

2023

Crisis Services & Prevention Report



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INTRODUCTION

Youth homelessness is a public health issue impacting over 4 million young people between the ages of 13 and 25 in the United States each year.¹ Annually, this means that at least one out of 30 youth between the ages of 13 to 17 will experience homelessness and one in ten young people between the ages of 18 to 25 will experience homelessness.

The potential impact of homelessness and housing instability among young people has far-reaching implications for their well-being. Without a safe living environment, young people experiencing homelessness may have to couch surf, bounce among relatives and friends, live in shelters, or stay on the streets and may struggle to afford food, care for their mental and physical health, attend and complete school, and avoid potentially dangerous and violent situations. Experiences of homelessness are also associated with a variety of adverse outcomes, such as physical and sexual abuse, substance use, and premature death.^{2,3,4}

These impacts have personal and societal costs, so it is critical that youth in crisis and experiencing or at risk of experiencing homelessness are connected to resources that can help them find safe and stable housing, access supports, develop a plan of action, or reunite safely with their families. Making resources available to young people in crisis, and the people who care about them, can help mitigate the impact of a crisis and prevent youth homelessness.

While the numbers of youth experiencing homelessness are staggering, even more young people experience crises that put them at risk of leaving their homes or being asked to leave. As you will learn throughout this report, each year the National Runaway Safeline (NRS) receives thousands of contacts from young people reaching out for support with various issues and circumstances while they are still at home. It is critical to recognize these truths and focus additional resources on education, outreach, and prevention efforts to raise awareness and address the diverse crises youth experience that may result in experiences of homelessness.

National Runaway Safeline Services

Founded in 1971, the National Runaway Safeline is committed to ensuring youth in crisis, youth who have run away, and those experiencing homelessness or housing instability are safe and off the streets. With support from the Family and Youth Services Bureau (FYSB), Administration for Children and Families (ACF), and U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (HHS), NRS serves as the federally designated National Communication System in the United States and U.S. territories for young people ages 12 to 21 who are in crisis, contemplating running away, or have run away and are experiencing homelessness.

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

¹ 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.

² 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.

³ 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.

⁴ 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.

Examples of services that NRS staff and volunteers may offer to those who reach out include: facilitating conference calls with family members or youth-serving organizations where NRS representatives advocate on behalf of a young person; using a messaging service where young people 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 young people to safely reunite with their family or travel to an alternate living arrangement using a free bus ticket. In addition, NRS maintains a database of approximately 6,500 resources across the country to help young people and families access local supports such as counseling, shelter, and substance use treatment, which may be offered as referrals during crisis connections.

Along with these resources, NRS also offers educational and outreach tools, prevention strategies and free resources to young people, families, service providers, teachers, public health professionals, and community members. One such resource is NRS' *Let's Talk: Runaway Prevention Curriculum*, a 16-module, interactive curriculum designed to help young people build critical life skills, learn when to seek assistance from trusted adults, and provide alternatives to running away with the aim of preventing experiences of homelessness. Annually, NRS has thousands of contacts with individuals seeking crisis services, information, support, referrals, and prevention resources in addition to hundreds of thousands of interactions via NRS' website and social media platforms.

Aims of This Report

The aims of this report are three-fold. We first reviewed the data elements that NRS collected through its crisis intervention services in calendar year 2023 and presented demographic differences across key data elements that NRS collected in 2023. We also presented select trends over time from 2019 through 2023. We concluded by highlighting insights related to demographic differences, trends over time, and emerging opportunities for preventing homelessness among youth and young adults.

AIM 1. Examine the characteristics of the individuals who contacted NRS in calendar year 2023, the channels through which these individuals connected with NRS, the problems identified that warranted crisis intervention, and the services NRS provided. This analysis describes the characteristics and needs of individuals who used NRS' crisis intervention services.

AIM 2. Conduct crosstabulations to examine demographic differences in type of caller, the method of contact, the top five reasons for connection, and the most common referral options. Further investigation into these crosstabulations helped to illuminate trends and patterns that would not otherwise be visible.

AIM 3. Graph key indicators that NRS has consistently captured to portray change over time. These figures show how contacts' characteristics, engagement with NRS' crisis intervention services, and contacts' needs changed from 2019 to 2023.

In short, the findings in this report reveal the characteristics, experiences, needs, and referrals of contacts who interacted with NRS' crisis intervention services team in 2023. The report also takes a deeper look at key trends in NRS' engagement with contacts and their characteristics, experiences, and needs both over time and across demographic subgroups.

Data Analysis

NRS uses one data collection form to capture relevant information disclosed during calls, emails, and forum posts, a second data collection form to capture information from live chats, and a third data collection form

to capture information from live texts. 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, live chats, live texts, emails, and forum posts, with information reported varying based on what individuals choose to share. As a result, the percentages listed 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 86% across the data points analyzed.

In 2023, NRS collected records for 25,328 contacts from calls, live chats, live texts, emails, and forum posts about young people aged 21 and under in need of support. This report’s analysis includes records for 25,284 contacts, excluding 40 cases that were labeled “pranks,” and four cases that were labeled “wrong number.”

To address Aim 1, we used descriptive analytic techniques, such as frequency tables. To address Aim 2, we conducted crosstabulations to understand intersections between contacts’ demographic characteristics and key metrics on contacts’ engagement with NRS and their experiences and needs. To address Aim 3, we used line graphs to visualize trends in key metrics from 2019 to 2023.

2023 FINDINGS

Who Contacts the National Runaway Safeline?

In 2023, 15,645 individuals reaching out to NRS through the 1-800-RUNAWAY hotline and text service as well as the digital services offered through 1800RUNAWAY.org (live chat, email, and forum) reported their relationship to the youth in crisis.

Individuals of any age can reach out to NRS in support of a young person. The majority of those who contacted NRS were youth seeking help for themselves (74%). Concerned individuals who reached out on behalf of youth included adults (9%), parents (9%), relatives (3%), and friends (3%), as well as others such as agency representatives and police or probation officers (see Table 1).

TABLE 1
Relationship to Youth

	N	%
Youth	11,507	74%
Adult	1,432	9%
Parent	1,405	9%
Relative	493	3%
Youth’s Friend	444	3%
Agency	247	2%
Other	84	<1%
Police	33	<1%
Probation Officer	3	<1%
Total	15,645	100%

N = 15,645; missing n = 9,639, 38%

Many of those who connected with NRS in 2023 shared information about themselves, including their age, race/ethnicity, and gender identity. More than half of these contacts involved youth under the age of 18 (52%).^a Notably, about a third of all contacts (36%) occurred with 15- to 17-year-olds. One percent of contacts were under the age of 12, 15% were ages 12-14, 25% were ages 18-21, and 24% were adults over the age of 22 (see Table 2).

TABLE 2
Demographic Characteristics of Contacts

	N	%
Age ^a		
Under 12	212	1%
12-14	2,152	15%
15-17	5,188	36%
18-21	3,567	25%
22+	3,440	24%
Race/Ethnicity ^b		
American Indian/Alaska Native	140	2%
Asian	341	4%
Black/African American	2,372	28%
Hawaiian/Pacific Islander	53	1%
Hispanic/Latinx	1,364	16%
Multiracial	696	8%
White/Caucasian	3,606	42%
Gender Identity ^c		
Female	8,454	65%
Male	3,482	27%
Transgender/Nonbinary	1,074	8%

^a Age: N = 14,599; missing n = 10,725, 42%

^b Race/ethnicity: N = 8,572; missing n = 16,712, 66%

^c Gender identity: N = 13,010; missing n = 12,274, 49%

Note: Some totals do not equal 100% due to rounding.

Just under half (42%) of crisis intervention contacts who reported their race/ethnicity^b were White/Caucasian. A little more than a quarter (28%) identified as Black/African American, 16% identified as Hispanic/Latinx, 8% identified as multiracial, 4% identified as Asian, 2% identified as American Indian/Alaska Native, and 1% identified as Hawaiian or Pacific Islander.

Of contacts who reported their gender identity,^c a much larger proportion of females, compared with males, reached out for support. Sixty-five percent of contacts identified as female, 27% identified as male, and 8% identified as transgender or nonbinary.

Are There Differences in Who Contacts NRS Based on Contacts’ Characteristics?

We examined whether there were differences by contact age, race/ethnicity, and gender in whether the contacts reaching out to NRS were the youth themselves or someone else advocating on their behalf.

Figure 1 shows that the bulk of contacts under the age of 12, between the ages of 12-14, 15-17, and 18-21 (depicted in blue) were youth contacts reaching out on their own behalf and other contacts reaching out on behalf of a youth under age 22 (depicted in green) ranged from 2% to 4%. “Other Contacts” include family, relatives, friends, adults, school personnel, police, among other individuals who might reach out to NRS on behalf of a young person (please see Table 1). Figure 1 also shows that adult contacts who were 22+ were nearly all individuals (“Other Contacts”) reaching out on behalf of a young person.

