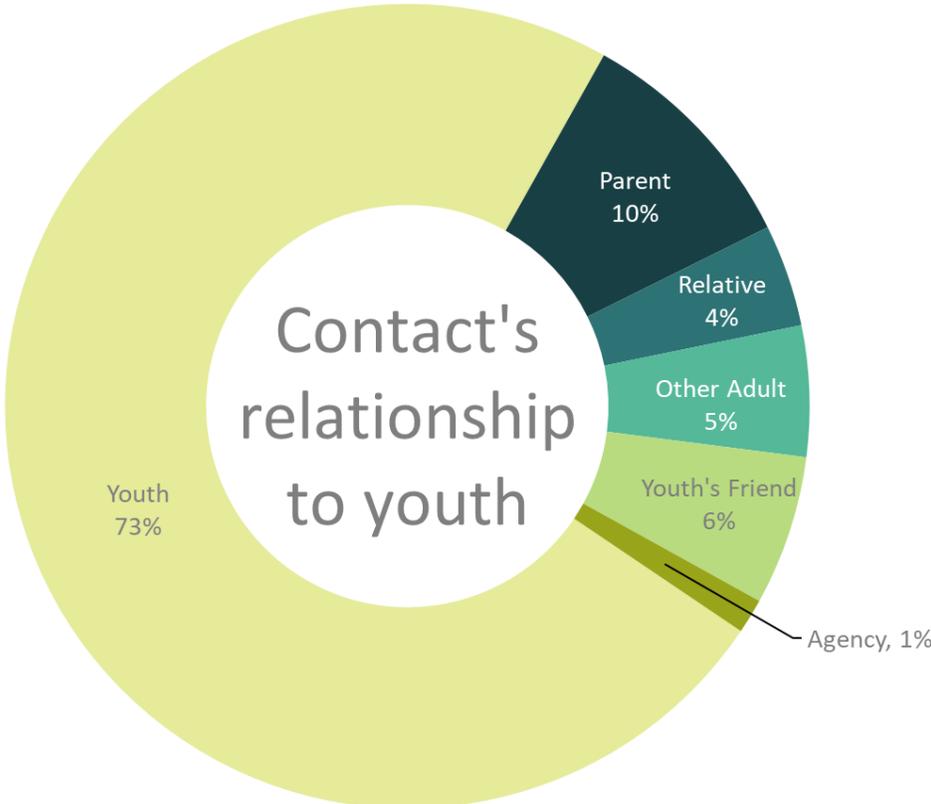
Table 1: Description of Status for Youth in Crisis

Category of youth	Description of Status
Contemplating running away	Youth who mention thinking about running away from home during a crisis connection
Youth in crisis	Youth who were in a serious situation that is not necessarily related to running away or being away from home
Runaway	Youth up to age 18 who left home without permission
Youth asked to leave home	Youth who were forced to leave their home by their parent or guardian
Homeless	Youth who are homeless because their family is also homeless and youth who are ages 18-21 and are on the street
Suspected missing	Youth’s location is unknown because they have not communicated it to their parent or guardian; the parent or guardian suspects that they are missing

Relationship to Youth in Crisis

While all other parts of this report focus on the youth as the focus of the connection to NRS, in this section of the report information is provided about who is reaching out to NRS for assistance, as there are some cases in which another youth or an adult will reach out on behalf of a youth in crisis. In 2017, the vast majority of people who reached out to the National Runaway Safeline (NRS) were youth doing so on their own behalf (73%). Parents (10%) and other relatives (4%) also connected with NRS about youth in crisis. Others who sought support on behalf of a youth in crisis included friends of youth (6%), other adults (5%), and agencies (1%).

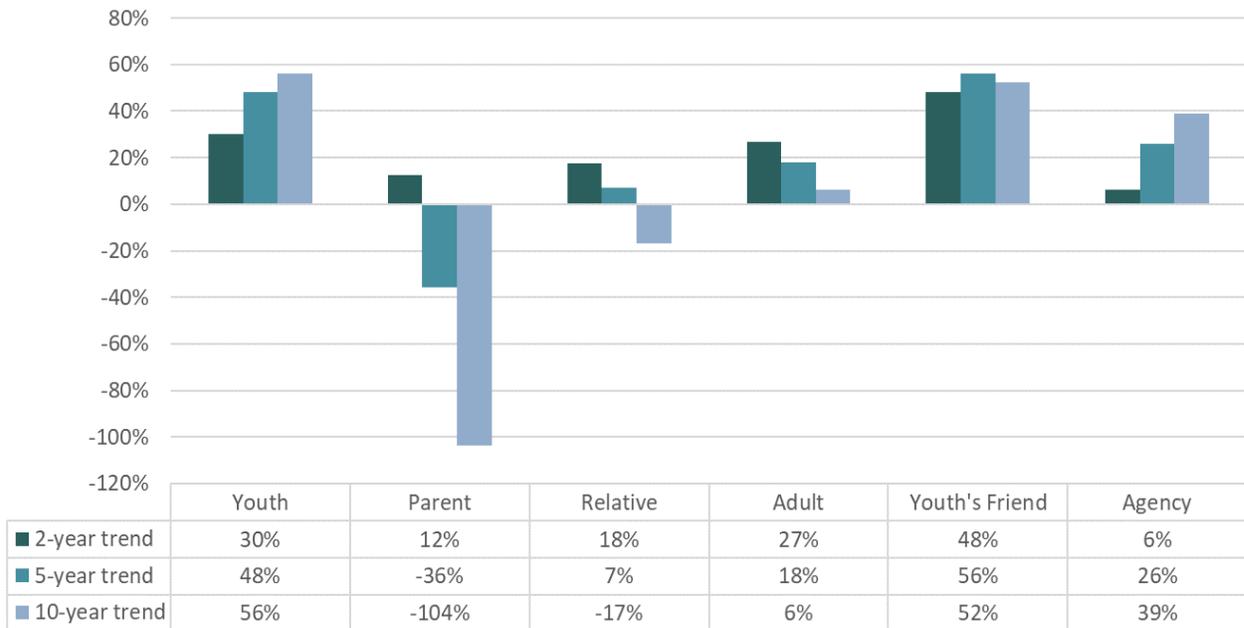
Chart 3: Contact's relationship to youth in crisis for NRS in 2017 (n=25,438)



The number of **youth reaching out on their own behalf continued a steady increase over the past two years (30% increase), five years (48%), and ten years (56%)**. While friends of youth made up a small proportion of youth in crisis connecting to NRS in 2017, that type of connection has increased by 48% over the past two years.

And while the number of connections from the parents of youth is down dramatically over the past ten years (-104%) and five years (-36%), connections from parents increased slightly over the past two years (12%).

