The logo for National Runaway Safeline, featuring a stylized green 'N' shape composed of two curved lines.

## National Runaway Safeline

### **2019 CRISIS SERVICES & PREVENTION REPORT**

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This report was developed by the National Runaway Safeline (NRS) in collaboration with Chapin Hall at the University of Chicago and the Family and Youth Services Bureau (FYSB).

The National Communications System for Runaway and Homeless Youth is operated by the National Runaway Safeline, supported by Grant Number 90CY6903 from the Administration on Children, Youth and Families, Family and Youth Services Bureau, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services.

# TABLE OF CONTENTS

Introduction	4
National Runaway Safeline Services	5
Data Analysis	6
National Runaway Safeline 2019 Crisis Contacts Report	7
Who Contacts the National Runaway Safeline?	7
How Do Contacts Reach the National Runaway Safeline?	8
Why Do Contacts Reach the National Runaway Safeline?	9
Resources and Outcomes	12
Referrals	12
Home Free Program	13
2019 Highlights	14



## I. INTRODUCTION

It is estimated that 4.2 million young people, ages 13 to 25, experience some form of homelessness each year in the United States,<sup>1</sup> with considerably more young people experiencing crises that put them at risk of facing similar housing insecurity. Think about it this way: in a classroom of 30 students, at least one of them will experience homelessness this year, without a safe living environment to call home and forced to couch surf, bounce among relatives and friends, live in shelters, or stay on the streets.

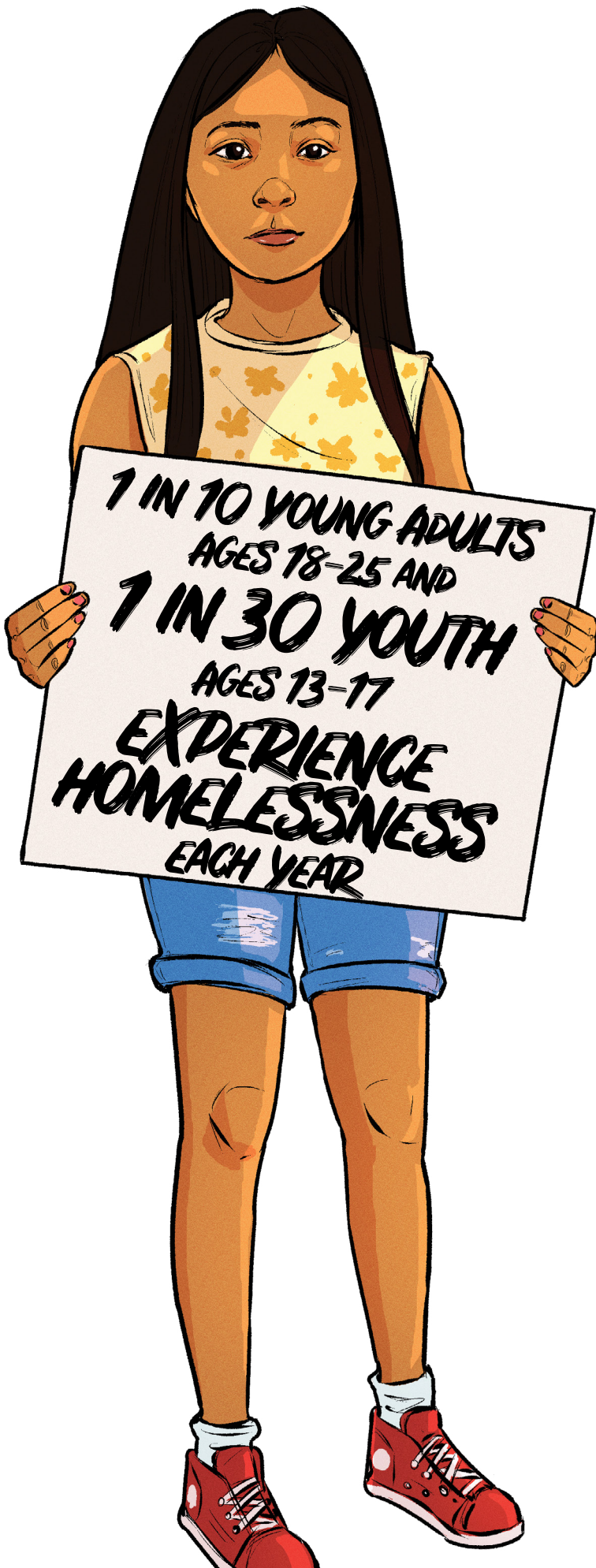
The potential impact of such instability goes beyond having a place to call home, as experiencing homelessness can lead to struggles to find consistent food, to care for one's mental and physical health, to attend and complete school, and to avoid potentially dangerous and violent situations. Because homelessness is associated with these and other negative outcomes, including physical and sexual abuse, substance use, and premature death,<sup>2,3,4</sup> it is critical that youth in crisis and experiencing (or at risk of experiencing) homelessness are connected to resources that can help them find stable housing, access supports, develop a plan, or reunite safely with their families.