FIGURE 1

Relationship to Youth by Age, 2023

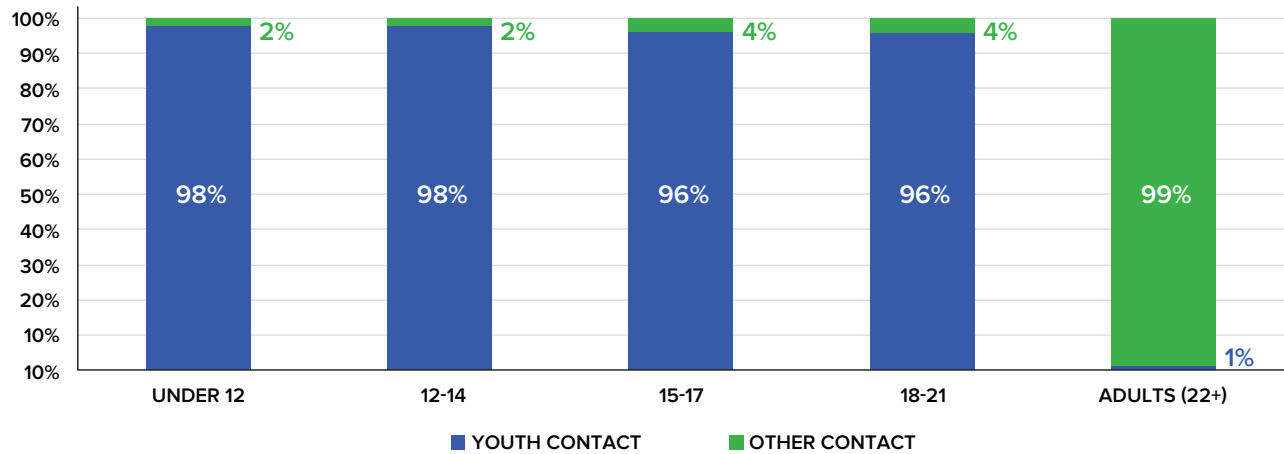


Figure 2 shows that most contacts of all races/ethnicities were youth contacts. This analysis combines American Indian/Alaska Native, Asian, Hawaiian/Pacific Islander, and Multiracial races/ethnicities into the “Other/Multiracial” category. Other/Multiracial contacts contained the highest proportion of youth contacts (88%), compared with 75% who were White/Caucasian and 74% who were Hispanic/Latinx.

FIGURE 2

Relationship to Youth by Race/Ethnicity, 2023

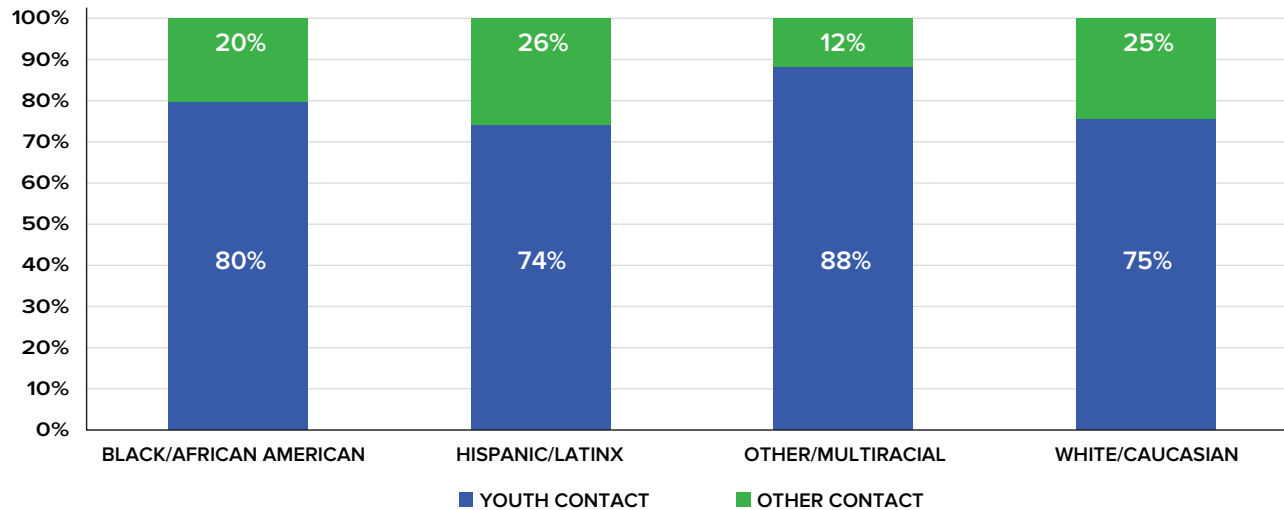
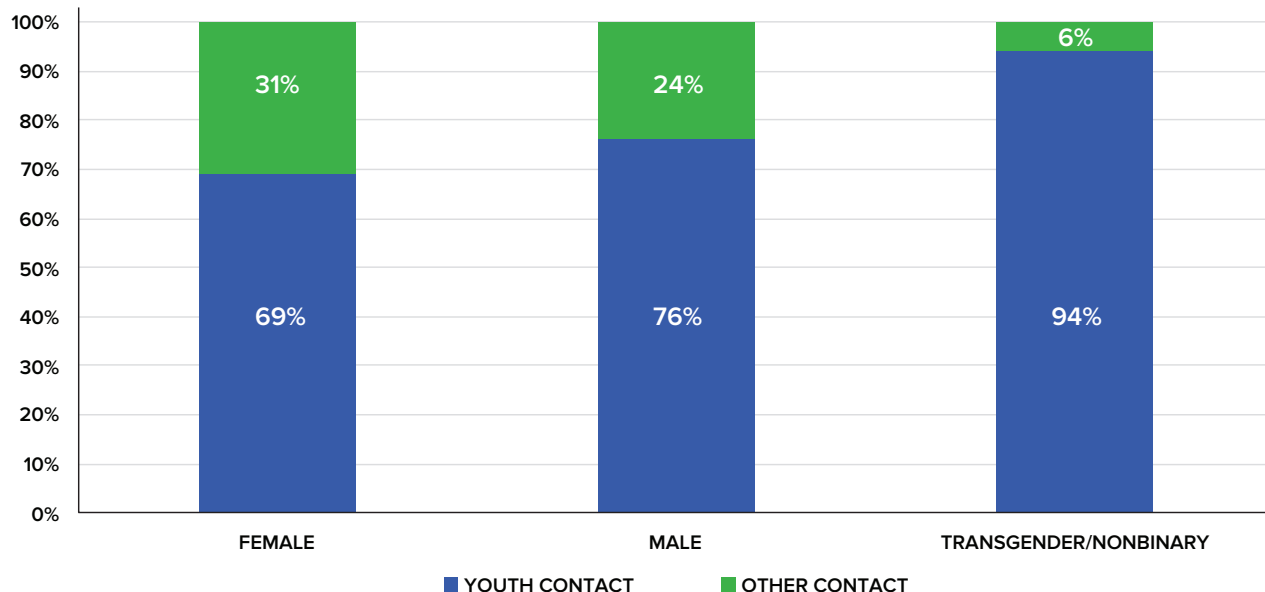


Figure 3 shows that contacts who identified as transgender/nonbinary represented the largest proportion of contacts who were youth advocating on their own behalf (94%), compared to 76% of males and 69% of females.

FIGURE 3

Relationship to Youth by Gender Identity, 2023



How Do Contacts Reach the National Runaway Safeline?

NRS’ crisis services are available through five methods of contact, including hotline calls, live chat, live text, email, and forum posts. The most common ways that contacts reached out to NRS in 2023 were the live chat service (58%) and hotline calls (33%), accounting for 91% of all crisis intervention connections. Four percent of contacts connected with NRS via online forum posts, 4% via email, and 2% via live text (see Table 3). Notably, there were a total of 1,091 forum posts in 2023, which 161,672 people visited throughout the year. This suggests that many potential contacts may have reviewed posts already available to answer their questions and address crises without posting new questions to the forum or reaching out through other methods.

TABLE 3

Method of Contact

	N	%
Live Chat	14,648	58%
Hotline Call	8,219	33%
Email	1,091	4%
Forum Post	936	4%
Live Text	390	2%
Total	25,284	101%

N = 25,284; missing n = 0, 0 %

Note: Total does not equal 100% due to rounding.

The Introduction of Live Texting



The live text method of contact was introduced in September 2023. Live text enables contacts to text 1-800-RUNAWAY to be connected directly with a member of NRS’ crisis intervention services team.

Prior to 2023, NRS utilized an automated text service – users were able to text a short code and were provided with a single autoreply to call the hotline or reach out via NRS’ online services. NRS received 1,770 incoming texts to the short code in 2019; 1,505 in 2020; 416 in 2021; 241 in 2022; and 370 in 2023. Please note that incoming texts to the short code in 2023 were for an eight-month period (January-August) whereas incoming texts to the short code between 2019-2022 span full 12-month calendar years.

Are There Differences in Method of Contact Based on Contacts’ Characteristics?

We examined whether there were differences by contact age, race/ethnicity, and gender in how contacts reached out to NRS. In Figures 4 through 6, columns do not add up to 100% because these figures exclude forum posts and emails, which comprise a comparatively small proportion of contacts.

Figure 4 shows that contacts under the age of 12, between the ages of 12-14 and 15-17 more commonly used the live chat feature, whereas contacts between the ages of 18-21 and 22+ more commonly reached out to NRS via hotline calls.

FIGURE 4

Method of Contact by Age, 2023

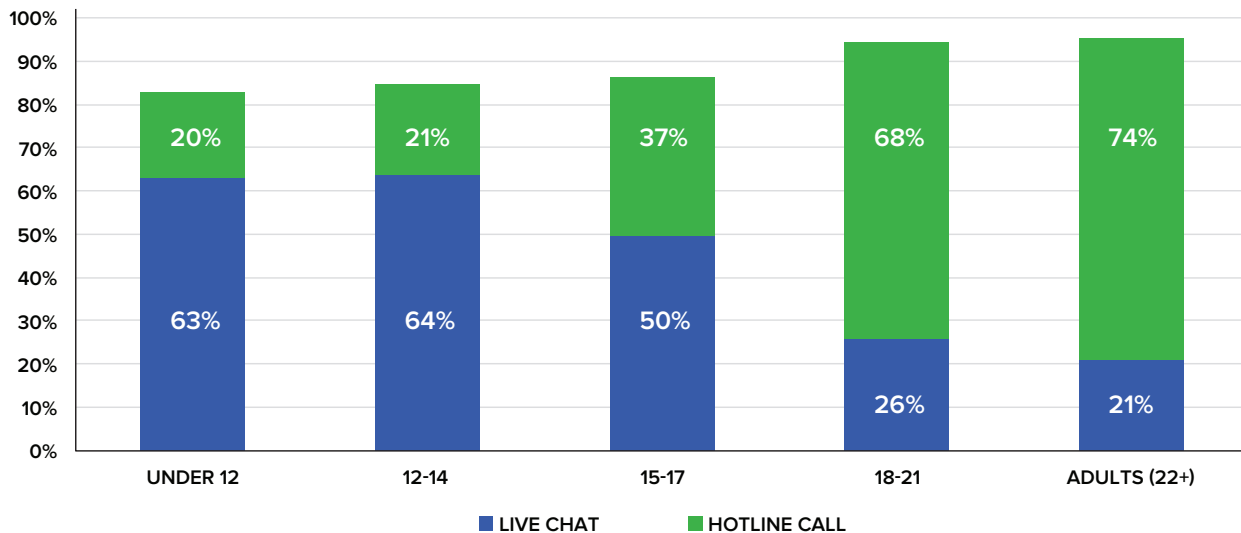


Figure 5 shows that contacts across racial/ethnic groups were about equally likely to use the live chat and hotline service, except contacts who identified as Other/Multiracial, who more often reached out via the live chat service.