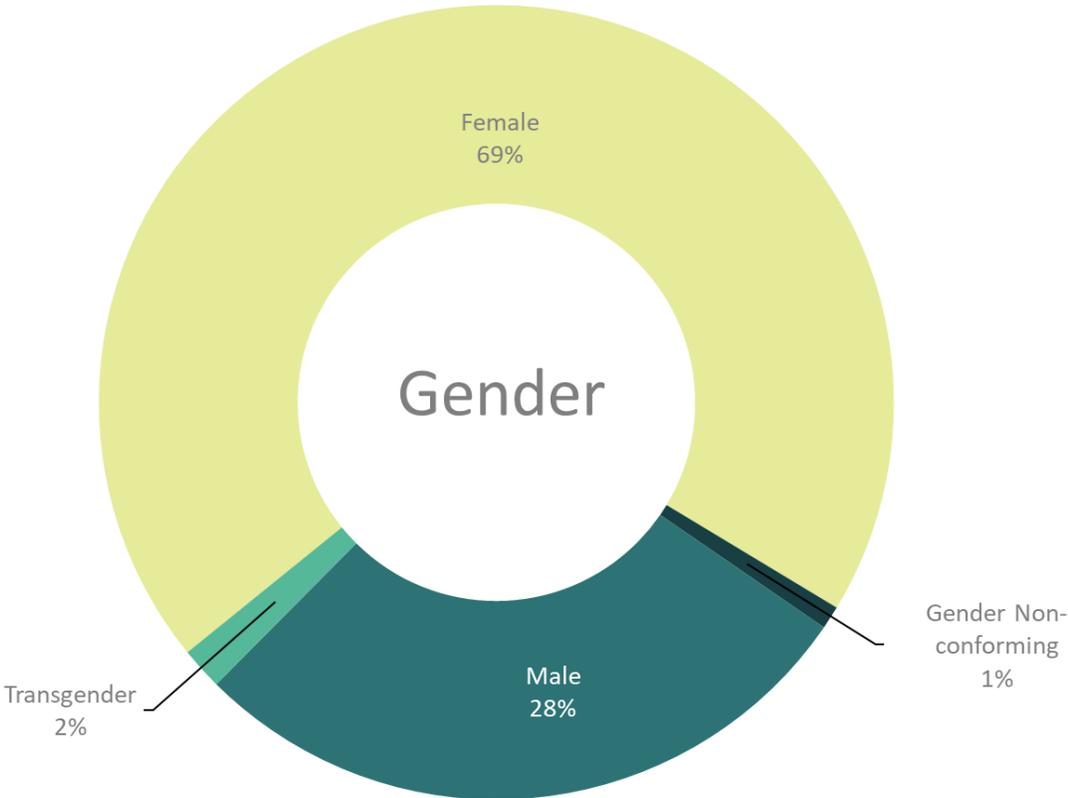
Chart 4: Trends in contact's relationship to youth in crisis for NRS (n=76,396 combined for 2017, 2015, 2012, and 2007)



Gender of Youth in Crisis

As NRS has seen in past years, **females are still more likely to reach out to the National Runaway Safeline (NRS) for assistance than males** at 69% compared to 28% in 2017. Youth who are transgender or gender non-conforming also reached out to NRS for assistance, but they made up a relatively small proportion of youth in crisis.

Chart 5: Gender of youth in crisis for NRS in 2017 (n=18,988)

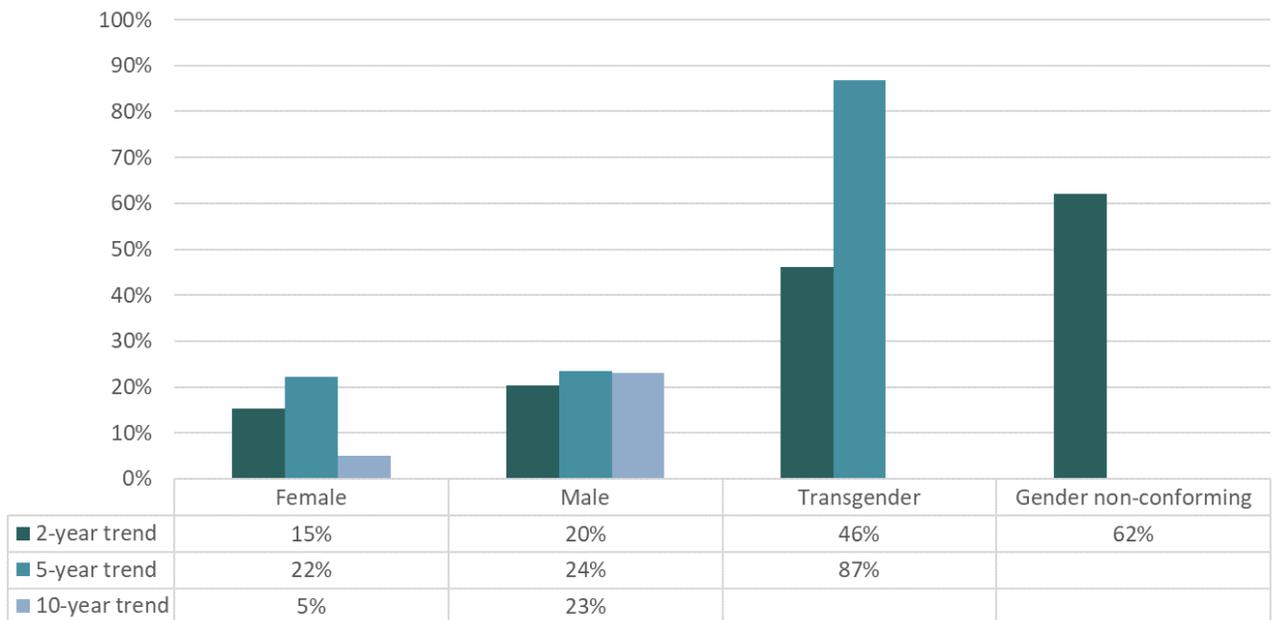


While connections are up across all gender categories over the past two years, connections from males (20% gain) increased more than connections from females (15% gain). This indicates that **the gap in connections by gender is**

narrowing for males and females, a trend that is also evident in the fact that in 2015, females made up 72% of youth in crisis compared to 69% in 2017.

The number of **connections from transgender youth has almost doubled in the past two years (46% gain) while the number from gender non-conforming youth has more than doubled (62% gain)**. These categories were introduced within the past ten years, so not all trend time horizons are yet available.