<sup>1</sup>Morton, M. H., Dworsky, A., & Samuels, G. M. (2017). *Missed opportunities: Youth homelessness in America. National estimates*. Chicago, IL: Chapin Hall at the University of Chicago.

<sup>2</sup>Auerswald, C. L., Lin, J. S., & Parriott, A. (2016). Six-year mortality in a street-recruited cohort of homeless youth in San Francisco, California. *Peer Journal*, 4, e1909.

<sup>3</sup>Hodgson, K. J., Shelton, K. H., van den Bree, M. B., & Los, F. J. (2013). Psychopathology in young people experiencing homelessness: a systematic review. *American Journal of Public Health*, 103(6), e24–e37.

<sup>4</sup>Medlow, S., Klineberg, E., & Steinbeck, K. (2014). The health diagnoses of homeless adolescents: A systematic review of the literature. *Journal of Adolescence*, 37(5), 531-542.





# INTRODUCTION

## NATIONAL RUNAWAY SAFELINE SERVICES

For nearly 50 years, the National Runaway Safeline (NRS) has served as such a resource, working to keep America's runaway, homeless and at-risk youth safe and off of the streets. With support from the Family and Youth Services Bureau (FYSB), Administration for Children and Families (ACF), U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (HHS), NRS serves as the federally-designated national communication system in the United States for youth ages 12 to 21 who are contemplating running away, or have run away and are experiencing homelessness.

NRS operates the 1-800-RUNAWAY hotline and online crisis services at 1800RUNAWAY.org, including live chat, email, and forum services. These free, confidential crisis services are available 24 hours a day, 365 days a year. Trained staff and volunteers provide non-judgmental, non-sectarian, and non-directive support to empower youth and their families to develop a plan of action to address their crises.

Examples of services that NRS staff and volunteers may offer to those who reach out include: facilitating conference calls with family members or community-based agencies, where NRS representatives advocate on behalf of a youth; using a messaging service where youth or family members can indirectly connect as a first step towards a mediated conversation; and accessing the Home Free program, offered in partnership with Greyhound Lines, Inc., which helps youth to safely reunite with their family or travel to an

alternate living arrangement through a free bus ticket. In addition, NRS maintains a database of over 6,500 resources across the country to help youth and families access local support such as counseling, shelter, and substance abuse treatment, which may be offered as referrals during crisis connections.

Along with these resources, NRS also offers unique education tools for youth, families, service providers, teachers, public health professionals, and community members that teach about prevention strategies, including the *Let's Talk: Runaway Prevention Curriculum*. This 14-module, interactive curriculum is designed to help youth build critical life skills and seek assistance from trusted contacts to avoid becoming homeless in the first place. Annually, NRS has hundreds of thousands of contacts with individuals seeking information, support, referrals and crisis intervention and prevention resources.

This report examines the characteristics of the individuals who contacted NRS in calendar year 2019, the channels through which these individuals connected with NRS, the problems identified that warranted crisis intervention, and the services that NRS provided. The data in this report will provide critical information about the needs of youth who are homeless or at risk of becoming homeless, and how NRS can best meet the needs of youth in crisis and those who care about them.

## INTRODUCTION

### DATA ANALYSIS

NRS uses one data collection form to capture relevant information disclosed during calls, emails, and forum posts, while using a separate data collection form to capture information from chats. NRS does not use a survey or interview tool to collect standardized data from crisis intervention contacts. Instead, NRS collects information that contacts voluntarily self-report in the context of crisis intervention exchanges. NRS staff and volunteers gather information from calls, emails, chats, and forum posts, with information reported varying based on what individuals choose to share. As a result, the percentages drawn in tables and figures throughout this report are based on the number of individuals (N) who chose to provide information on each data point,

with the amount of missing data ranging from 0% to 81% across the data points analyzed.