FIGURE 5

Method of Contact by Race/Ethnicity, 2023

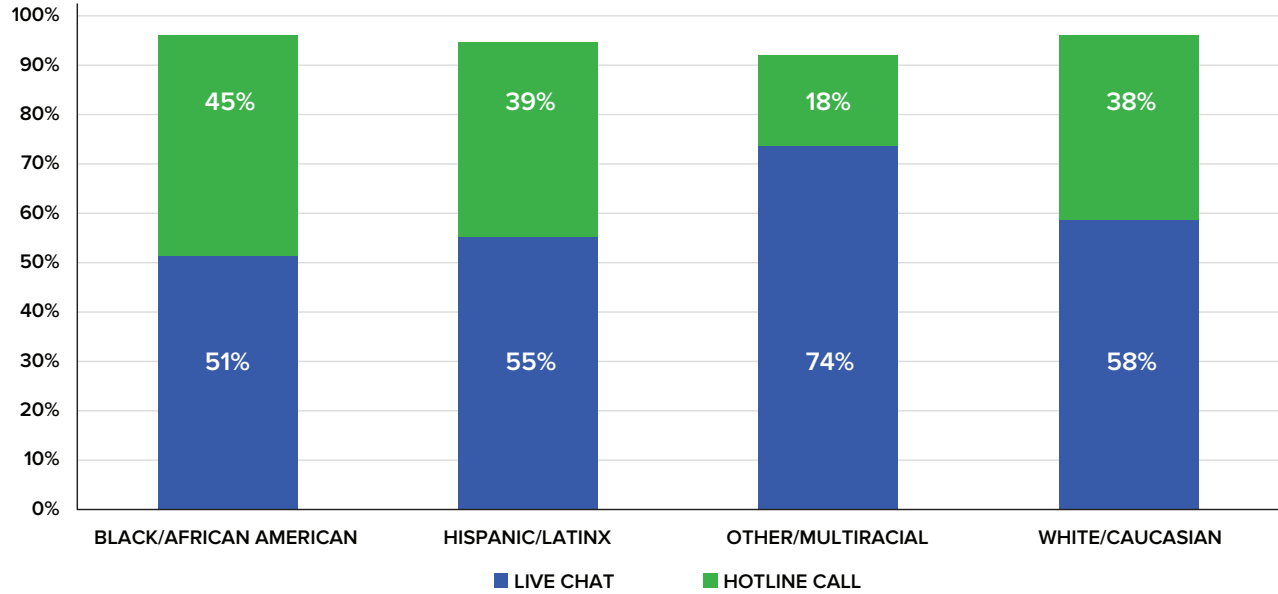
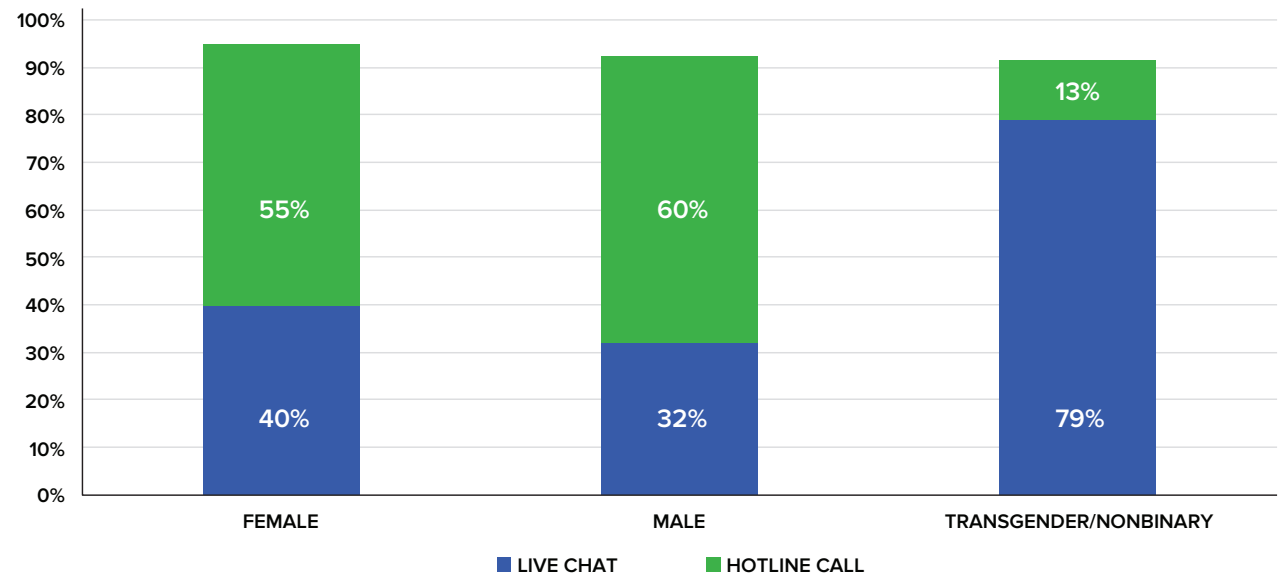


Figure 6 shows that contacts who identified as female and male more commonly called the hotline, but contacts who identified as transgender/nonbinary used the live chat service much more often.

FIGURE 6

Method of Contact by Gender, 2023



More than three-quarters of contacts (78%) learned about NRS through the internet, underscoring the importance of NRS’ outreach, advertising, and awareness campaigns through digital platforms, including social media. Seven percent of contacts learned about NRS through word of mouth, with fewer contacts following up from a previous call (5%) or learning about NRS through a social service agency (3%), school (3%), or NRS’ runaway prevention curriculum (2%). A smaller percentage of contacts learned about NRS through the additional methods outlined in Table 4.

TABLE 4
How Contacts Learned of NRS

	N	%
Internet	15,012	78%
Word of mouth	1,327	7%
Previous call	949	5%
Social service agency	535	3%
School	534	3%
NRS runaway prevention curriculum	335	2%
Law enforcement	210	1%
NRS partner organization	151	1%
Directory service	104	1%
NRS promotional material	67	<1%
Public service announcement	46	<1%
Total	19,270	99%

N = 19,270; missing n = 6,014, 24%

Note: Total does not equal 100% due to rounding.

WHY DO CONTACTS REACH THE NATIONAL RUNAWAY SAFELINE?

Young people who are experiencing homelessness or are at risk of experiencing homelessness face numerous challenges that lead to their reaching out to NRS for support. In 2023, crisis contacts typically reported one or more “presenting problems” or reasons for seeking crisis intervention services, with three-quarters of contacts reporting at least one presenting problem. The most common presenting problem was family dynamics (74%), including conflict with rules, problems with parents or siblings, blended family, divorce or custody issues, death of a family member, or pregnant/parenting young people. Other common presenting problems were economics (26%), emotional abuse (26%), mental health (22%), and peer/social issues (20%) that include problems with friends, relationships, or gangs (see Table 5).

TABLE 5
Reasons for Crisis Intervention

	N	%
Family dynamics	11,444	74%
Economics	4,062	26%
Emotional abuse	4,053	26%
Mental health	3,424	22%
Peer/social issues	3,059	20%
Transportation	2,973	19%
Physical abuse	2,597	17%
Neglect	1,883	12%
Youth/family services	1,466	9%
School/education	1,371	9%
Alcohol/substance use	847	5%
Judicial system	692	4%
LGBTQIA2S+ issues	687	4%
Sexual abuse	548	4%
Health	500	3%
Exploitation	186	1%

Note: Categories are not mutually exclusive and contacts can report multiple reasons for crisis intervention. The total N below is the total number of contacts who reported at least one reason for crisis intervention.

N = 15,480; missing n = 9,804, 39% missing

Are There Differences in Reasons for Crisis Intervention Based on Contacts' Characteristics?

We examined whether there were differences by contact age, race/ethnicity, and gender in why contacts reached out to NRS. The reasons for crisis intervention were not mutually exclusive, and we present differences in the top five most common reasons in 2023: family dynamics, economics, emotional abuse, mental health, and peer/social issues.

Figure 7 shows that contacts who were under age 12, between the ages of 12-14 and 15-17 reported family dynamics, economics, and emotional abuse about equally across groups, though contacts ages 15-17 more commonly reported economics. Contacts between the ages of 18-21 reported family dynamics the least often and economics the most often among all age groups. Contacts between the ages of 12-14 more commonly reported mental health, more than twice that number reported mental health for contacts ages 18-21. Adults (22+) more commonly reported peer/social issues than other age groups.