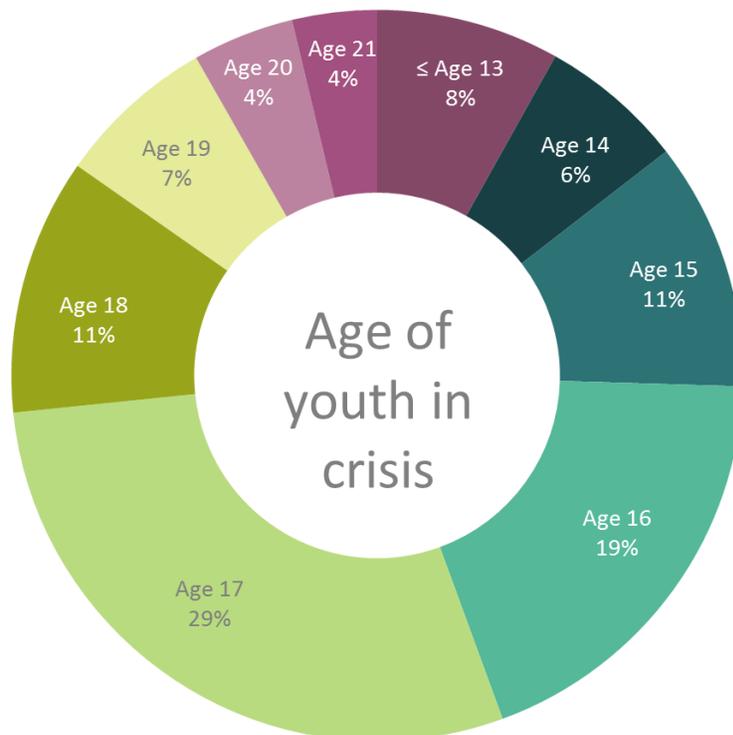
Chart 6: Trends in gender of youth in crisis for NRS (n=65,612 combined for 2017, 2015, 2012, and 2007)



Age of Youth in Crisis

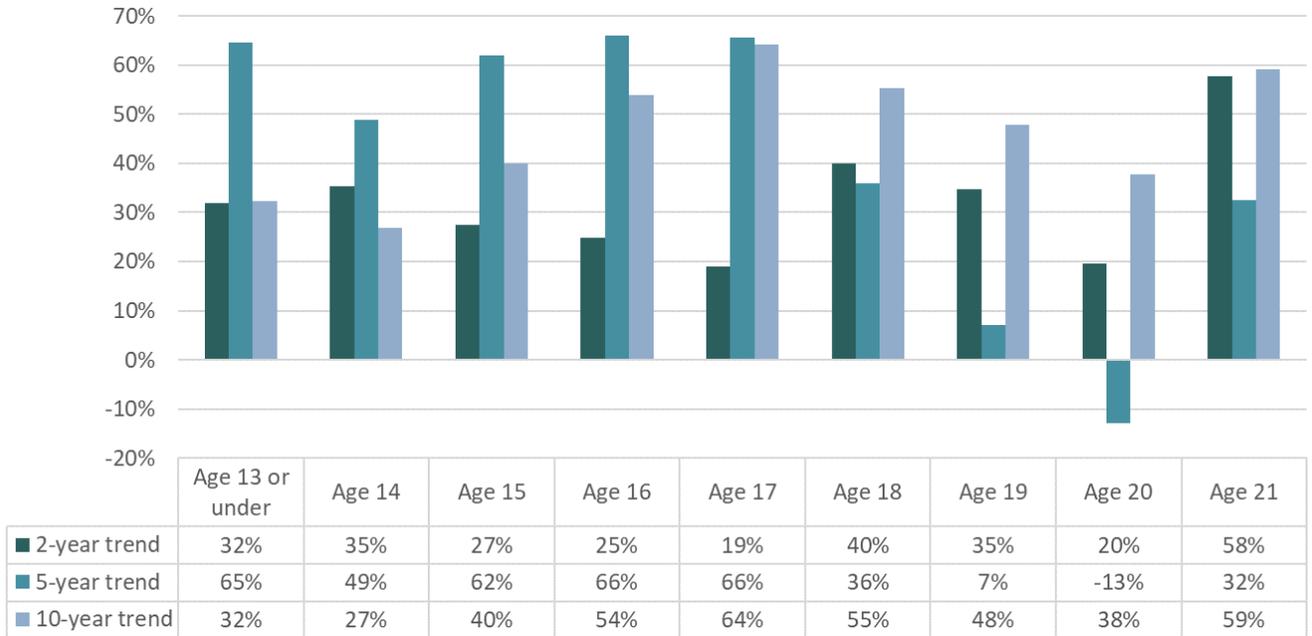
The most common age of a youth in crisis who connected to the National Runaway Safeline (NRS) in 2017 was 17 (29%). In fact, **over half of youth in crisis were between ages 15-17 in 2017 (59%), and that proportion jumps to 70% if NRS also includes the 11% of youth who were 18 years old.**

Chart 7: Age of youth in crisis for NRS in 2017 (n=18,122)



Over the **past two years, the largest increases in connections by age have come from older youth**—ages 21 (58% gain), 18 (40% gain), and 19 (35% gain). Looking at a slightly longer time horizon, NRS sees a different pattern with large increases over the past five years in crisis connections from younger youth—ages 13 or under (65% gain), age 14 (49% gain), age 15 (62% gain), and ages 16 and 17 (both a 66% gain).

Chart 8: Trends in age of youth in crisis for NRS (n=48,740 combined for 2017, 2015, 2012, and 2007)



Race and Ethnicity of Youth in Crisis

The National Runaway Safeline (NRS) began collecting data on the race and ethnicity of youth in crisis relatively recently in 2015, and this is the first time that these data have been shared through the trend report. In 2017, **Caucasians made up the largest single group of youth in crisis reaching out to NRS (47%), followed by Black or African Americans (23%), Hispanics or Latinos (18%),** multi-racial youth (7%), Asians (3%), Native Hawaiian or other Pacific Islanders (1%), and American Indian or Alaska Natives (1%).

When compared to the Current Population Survey (CPS)² measures of race/ethnicity of youth across the country, Caucasians are slightly underrepresented among youth in crisis who connected to NRS (47% NRS vs. 54% CPS) as are Hispanic or Latinos (18% NRS vs. 23% CPS), and Asians (3% NRS vs. 5% CPS). In contrast, **Black or African Americans make up a larger proportion of youth in crisis connecting to NRS (23%) than their proportion in the general youth population (14%).** Multiracial youth are also more likely to connect with NRS than we would expect given their proportion of the population (7% NRS vs. 3% CPS).

² Current Population Survey: Projected Population by Single Year of Age, Sex, Race, and Hispanic Origin for the United States: 2014 to 2060.