In 2019, NRS collected records for 38,422 contacts from hotline calls, emails, chats, and forum posts involving youth under age 21. This report's analysis includes records for 36,803 contacts, excluding 1,619 records for the following reasons: 1,491 records were cases for Comprehensive Community Based Youth Services, which NRS provides to youth in Illinois through a subcontract with the Illinois Department of Human Services; 124 records involved adults in crisis over the age of 22; 3 records involved text messages; and 1 record did not have an ID number.



## II. NATIONAL RUNAWAY SAFELINE 2019 CRISIS CONTACTS REPORT

### WHO CONTACTS THE NATIONAL RUNAWAY SAFELINE?

In 2019, 25,971 individuals reaching out to NRS through the 1-800-RUNAWAY hotline and the digital services offered through 1800RUNAWAY.org (live chat, email, and forum) reported their relationship to the youth in crisis.

Most of those who contacted NRS were youth seeking help for themselves (79%). However, concerned individuals also reached out on behalf of youth, such as parents (7%), adults (6%), friends (5%), and others (4%), including relatives, agency representatives and police officers (please see Table 1).

Table 1. Relationship to Youth (N = 25,971; missing n = 10,832, 29%)

Contact Relationship	N	%
Youth	20,434	79%
Parent	1,702	7%
Adult	1,570	6%
Youth's Friend	1,202	5%
Relative	682	3%
Agency	256	1%
Other	92	<1%
Police	33	<1%
<b>Total</b>	<b>25,971</b>	<b>100%</b>

Many of those who connected with NRS in 2019 also shared information about their age, race/ethnicity, and gender identity. The majority of these contacts took place with youth under the age of 18 (63%).<sup>a</sup> Notably, just under half of these contacts (48%) occurred with 15 to 17 year-olds. About 1% of contacts were under the age of 12, 14% were ages 12-14, 19% were ages 18-21, and 18% were over the age of 22 (please see Table 2).

Crisis intervention contacts who reported their race/ethnicity<sup>b</sup> were disproportionately white/Caucasian (50%). Twenty percent identified as Black/African American, 16% identified as Hispanic/Latinx, 8% identified as multiracial, 5% identified as Asian, Hawaiian, or Pacific Islander, and 1% identified as American Indian/Alaska native.

Of contacts who reported their gender identity,<sup>c</sup> females were more than twice as likely as males to reach out for support. Sixty-nine percent of contacts identified as female, 26% identified as male, and 5% identified as transgender or nonbinary.

Table 2. Demographic Characteristics of Contacts

Contact Characteristics	N	%
<b>Age<sup>a</sup></b>		
Under 12	284	1%
12 - 14	3,216	14%
15 - 17	11,338	48%
18 - 21	4,386	19%
21+	4,209	18%
<b>Race/Ethnicity<sup>b</sup></b>		
White/Caucasian	7,220	50%
Black/African American	2,909	20%
Hispanic/Latinx	2,237	16%
Multiracial	1,170	8%
Asian, Hawaiian, Pacific Islander	659	5%
American Indian/Alaska Native	181	1%
<b>Gender Identity<sup>c</sup></b>		
Female	12,844	69%
Male	4,758	26%
Transgender/Non-binary	933	5%