FIGURE 7

Reasons for Crisis Intervention by Age, 2023

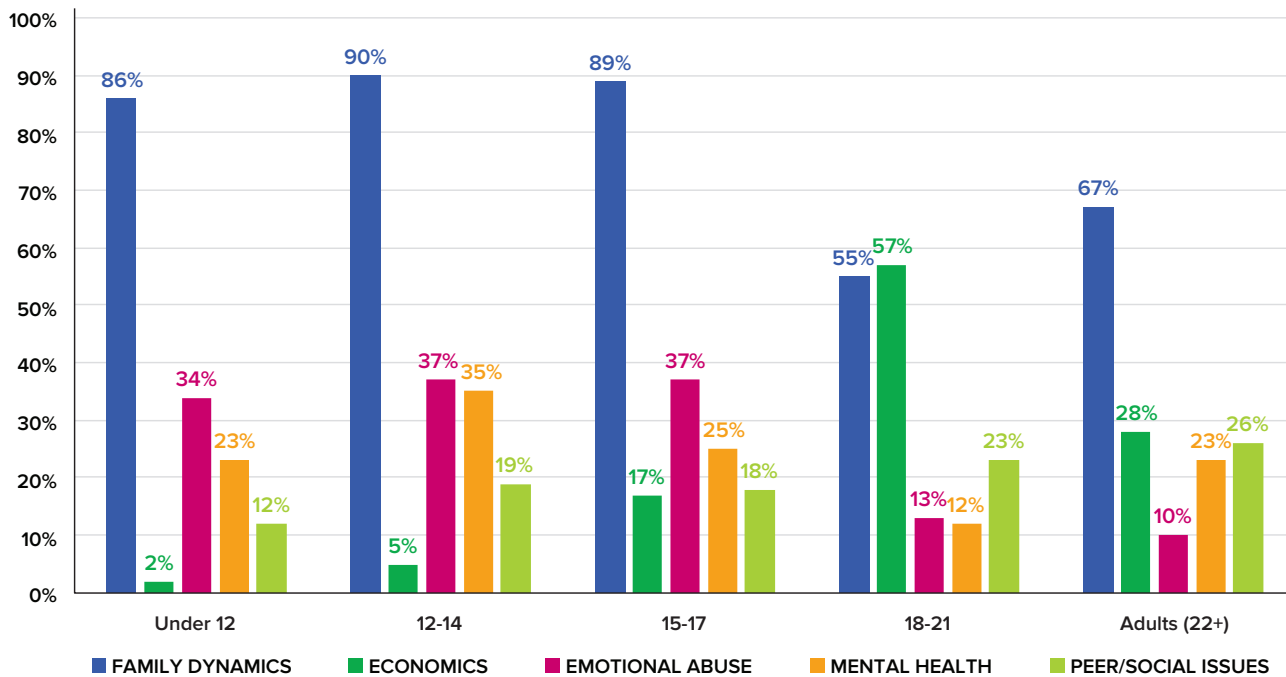


Figure 8 shows that contacts across race/ethnicity reported family dynamics as the most common reason for reaching out to NRS for support, with Other/Multiracial contacts at the highest percentage. In addition, Other/Multiracial contacts reported emotional abuse most often and reported mental health struggles at the same rate as White/Caucasian contacts, both more than other racial/ethnic groups. Black/African American contacts reported the highest percentage of economic issues.

FIGURE 8

Reasons for Crisis Intervention by Race/Ethnicity, 2023

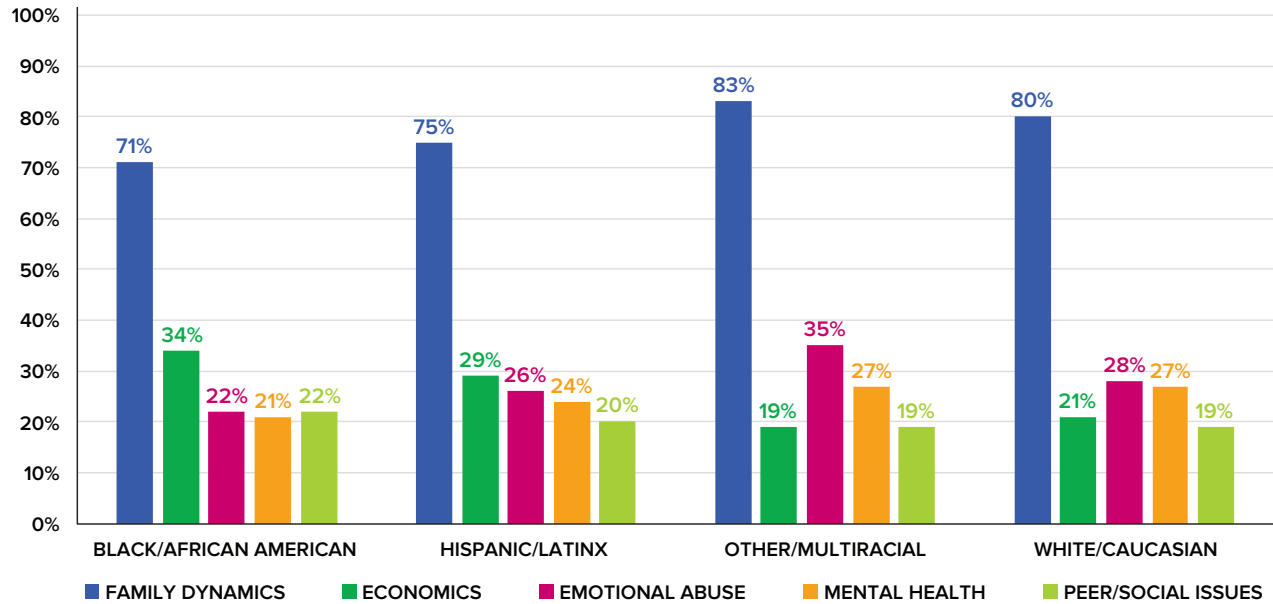
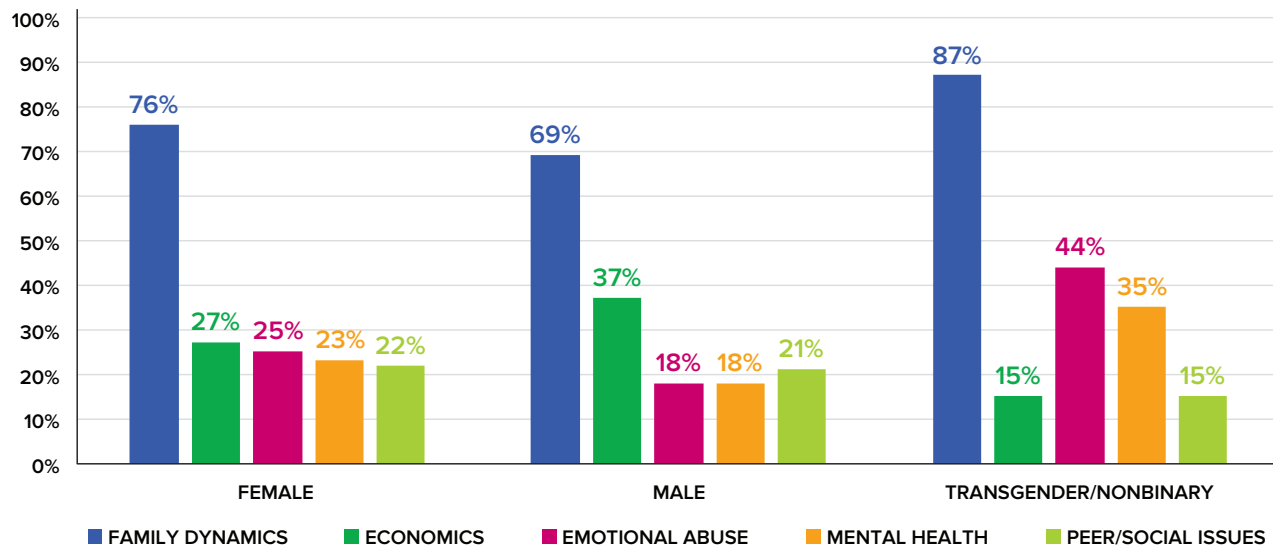


Figure 9 shows that contacts who identified as transgender/nonbinary reported family dynamics and emotional abuse most often and economics and peer/social issues the least often, compared with females and males.

FIGURE 9

Reasons for Crisis Intervention by Gender, 2023



Although many young people who are at risk of experiencing homelessness face problems that are very serious, a little more than one-third of those who reached out to NRS for crisis services (36%) did so from home. This suggests there is an opportunity for de-escalating a crisis prior to leaving home in the first place and underscores the importance of prevention efforts. When contacts shared the youth’s location, they most often said that youth who were not at home were staying with a friend (10%, see Table 6).

TABLE 6
Youth’s Location at Time of Contact

	N	%
Home	4,874	36%
Unknown to NRS staff/volunteers	2,869	21%
Friend	1,400	10%
Street	1,117	8%
Unknown to caller	768	6%
Other	722	5%
Relative	708	5%
School	339	3%
Shelter	329	2%
Recent acquaintance	157	1%
Greyhound	121	1%
Detention/police	86	1%
Work	36	<1%
Pimp/dealer	18	<1%
Total	13,544	100%

N = 13,544; missing *n* = 11,740, 46%

Are There Differences in Youth’s Location at Time of Contact Based on Contacts’ Characteristics?

We examined whether there were differences by contact age, race/ethnicity, and gender in youth’s location at the time of outreach to NRS.

Figure 10 shows that younger contacts most reported that the youth was at home at the time of outreach to NRS, with older contacts increasingly reaching out to NRS when the youth was already staying elsewhere. As a reminder, 74% of contacts in 2023 were youth reaching out on behalf of themselves.