Chart 9: Comparison of NRS ethnicity data and the national data from the Current Population Survey (n= 14,827 for NRS in 2017)

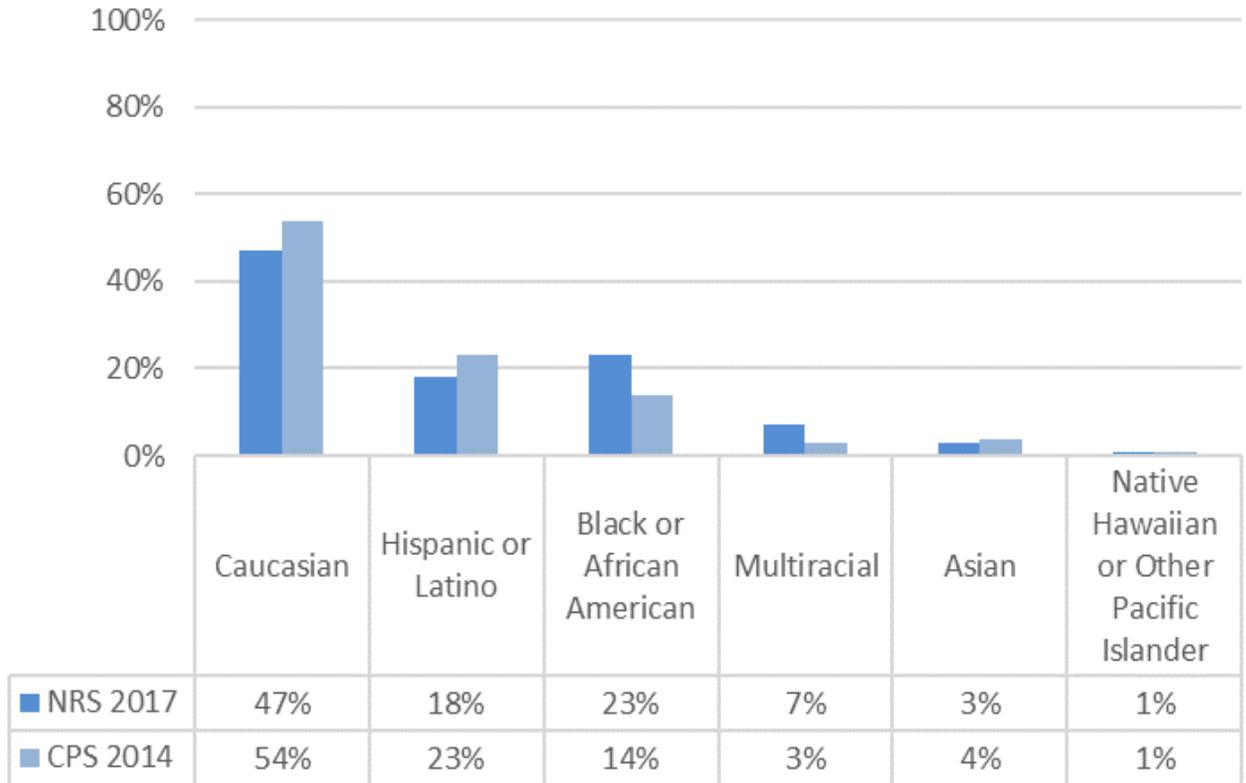
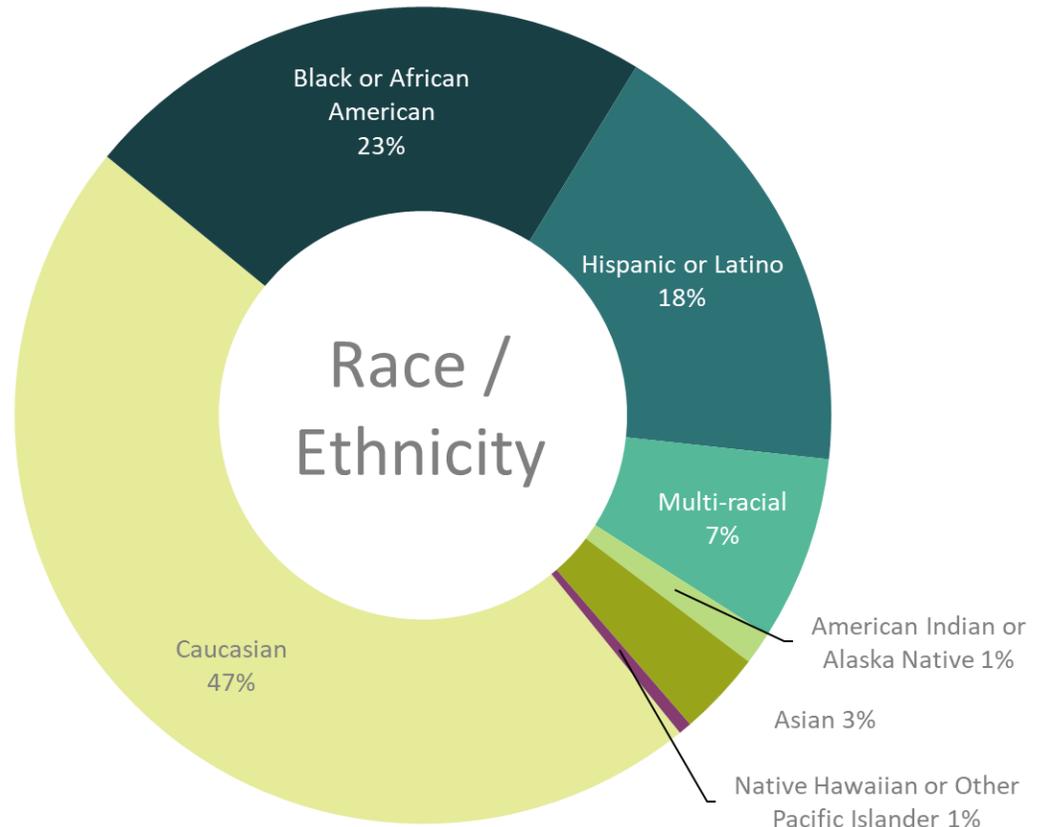
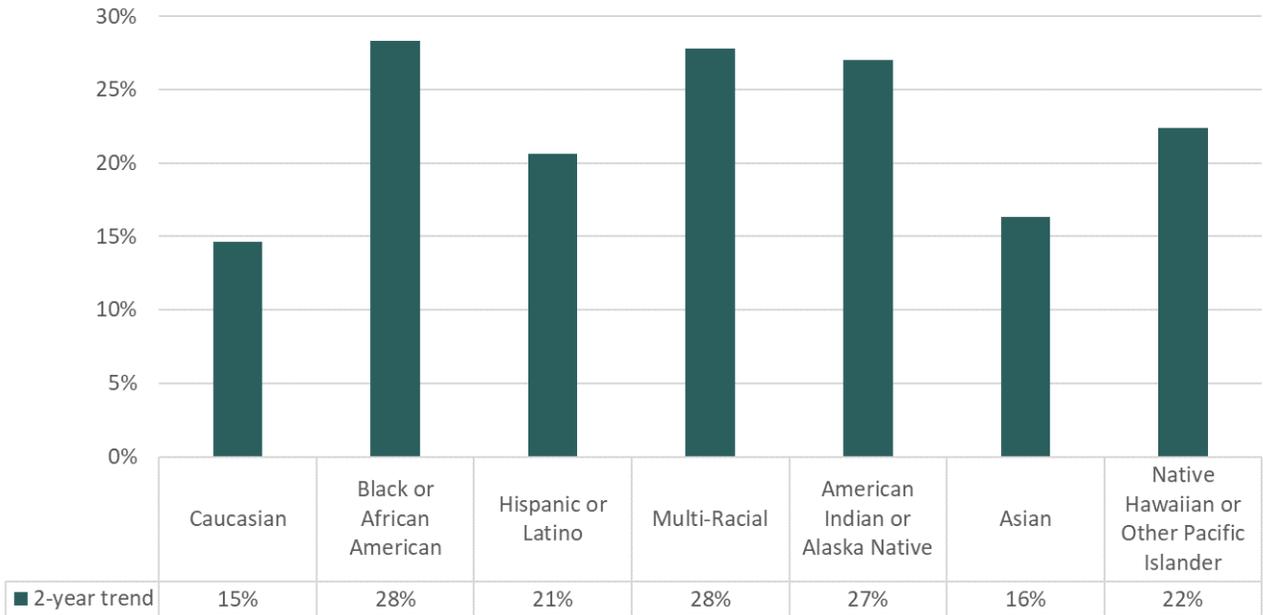