<sup>a</sup> Age: N = 23,433; missing n = 13,370, 36%

<sup>b</sup> Race/ethnicity: N = 14,376; missing n = 22,427, 61%

<sup>c</sup> Gender identity: N = 18,535; missing n = 18,268, 50%



## HOW DO CONTACTS REACH THE NATIONAL RUNAWAY SAFELINE?

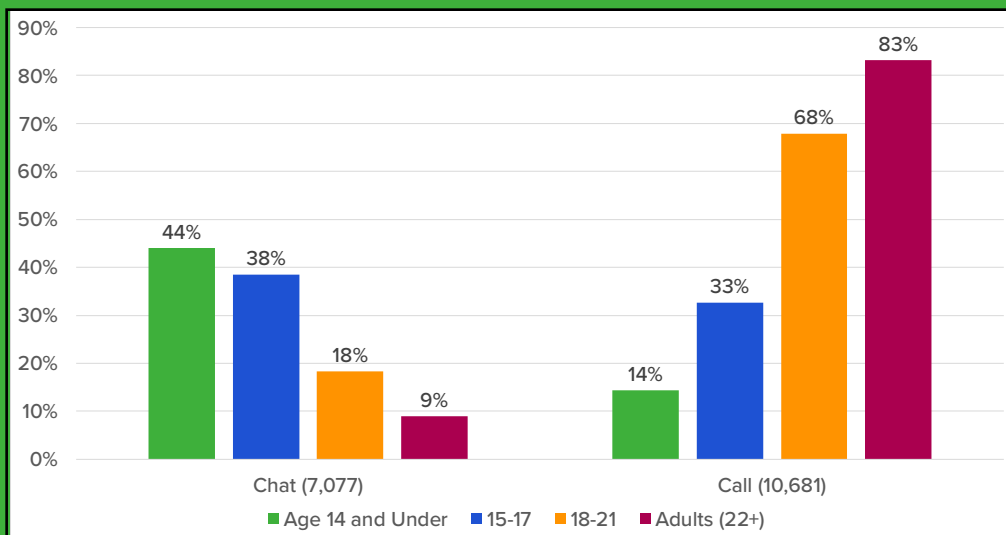
Of the four methods of contact offered through NRS crisis services, including hotline, live chat, email, and forum posts, the most common forms of contact in 2019 were the chat service (44%) and the hotline (34%), accounting for over three-quarters of all crisis intervention connections. Less than one-quarter of contacts connected with NRS via online forum posts (13%) or email (8%, please see Table 3.)

Table 3. Method of Contact (N = 36,803; missing n = 0, 0%)

Method of Contact	N	%
Chat	16,361	44%
Hotline Call	12,460	34%
Forum Post	4,885	13%
Email	3,097	8%
<b>Total</b>	<b>36,803</b>	<b>100%</b>

## WHO IS MOST LIKELY TO CALL? THE LINK BETWEEN METHOD OF CONTACT AND CONTACT AGE

NRS has four methods through which individuals can access crisis intervention services. A deeper dive into these numbers revealed age differences with regard to who used the two most popular methods, live chat and hotline calls. As indicated in the chart below, as the age of those contacting NRS increased, use of the hotline increased (from 14% to 83%) and use of the chat service decreased (from 44% to 9%). These findings point to the importance of NRS targeting advertising and awareness campaigns to the ways in which different demographic groups are most comfortable engaging.



**Note:** Method of contact by ages sample sizes included for chat: Age 14 and under n = 1,540; 15-17 n = 4,358; 18-21 n = 800; adult n = 379. Samples sizes included for call included: Age 14 and under n = 502; 15-17 n = 3,702; 18-21 n = 2,975; adult n = 3,502.

The vast majority of contacts (84%) learned about NRS through the internet, highlighting the importance of NRS targeting outreach, advertising, and awareness campaigns through digital sources, including social media. Six percent of contacts learned about NRS through word of mouth and 4% were following up from a previous call (please see Table 4).

**Table 4. How Contacts Learned of NRS**  
(N = 19,383; missing n = 17,420, 47%)

How Contacts Learned of NRS	N	%
Internet	16,262	84%
Word of mouth	1,184	6%
Previous call	852	4%
Social service agency	567	3%
NRS partner organization	145	1%
School	119	1%
Law enforcement	92	<1%
NRS promotional material	64	<1%
Directory service	68	<1%
Public service announcement	26	<1%
NRS runaway prevention curriculum	4	<1%
<b>Total</b>	<b>19,383</b>	<b>100%</b>

## WHY DO CONTACTS REACH THE NATIONAL RUNAWAY SAFELINE?

Young people who are homeless or are at risk of becoming homeless face numerous challenges that lead to their reaching out to NRS for support. In 2019, crisis contacts typically reported one or more “presenting problems,” or reason for seeking crisis intervention services (Table 5), with over two-thirds of NRS crisis intervention contacts reporting at least one presenting problem. By far, the most common presenting problem was family dynamics (57%), including conflict with rules, problems with parents or siblings, blended family, divorce or custody issues, death of a family member, or teen parenting. Other common presenting problems were emotional abuse (20%), peer/social issues (14%) - including problems with friends, internet relationships, gang or cult involvement, sexual activity, relationship problems, and independence - and mental health problems (13%, please see Table 5).