FIGURE 10

Location at Time of Contact by Age, 2023

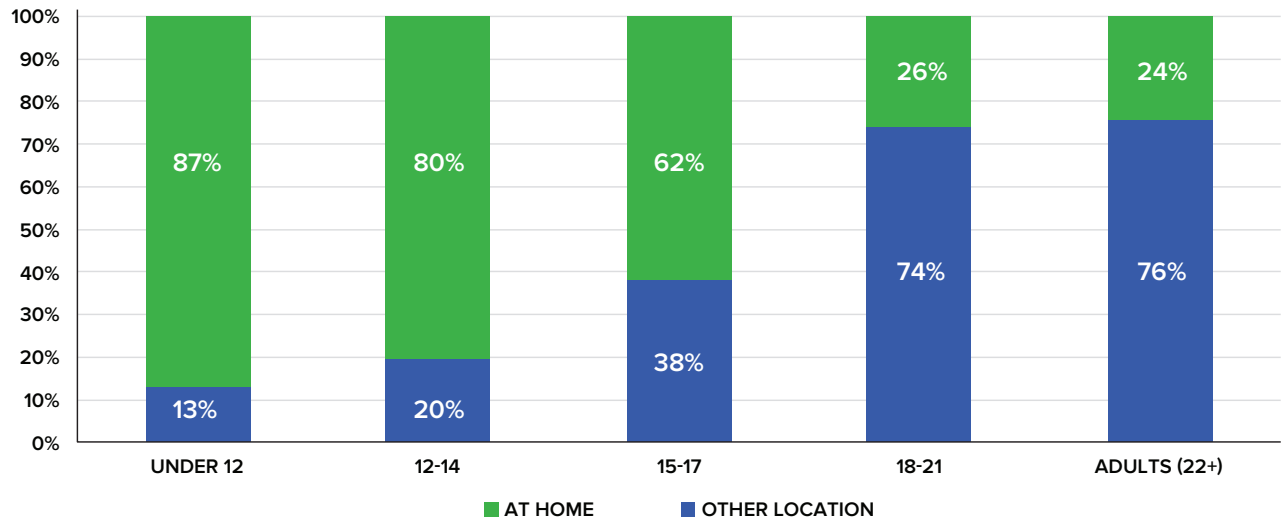


Figure 11 shows that, across racial/ethnic groups, contacts reporting that youth were at home versus another location were about equivalent, except for contacts who identified as Other/Multiracial, who most commonly reported that a youth was at home.

FIGURE 11

Location at Time of Contact by Race/Ethnicity, 2023

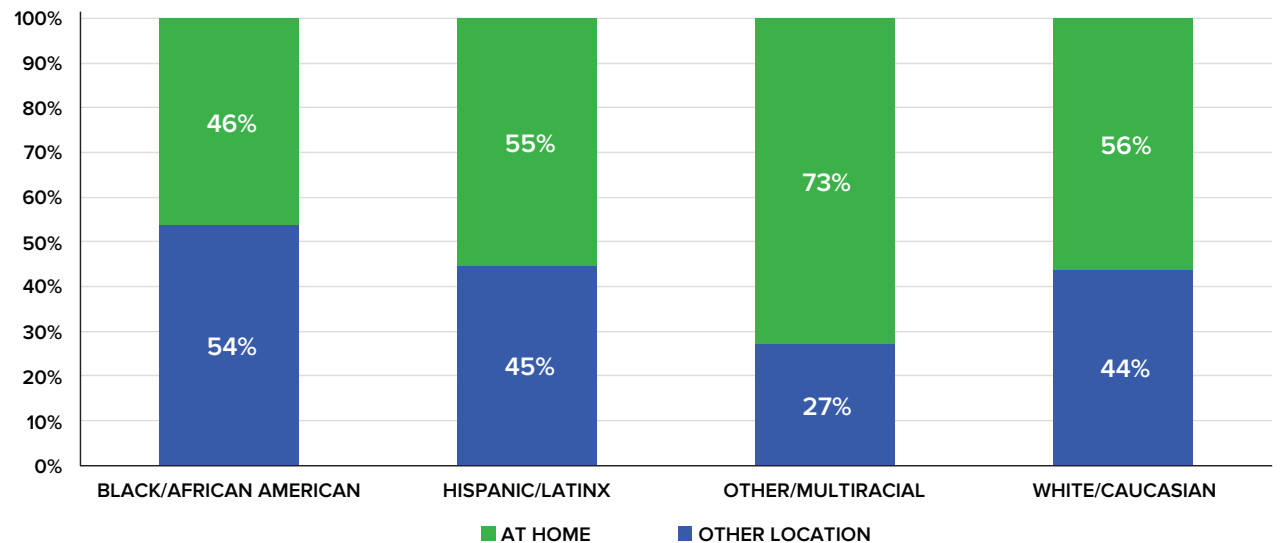
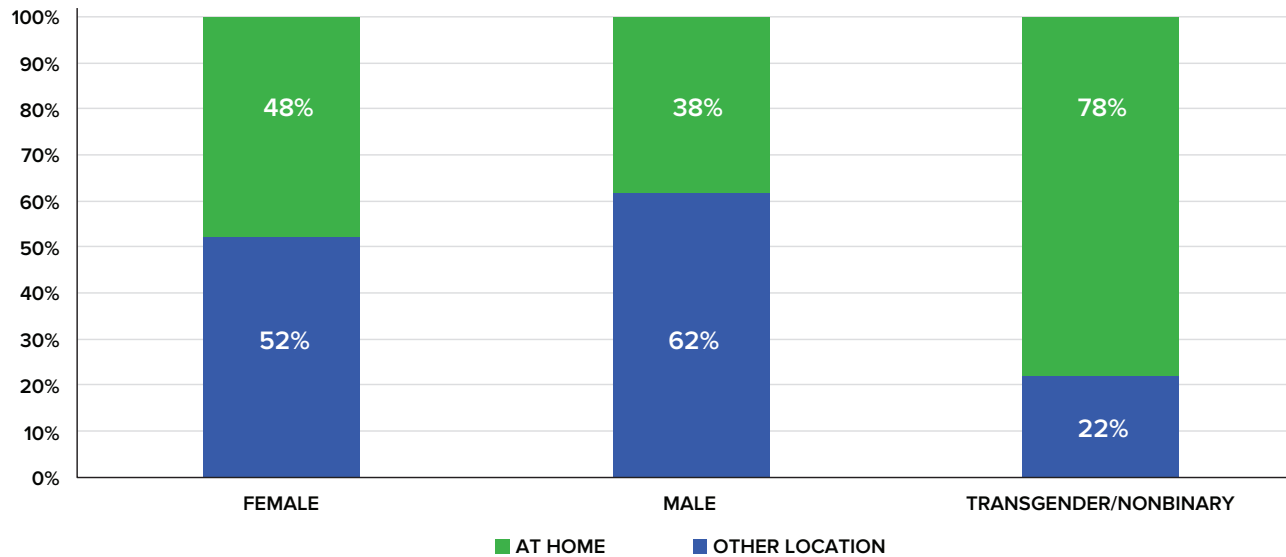


Figure 12 shows that contacts who identified as transgender/nonbinary more commonly reported that youth were at home at the time they reached out to NRS.

FIGURE 12

Location at Time of Contact by Gender, 2023



In addition, nearly three-quarters of crisis intervention contacts in 2023 involved youth who had not yet left home or been asked to leave: this includes 42% of youth who were in crisis and 26% of youth who were contemplating running away. Sixteen percent had already run away, 13% were experiencing homelessness, 3% had been asked to leave, and less than 1% were suspected of being missing (see Table 7).

TABLE 7

Youth’s Crisis Status at Time of Contact

	N	%
Youth in crisis	6,068	42%
Contemplating running	3,733	26%
Runaway	2,371	16%
Homeless	1,888	13%
Asked to leave	468	3%
Suspected missing	65	<1%
Total	14,593	100%

N = 14,593; missing n = 10,691, 42%

Are There Differences in Youth’s Crisis Status Based on Contacts’ Characteristics?

Finally, we examined whether there were differences by contact age, race/ethnicity, and gender in youth’s crisis status. We also examined whether there were differences in youth’s crisis status by the youth’s location at time of outreach to NRS.

Figure 13 shows that contacts who were under the age of 12 and between 12-14 least often reported that youth were experiencing homelessness and most often reported that youth were contemplating running away. Contacts between the ages of 18-21 and 22+ (adults) least often reported that youth were contemplating running away. Contacts between the ages of 18-21 most often reported that youth were in crisis.