Chart 10: Race/ethnicity of youth in crisis for NRS in 2017 (n=14,827)



Because data on race and ethnicity has only been collected since 2015, the two-year trend is the first comparison that can be made. While crisis connections have increased from all races/ethnicities in that time, the increase has been greatest for Black or African Americans (28%), Multi-racial youth (28%), and American Indian or Alaska Natives (27%).

Chart 11: Trends in race/ethnicity of youth in crisis for NRS (n=27,425 combined for 2017 and 2015; no data available for earlier years)



Time on the Street while in Crisis

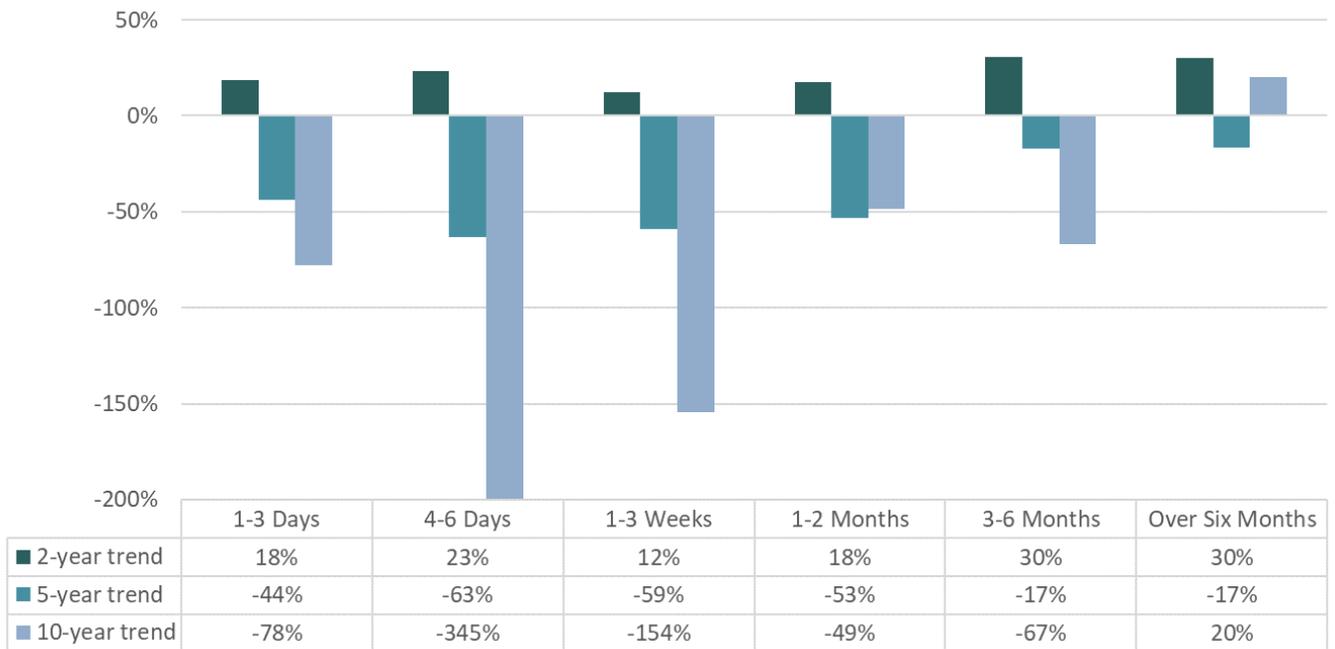
Almost half (45%) of youth in crisis reached out to the National Runaway Safeline (NRS) within a few days of being on the street, and an additional 7% reached out by the end of the first week (for a total of 52% within the first week). The longest periods of time on the street—3-6 months or 6+ months—are the least likely time points for youth to reach out to NRS at 9% each.

Chart 12: Time on the street of youth in crisis for NRS in 2017 (n=5,145)



However, over the past two years, the greatest increases in connections from youth in crisis came in those long-term categories of 3-6 months and 6 or more months (each was up 30%). **Looking further back to five and ten-year trends, NRS sees sharp declines across the board in time on the street; these drops may be likely due to the shift in types of callers towards youth contacting NRS before running away from home.**

Chart 13: Trends in time on the street of youth in crisis for NRS (n=26,949 combined for 2017, 2015, 2012, and 2007)