**Table 5. Reasons for Crisis Intervention**  
(N = 25,971; missing n = 10,832, 29% missing)

Reason for Crisis Intervention	N	%
Family dynamics	20,936	57%
Emotional abuse	7,211	20%
Peer/social	5,279	14%
Mental health	4,690	13%
Physical abuse	4,420	12%
Economics	3,251	9%
Neglect	3,124	8%
School/Education	2,040	6%
Youth/Family	1,691	5%
Transportation	1,678	5%
Alcohol/Substance abuse	1,316	4%
LGBTQ	932	3%
Judicial system	815	2%
Sexual abuse	693	2%
Health	670	2%
Exploitation	135	<1%

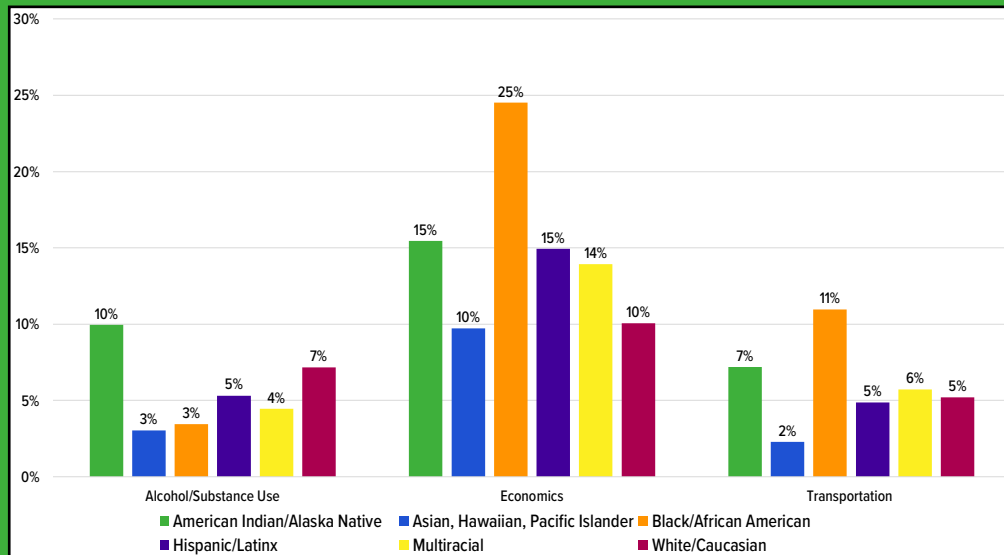
**Note:** Because these categories were not mutually exclusive and contacts could report multiple presenting problems, a total N is not included in this table.



## What Challenges Do Youth Face?

### The Link Between Reasons for Crisis Intervention and Race/Ethnicity

Certain types of presenting problems were more common among crisis contacts of certain racial/ethnic groups than others. Contacts who identified as American Indian and Alaskan Native reported more concerns about alcohol/substance use (10%) than any other ethnic group, whereas contacts who identified as Black and African American cited financial challenges (25%) and transportation (11%) as concerns more than any other racial group surveyed. These findings underscore the value of NRS cultivating relationships with local runaway and homeless youth providers who can address these topics in order to advance equitable solutions for youth of color (i.e., non-white/Caucasian).



**Note:** Sample sizes by race/ethnicity include: American Indian/Alaska Native n = 181; Asian, Hawaiian, Pacific Islander n = 659; Black/African American n = 2,909; Hispanic/Latinx n = 2,237; Multiracial n = 1,170; White/Caucasian n = 7,220.

Despite the potentially overwhelming problems faced by youth reaching out to NRS for crisis services, many contacts presented important opportunities for preventing a crisis from escalating to youth leaving home in the first place. More than half of youth who were the subject of an NRS contact were at home at the time of connecting with NRS (60%). Contacts reported that youth who were not at home were primarily staying with a friend (12%, please see Table 6).

**Table 6. Youth's Location at Time of Contact**  
(N = 18,120; missing n = 18,683, 51%)

Youth's Location	N	%
Home	10,986	60%
Friend	2,247	12%
Street/payphone	1,280	7%
Relative	968	5%
Unknown to caller	828	5%
Other	626	4%
Shelter	383	2%
School	339	2%
Recent acquaintance	154	1%
Detention/police	124	1%
Greyhound	111	<1%
Work	54	<1%
Pimp/dealer	10	<1%
<b>Total</b>	<b>18,120</b>	<b>100%</b>



In addition, nearly three-quarters of 2019 crisis intervention contacts involved youth who had not yet run away or been asked to leave, 42% of youth were in crisis and 34% of youth were contemplating running away. Thirteen percent had already run away, 8% were homeless, 3% had been asked to leave, and less than 1% were suspected to be missing (please see Table 7).