FIGURE 13

Youth’s Crisis Status by Age, 2023

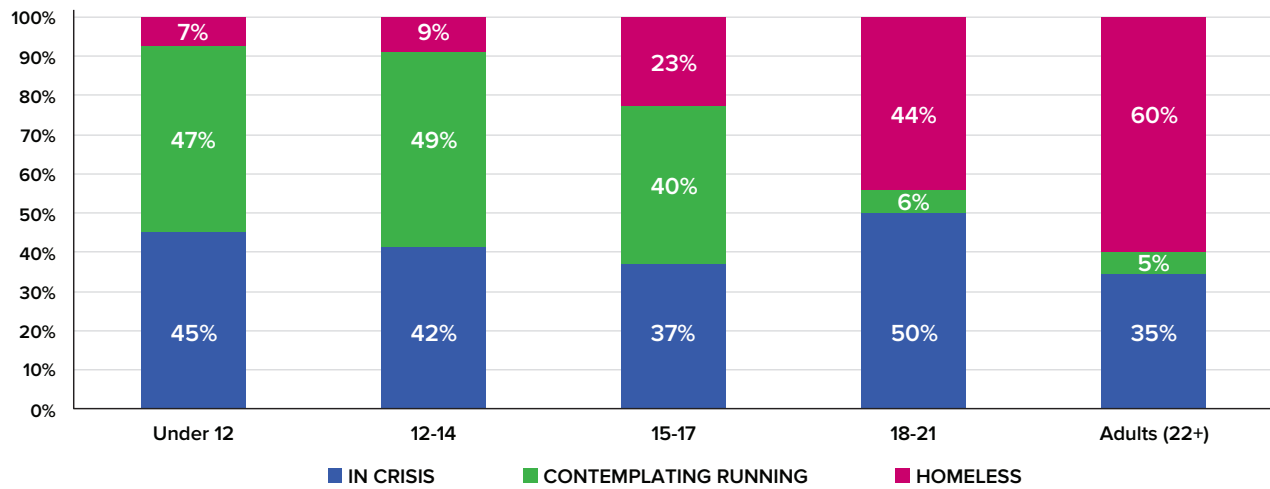
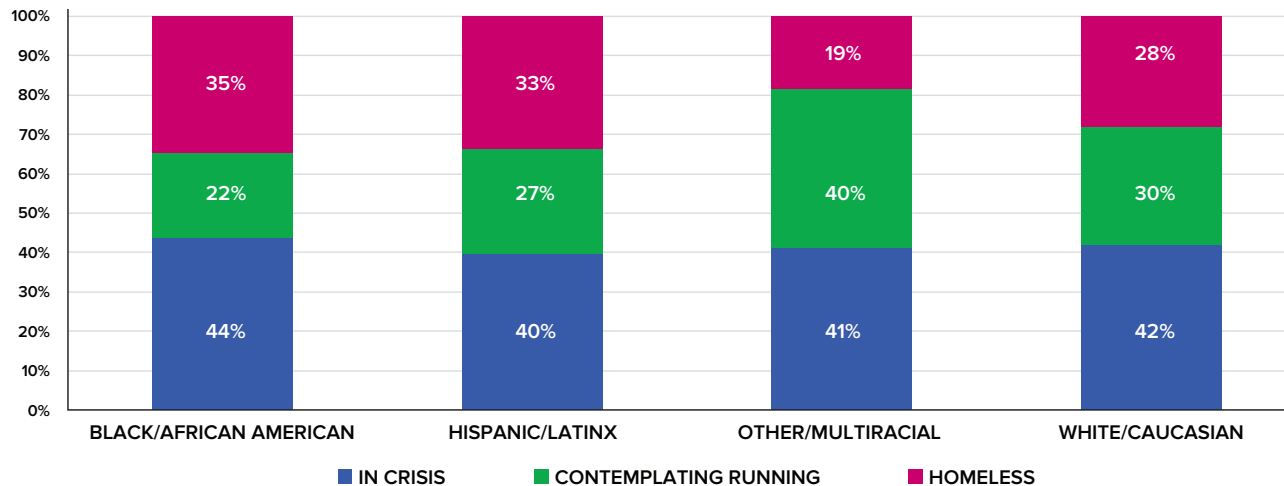


Figure 14 shows that contacts who identified as Other/Multiracial most often reported that youth were contemplating running away. There were few other differences in youth’s crisis status by race/ethnicity.

FIGURE 14

Youth’s Crisis Status by Race/Ethnicity, 2023

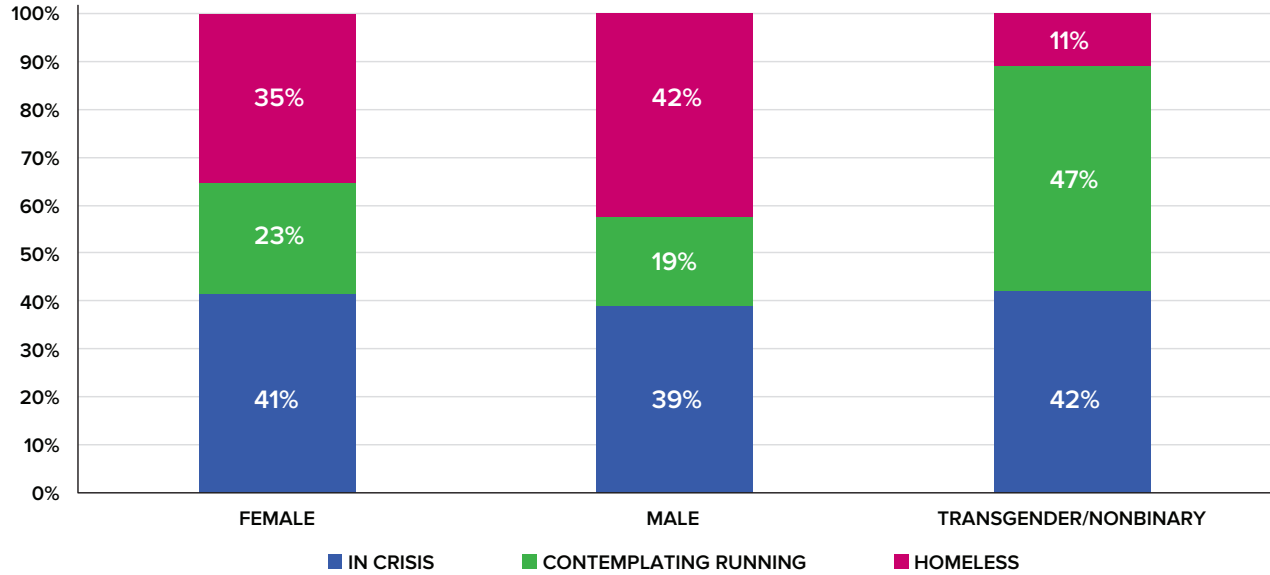


Note: Some totals do not add to 100% due to rounding.

Figure 15 shows that contacts who identified as transgender/nonbinary reported contemplating running away most often and experiencing homelessness least often. There were few differences between male and female contacts.

FIGURE 15

Youth’s Crisis Status by Gender, 2023

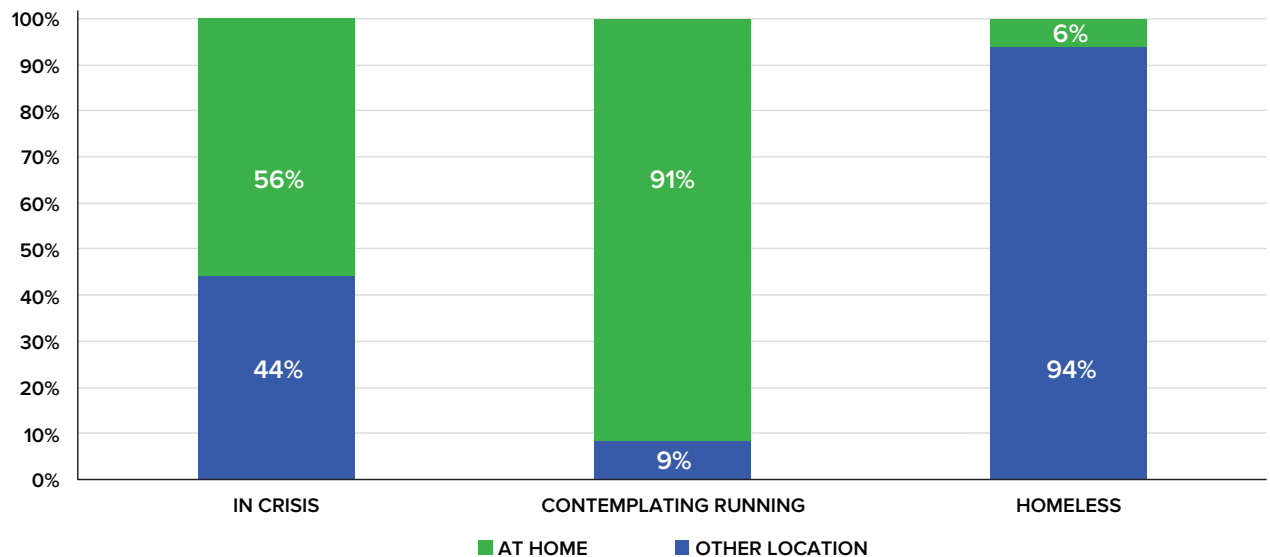


Note: Some totals do not add to 100% due to rounding.

Figure 16 shows that contacts who reported that youth were in crisis were about equally likely to say that a youth was at home or at some other location. Nearly all contacts who reported that a youth was contemplating running away also said the youth was at home at the time they reached out to NRS. Nearly all contacts who reported that a youth was already experiencing homelessness also said the youth was not at home.

FIGURE 16

Location at Time of Contact by Youth’s Crisis Status, 2023



In 2023, a relatively small number of total crisis contacts (15%) indicated how the youth was surviving while experiencing homelessness. The majority, 84%, reported that friends and family networks were the primary modes of survival, while 10% survived through personal funds, and another 12% relied on shelters (see Table 8). Due to the small number of contacts who reported how they survived while homeless, demographic breakdowns and five-year trends were not analyzed.

TABLE 8
How Youth Survived
While Homeless

	N	%
Friends/relatives	3,057	84%
Shelter	447	12%
Personal funds	360	10%
Employment	174	5%
Detention/police	45	1%
Survival sex	38	1%
Panhandling	35	1%
Stealing	16	<1%
Sex industry	15	<1%
Selling drugs	2	<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. The total N below is the total number of contacts who reported both being homeless and sharing information on how they survived.

In 2023, N = 3,658, missing n = 21,626, 86%

What Referrals and Resources Do Contacts Receive?

Referral Options

NRS’ intervention services aim to support youth who may be experiencing crisis and individuals who care about them. After evaluating the reasons for reaching out to NRS and the situation a young person is in, NRS crisis services staff and volunteers discuss potential services, resources, and supports that contacts might pursue to address the issues at hand. In 2023, NRS’ trauma-informed, solutions-focused approach led to 63% of crisis contacts discussing options for referrals or next steps, with many contacts discussing multiple referral options (see Table 9).