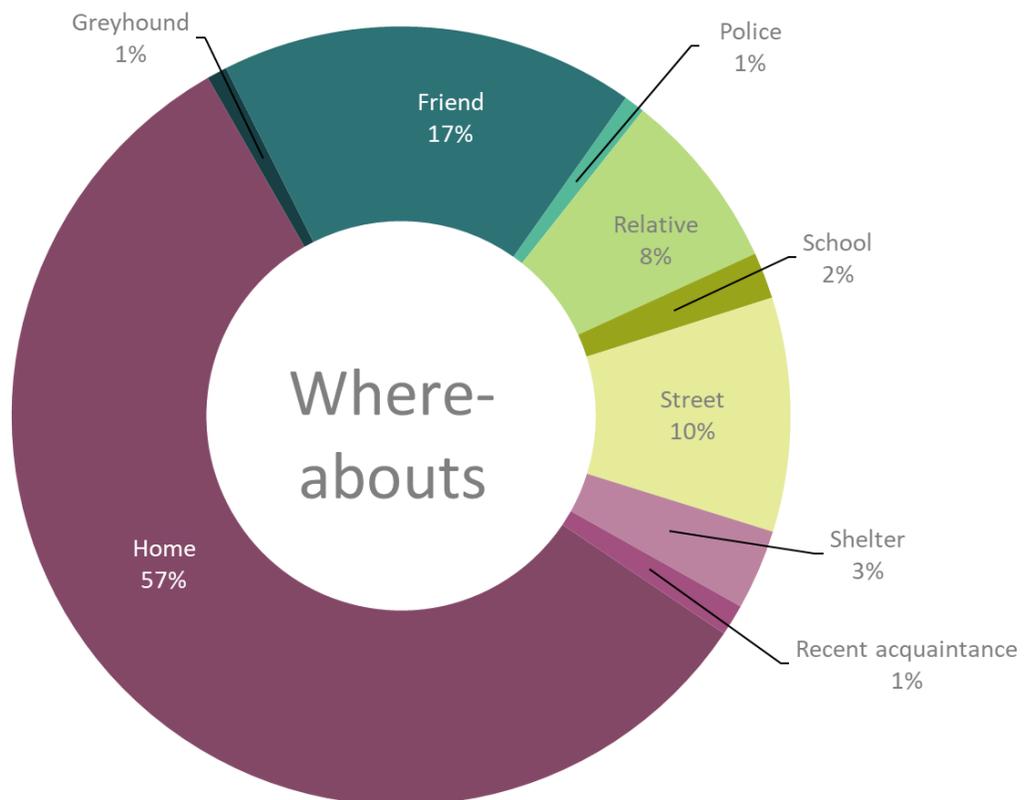


**** Note that the axis on the chart for duration of time is limited to -200% for visual clarity, but the 10-year trend for “4-6 days” is actually -345%.**

Whereabouts of Youth in Crisis

In 2017, most youth in crisis reached out to the National Runaway Safeline (NRS) from home (57%) or from a friend’s house (17%). Youth also made connections to NRS from a relative’s house (8%), the street (10%), shelters (3%), school (2%), police (1%), Greyhound stations (1%), and recent acquaintances (1%).

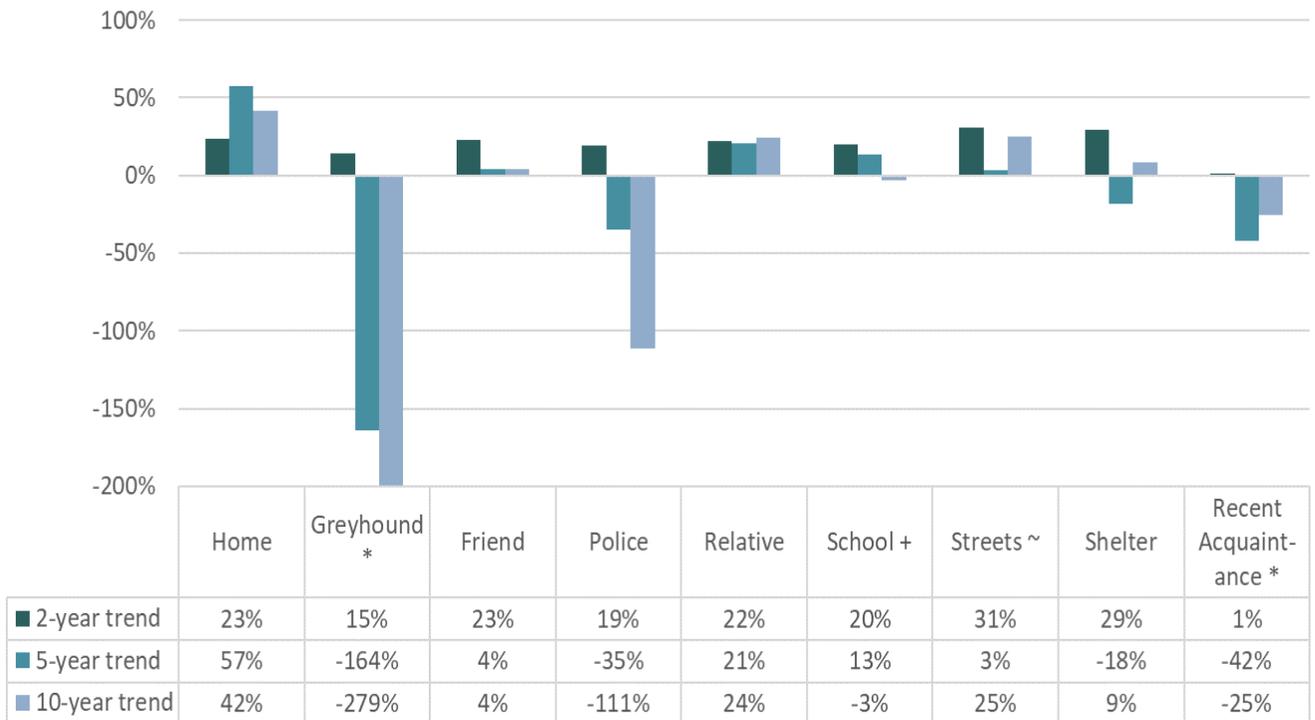
Chart 14: Whereabouts of youth in crisis for NRS in 2017 (n=15,709)



When comparing whereabouts of youth in crisis in 2017 with previous years, NRS sees **fairly consistent long-term increases in locations like home, friends’ homes, homes of relatives, and school—locations that kids often use to reach out to NRS for help before running away** from home. In looking at trends just over the

past two years, NRS has also seen a small uptick in connections from youth in locations that are more common for runaway youth or those asked to leave home, such as a Greyhound station (15%), police (19%), streets (41%), and shelters (29%); however, it is important to note that youth contacting NRS from these types of locations were a small proportion of all connections in 2017.

Chart 15: Trends in whereabouts of youth in crisis for NRS (n=49,922 combined for 2017, 2015, 2012, and 2007)