**Table 7. Youth's Crisis Status at Time of Contact**  
(N = 24,983; missing n = 11,820, 32%)

Youth's Crisis Status	N	%
Youth in crisis	10,407	42%
Contemplating running	8,372	34%
Runaway	3,236	13%
Homeless	2,075	8%
Asked to Leave	835	3%
Suspected Missing	58	<1%
<b>Total</b>	<b>24,983</b>	<b>100%</b>

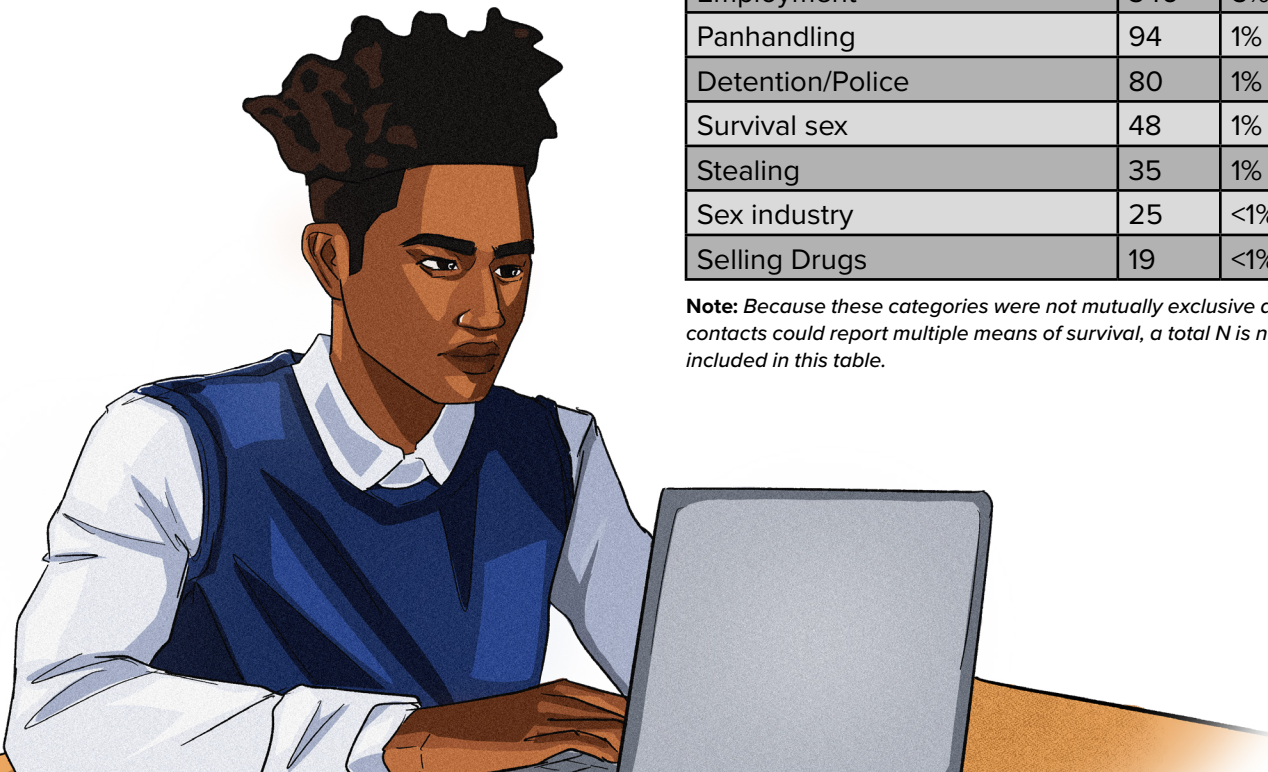
These figures indicate the importance and impact of the services offered by NRS. While home may not always be the best or safest option for at-risk youth, the majority of youth who connect with NRS seek support prior to experiencing homelessness. Just as NRS offers resources and referrals to support youth who are homeless, this data highlights the importance of NRS' prevention and education efforts in hopes of avoiding the dangers and risks associated with runaway or homeless incidents in the first place.

In cases where the youth was homeless, a relatively small number of total crisis contacts (19%) indicated how the youth survived. The majority, 86%, reported that friends and family networks were the primary modes of survival while homeless, while 26% survived through personal funds, and another 7% relied on shelters and soup kitchens (please see Table 8).