TABLE 9
Referral Options that
Contacts Discussed with
NRS Staff/Volunteers

	N	%
NRS services ⁵	15,165	96%
Family	6,408	41%
Friend	5,127	32%
Alternate youth housing	4,879	31%
Police	4,071	26%
Adult	3,403	22%
Home Free	2,504	16%
Self-help/coping skills	2,359	15%
Transitional living program	2,181	14%
Child abuse reporting	2,148	14%
School personnel	2,124	13%
Social services	2,082	13%
Mental health professional	1,411	9%
Legal services	1,406	9%
211 United Way	924	6%
Social worker	643	4%
Health professional	459	3%
Missing children number	459	3%
Religious organizations	342	2%
Juvenile court	317	2%
Transportation	189	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. The total N below is the total number of contacts who reported discussing at least one referral option with NRS staff/volunteers.

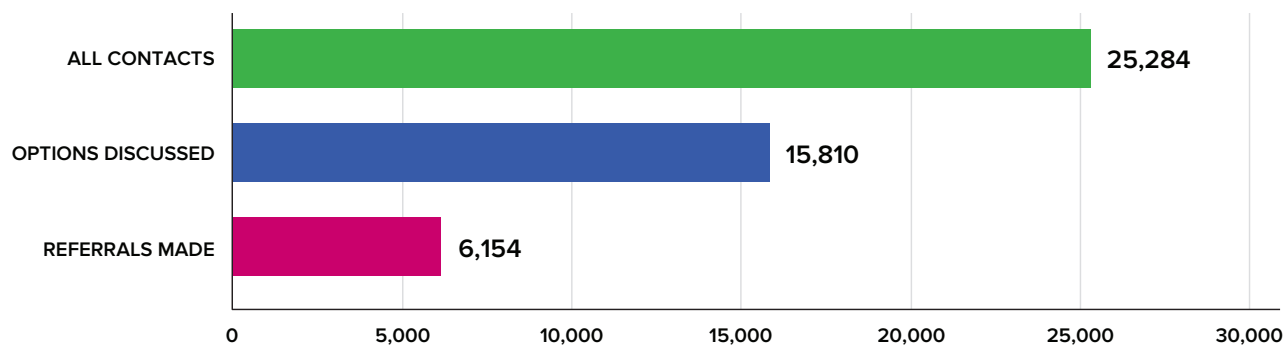
N = 15,810; missing n = 9,474, 38%

⁵ NRS services may also include referrals to the Home Free program.

Among crisis contacts who were interested in learning about referral options, NRS staff and volunteers recommended additional NRS services for nearly all of them (96%). Additional NRS services included the message service, conference calls, and the Home Free program. NRS also often explores what a young person’s natural supports may look like during crisis intervention, as a young person may identify a family member, friend, or other adult they trust that they would be willing to reach out to as a resource. In 2023, family (42%), friends (32%), and other adults (22%) were some of the most discussed referral options. Formal supports, such as alternative youth housing (31%) and police (26%) were also commonly discussed. Of the 25,284 total crisis contacts in 2023, nearly one-quarter (24%) ultimately obtained referrals for options discussed (see Figure 17).

FIGURE 17

Referral Options Discussed and Obtained, 2023



Home Free

Sixteen percent of crisis contacts who were interested in referral options learned about the Home Free program from NRS’ frontline staff. This service is a partnership between NRS and Greyhound Lines, Inc. that offers youth who have run away or are experiencing homelessness a free bus ticket to return home or to a safe, alternative living arrangement. In 2023, NRS made 2,504 referrals to the Home Free program. Of those referrals, 1,143 individuals started the process to use the Home Free program, resulting in 460 bus tickets being issued to young people. Additionally, 18 parent/guardian escorts received tickets through the Home Free program.

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

TABLE 10

Home Free Referrals, Uptake, and Outcomes

	N
NRS referrals to Home Free	2,504
Contacts in Home Free form	1,143
Youth had Home Free itinerary	460
Parent/Guardian escort tickets issued	18

2019-2023 TRENDS

We examined whether there were differences by contact age, gender, race/ethnicity, method of contact, reason for crisis intervention, youth’s location at time of contact, and youth’s crisis status at time of contact over time from 2019-2023.

How Have Demographic Characteristics of Contacts Changed Over Time?

We examined whether there were changes in demographic characteristics of contacts between 2019 and 2023. Figures 18, 19 and 20 show trends in age, racial/ethnic composition, and gender of contacts over time.

Figure 18 illustrates the changes in the age composition of contacts who reached out to NRS for crisis intervention services between 2019 and 2023. In 2019, 15- to 17-year-olds comprised about half of contacts, but by 2023, they comprised only 36% of the sample. Between 2019 and 2023, the proportion of contacts between the ages of 12-14, 18-21, and 22+ all increased modestly, with the proportion of contacts between the ages of 12-14 receding to 2019 levels by 2023.

FIGURE 18

Trends in Age Composition of Contacts, 2019-2023

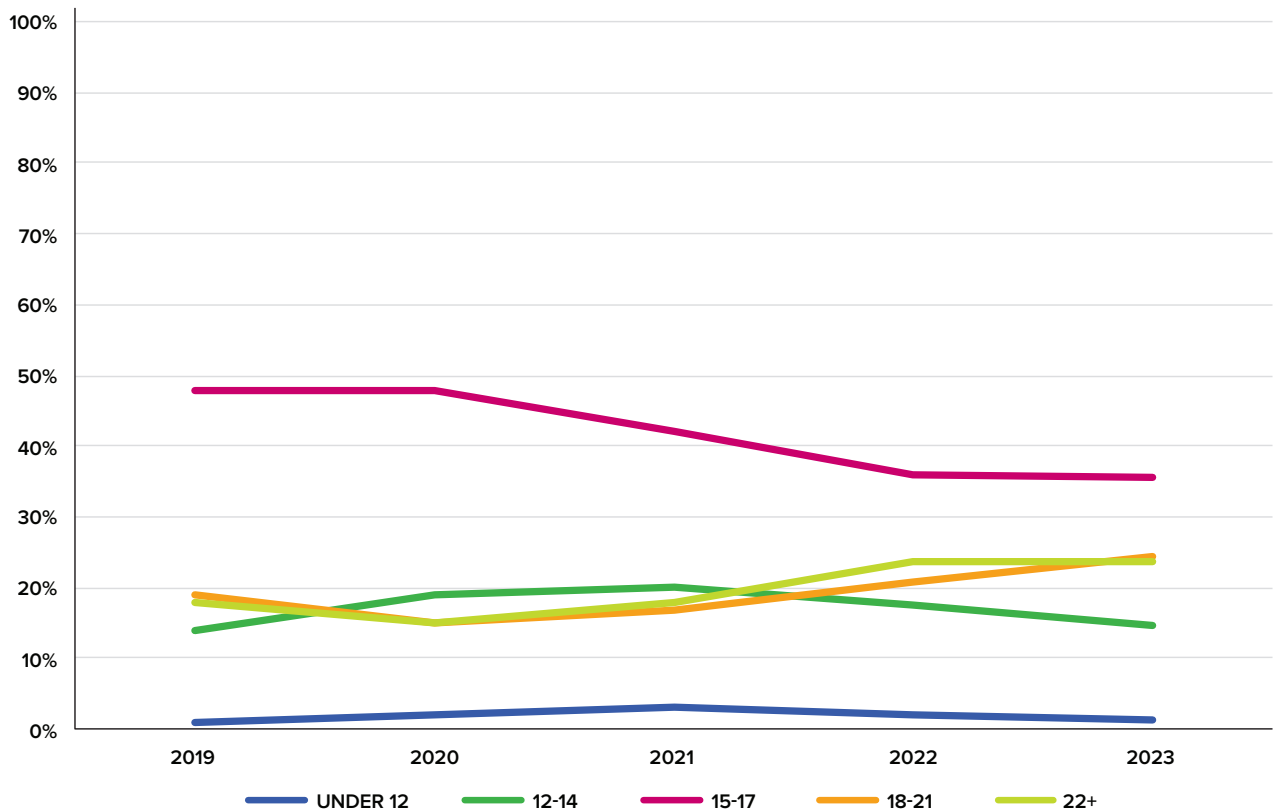


Figure 19 shows the changes in the racial/ethnic composition of contacts who reached out to NRS for crisis intervention services between 2019 and 2023. This analysis combines American Indian/Alaska Native, Asian, Hawaiian/Pacific Islander, and Multiracial races/ethnicities into the “Other/Multiracial” category. The proportion of contacts self-identifying as White/Caucasian decreased from 50% in 2019 to 42% in 2023, whereas the proportion of contacts identifying as Black/African American increased from 20% in 2019 to 28% in 2023. Proportions of contacts identifying as Hispanic/Latinx and Other/Multiracial were similar over time.