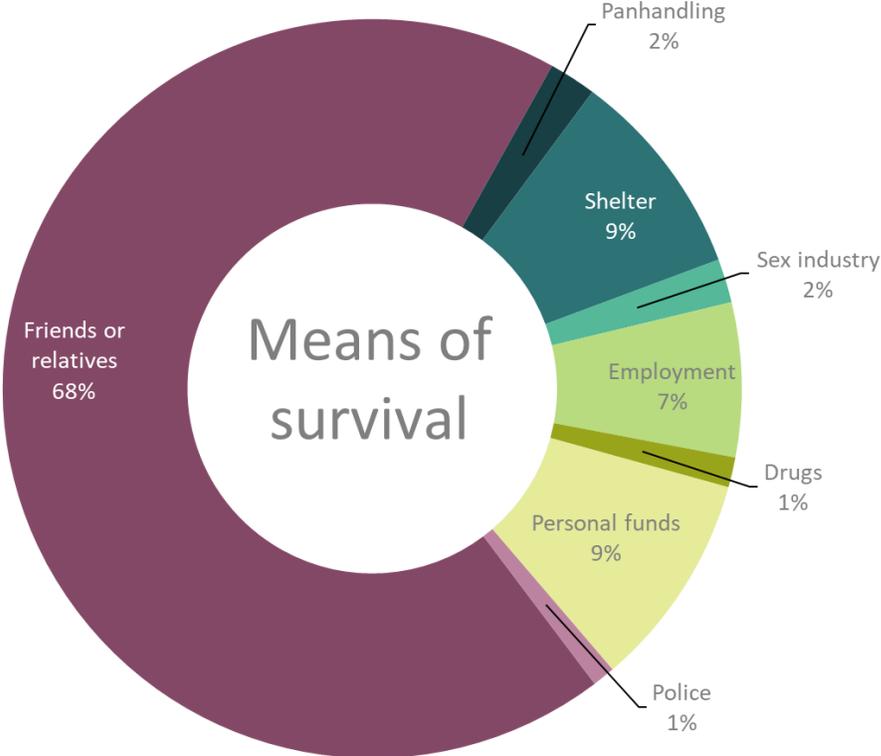
** Note that the axis on the chart for whereabouts is limited to -200% for visual clarity, but the 10-year trend for “Greyhound” is actually -279%.

*** Note that comparisons are significant at $p < .05$ unless marked: * signifies a lack of significance for the 2-year trend; ~ signifies a lack of significance for the 5-year trend; and + signifies a lack of significance for the 10-year trend.

Means of Survival for Youth in Crisis

The majority of youth in crisis who contacted the National Runaway Safeline (NRS) survived through the support of friends or relatives (68%) in 2017. Employment (7%), personal funds (9%), and shelters (9%) were also important sources of support. Much smaller proportions of youth relied on panhandling (2%), drugs (1%), the sex industry (2%), or police detention (1%) for support.

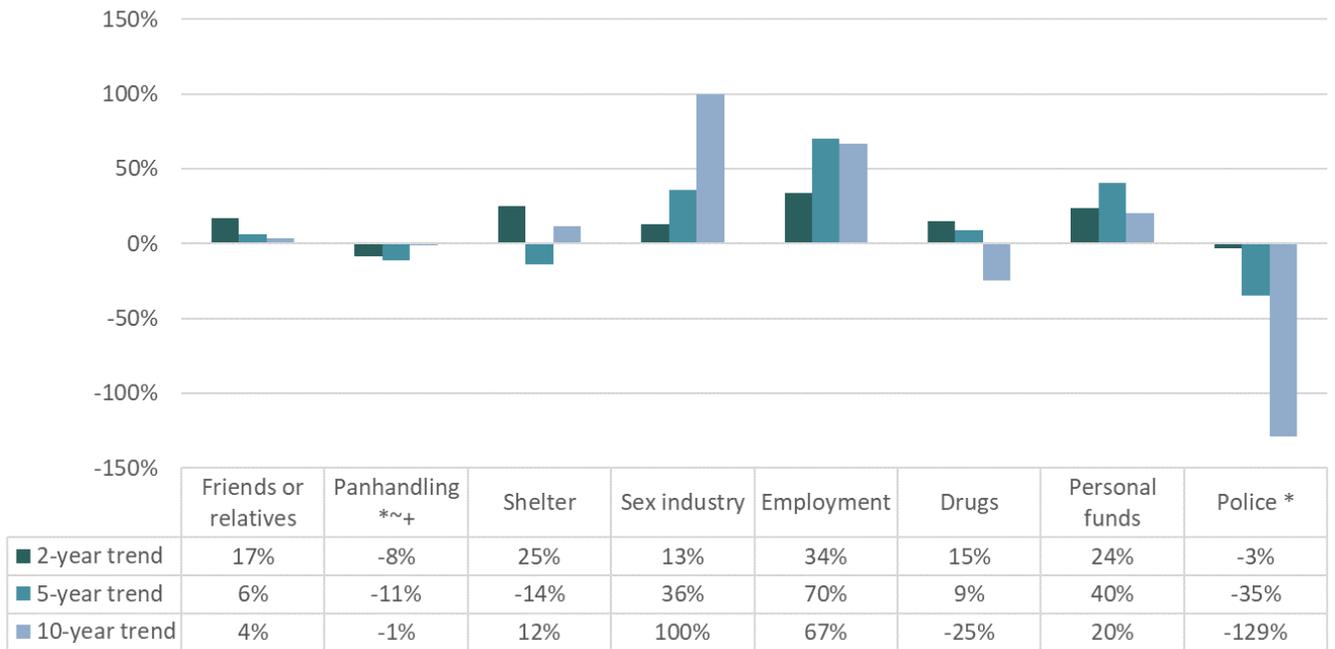
Chart 16: Means of survival of youth in crisis for NRS in 2017 (n=6,995)



Over the past two years, the largest shifts in types of support for youth in crisis was an **increase in youth relying on employment (34% increase) or personal funds (24%) for support**. While the sex industry makes up a very small proportion of youth’s means of support, **NRS has noticed a disturbing and consistent**

increase in reliance on the sex industry for survival over the past two (13% increase), five (36%), and 10 years (100%). There has also been a sizeable decrease in youth surviving through police detention over the past five (35% drop) and 10 years (-129%).

Chart 17: Trends in means of survival of youth in crisis for NRS (n=25,129 combined for 2017, 2015, 2012, and 2007)