**Table 8. How Youth Survived While Homeless**  
(N = 6,899; missing n = 29,904, 81%)

How Youth Survived While Homeless	N	%
Friends/relatives	5,955	86%
Personal funds	1,765	26%
Shelter/Soup kitchen	514	7%
Employment	346	5%
Panhandling	94	1%
Detention/Police	80	1%
Survival sex	48	1%
Stealing	35	1%
Sex industry	25	<1%
Selling Drugs	19	<1%

**Note:** Because these categories were not mutually exclusive and contacts could report multiple means of survival, a total N is not included in this table.



## RESOURCES & OUTCOMES

### REFERRALS

The primary goal of NRS crisis intervention services is to help support youth in crisis and those who care for them. After assessing the reasons for reaching out to NRS and the nature of the crisis, NRS crisis services staff and volunteers discuss services, resources, and supports that contacts might pursue to resolve the crisis at hand. This solutions-focused approach led to 71% of crisis intervention contacts discussing options for referrals or next steps, with many contacts discussing multiple referral options (please see Table 9).

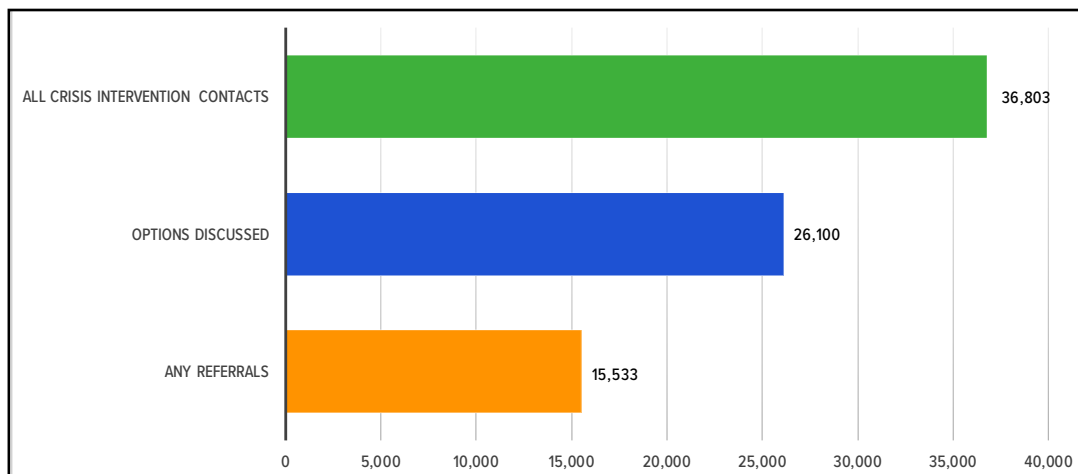
NRS frontline staff and volunteers recommended additional NRS services for nearly all of the crisis intervention contacts who were interested in learning about referral options (99%). This included the NRS message service, conference calls, and the Home Free program. Other referral options discussed with crisis intervention contacts included police (41%), family (39%), and friends (34%). Of the 36,803 total crisis intervention contacts in 2019, 42% ultimately obtained referrals (please see Figure 1).

Table 9. Referral Options that Contacts Discussed with NRS Staff and Volunteers (N = 26,100; missing n = 10,703, 29%)

Referral Options	N	%
NRS Services	25,715	99%
Police	10,635	41%
Family	10,053	39%
Friend	8,812	34%
Alternative youth housing	6,276	24%
Adult	4,716	18%
Child abuse reporting	4,308	17%
Self help	4,163	16%
School personnel	3,605	14%
Social services	3,036	12%
Legal services	3,149	12%
Mental health professional	2,775	11%
Transitional living program	2,619	10%
Home Free	1,450	6%
Social worker	1,195	5%
211 United Way	791	3%
Juvenile court	472	2%
Health professional	609	2%
Religious organizations	405	2%
Missing children number	349	1%

**Note:** Because these categories were not mutually exclusive and contacts could report multiple referral options, a total N is not included in this table.

Figure 1. Referral Options and Referrals Obtained (N = 36,803, missing n = 0, 0%)





### HOME FREE PROGRAM

One referral option referenced above was the Home Free program. This service, offered by NRS in partnership with Greyhound Lines, Inc., offers runaway and homeless youth a free bus ride home or to a safe alternative living environment. In 2019, 861 individuals started the process for using the Home Free program, resulting in 294 bus tickets issued for 291 youth and 3 parents. Ultimately, 277 of the 291 youth who were issued tickets (95%) returned home. While NRS

and Greyhound aim to provide as many tickets as possible to youth in need, there are several reasons why requests do not always result in an issued ticket, including: situations in which youth and their family do not agree on reunification; youth and/or family members do not call back to complete the ticketing process; youth do not have a safe location identified to which they would travel; youth and/or family find alternative transportation; or transportation is not available in a particular location.