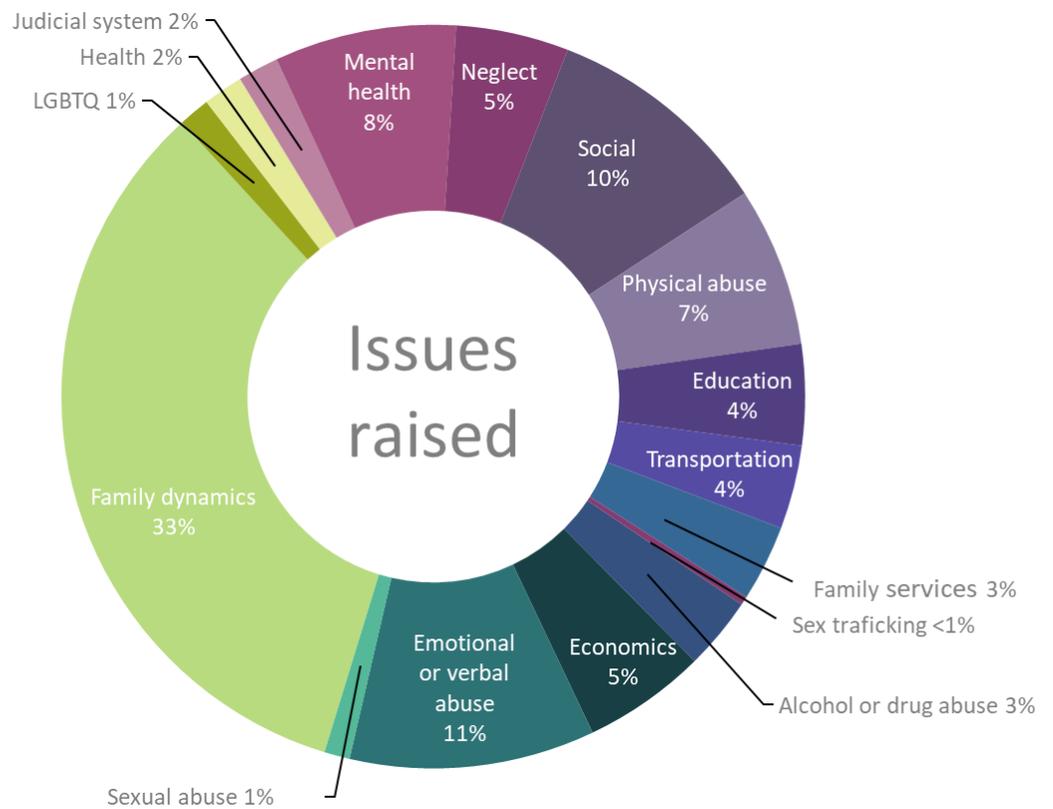


Issues Raised by Youth in Crisis

NRS records all of the issues raised by youth in crisis on a call; however, it is probable that some of these issues are components of a youth's life but may not have been the pressing issue at the time when the connection to NRS was made. For this reason, it's only possible to speak to the issues raised during a connection rather than the presence or absence of these issues in the life of each youth in crisis who connects with NRS.

Family dynamics (33%) continued to be the most commonly raised issue among youth in crisis connecting to NRS in 2017. Abuse as a combined category (including emotional or verbal abuse, sexual abuse, physical abuse, and neglect) made up the second most common issue (24%) raised by youth in crisis.

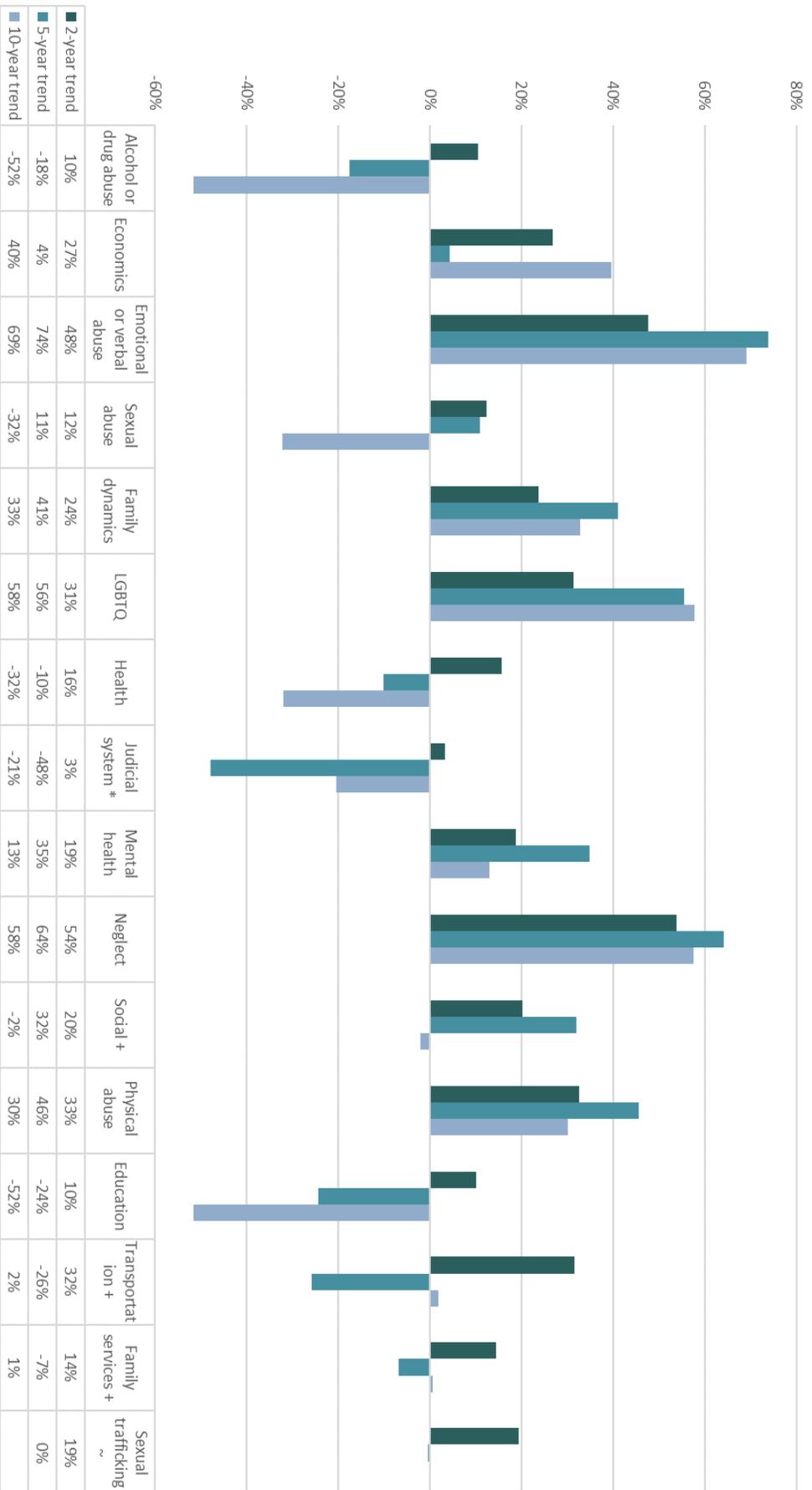
Chart 18: Issues raised by/about youth in crisis for NRS in 2017 (n=60,902)



**Note that youth in crisis can raise multiple issues in a single interaction, and they may not bring up all issues in their lives during a crisis connection.*

Over the past two years, **the largest increases in issues raised by youth in crisis have been related to abuse or neglect** with increases of 54% for neglect, 48% for emotional or verbal abuse, 33% for physical abuse, and 11% for sexual abuse. NRS has also seen sizeable increases since 2015 in youth raising issues of transportation (32%) and LGBTQ topics (31%) when they reach out to NRS.

Chart 19: Trends in issues raise by/about youth in crisis for NRS n=194,712 combined for 2017, 2015, 2012, and 2007).



**Note that youth in crisis can raise multiple issues in a single interaction.*