## III. 2019 HIGHLIGHTS

### REPORT SUMMARY

---

79% of contacts are youth who connected directly with NRS on their own behalf

---

Nearly half of contacts were between the ages of 15 and 17

---

Contacts who connect with NRS are primarily white/Caucasian and female

---

At the time of outreach, contacts said that 60% of youth were still at home

---

Contacts reported that 42% of youth were in crisis and 34% were contemplating running away

---

44% of contacts used NRS's chat feature and 34% call the hotline

---

57% of contacts reported family dynamics as the reason for seeking crisis intervention services

---

70% of contacts discussed referral options with NRS frontline staff and volunteers

---

42% of contacts received a referral

---

### 2019 BY THE NUMBERS



36,803 hotline calls

---



16,361 crisis chats

---



3,097 crisis emails

---



4,885 forum posts

---



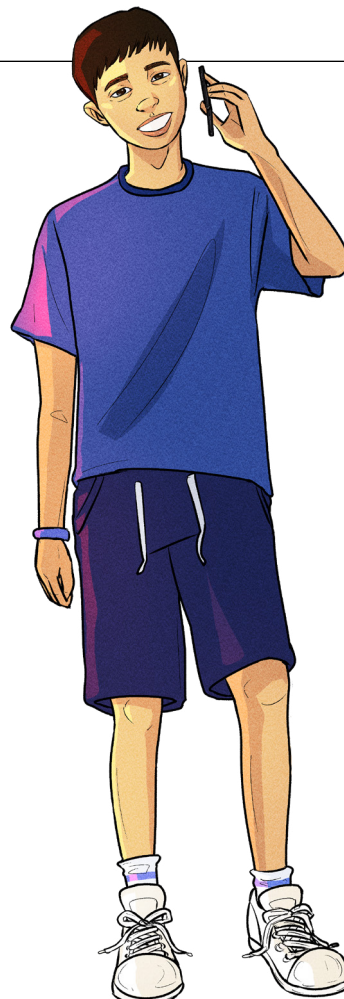
15,533 contacts accepted referrals

---



294 Home Free tickets issued

---



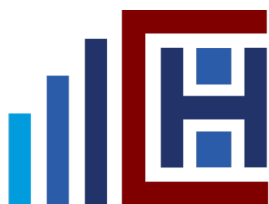


The National Runaway Safeline (NRS) is a national non-profit organization committed to ensuring that runaway, homeless and at-risk youth are safe and off the streets.

Founded in 1971, NRS serves as the national communication system crisis line for youth and families, providing critical crisis intervention 24 hours a day, 365 days a year. Each year, NRS makes hundreds of thousands of connections to help and hope through hotline (1-800-RUNAWAY), online (1800RUNAWAY.org) and prevention services.

For additional information, visit [www.1800RUNAWAY.org](http://www.1800RUNAWAY.org) or follow us @1800RUNAWAY on Facebook, Instagram and Twitter.

---



Chapin Hall is an independent policy research center at the University of Chicago that provides public and private decision-makers with rigorous research and achievable solutions to support them in improving the lives of children and families.

Chapin Hall partners with policy makers, practitioners, and philanthropists at the forefront of research and policy development by applying a unique blend of scientific research, real-world experience, and policy expertise to construction actionable information, practical tools, and ultimately, positive change for children and families.

Established in 1985, Chapin Hall's areas of research include child welfare systems, community capacity to support children and families, and youth homelessness.

For more information about Chapin Hall, visit [www.chapinhall.org](http://www.chapinhall.org).

---



The Family and Youth Services Bureau (FYSB) within the Administration for Children and Families (ACF), U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) supports organizations and communities that work to reduce the risk of youth homelessness, adolescent pregnancy and domestic violence.

FYSB envisions a future in which all our nation's youth, individuals and families — no matter what challenges they may face — can live healthy, productive, violence-free lives.

For more information about the Family and Youth Services Bureau, visit: [www.acf.hhs.gov/fysb](http://www.acf.hhs.gov/fysb).

National  
Runaway  
Safeline®