FIGURE 19
Trends in Racial/Ethnic Composition of Contacts, 2019-2023

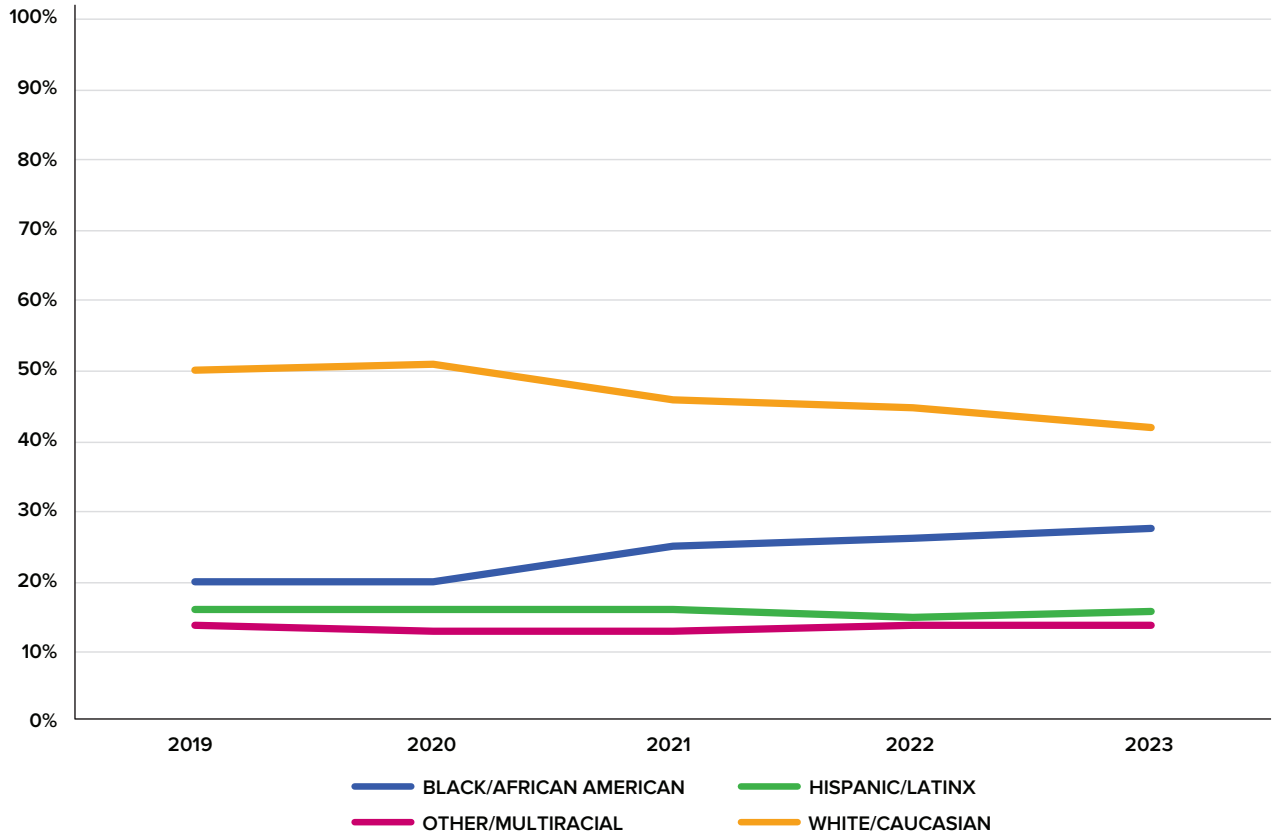
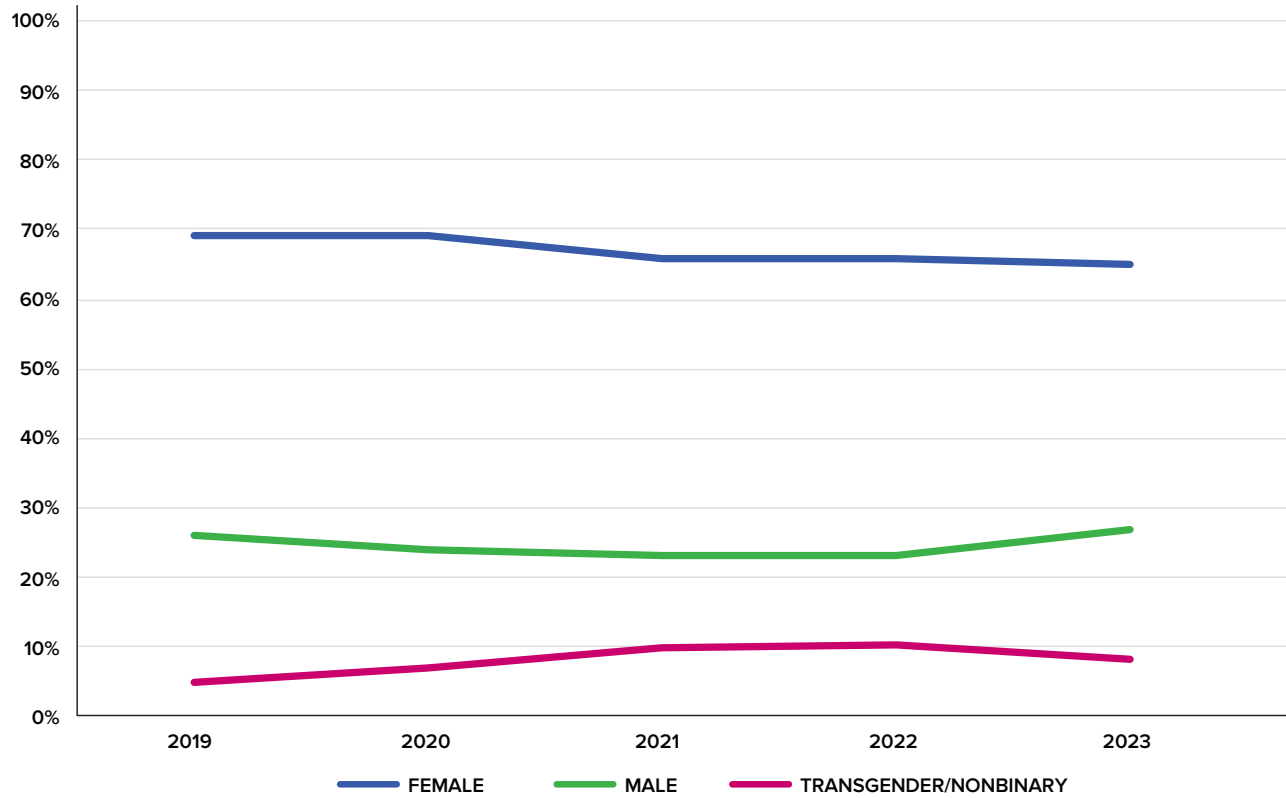


Figure 20 illustrates the changes in the gender composition of contacts who reached out to NRS for crisis intervention services between 2019 and 2023. From 2019 to 2023, a much larger proportion of females, compared with males, has consistently reached out for support (69% vs. 26% in 2019, and 65% vs. 27% in 2023, respectively). Between 2019 and 2023, the proportion of contacts who reported identifying as transgender/nonbinary increased from 5% in 2019 to 10% in 2021, but then receded back to 8% in 2023.

FIGURE 20
Trends in Gender Composition of Contacts, 2019-2023

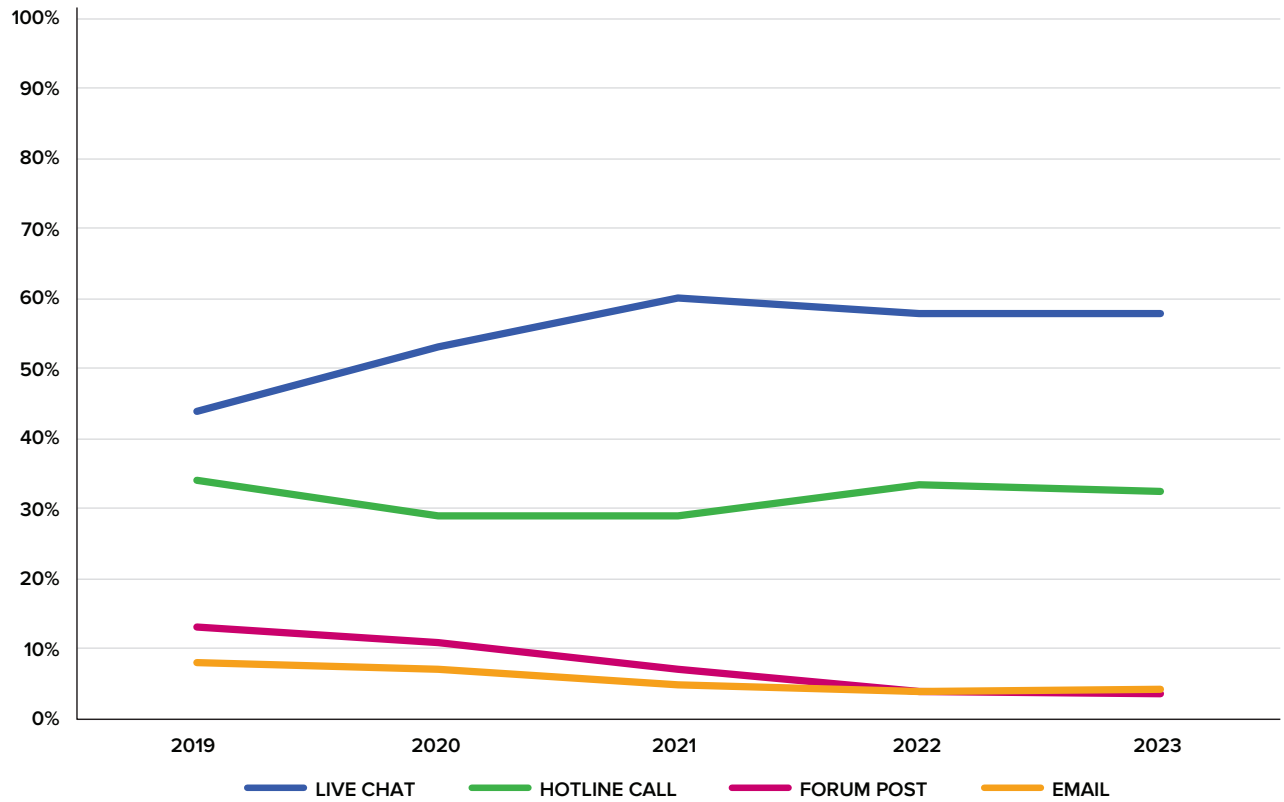


How Have Methods of Contact Changed Over Time?

Figure 21 shows how methods of contact have changed over time, excluding live text, which launched in September 2023. The proportion of contacts using the live chat service increased from 44% in 2019 to 58% in 2023. The proportion of contacts interacting through forum posts and emails modestly decreased from 2019 to 2023.

FIGURE 21

Trends in Method of Contact, 2019 – 2023

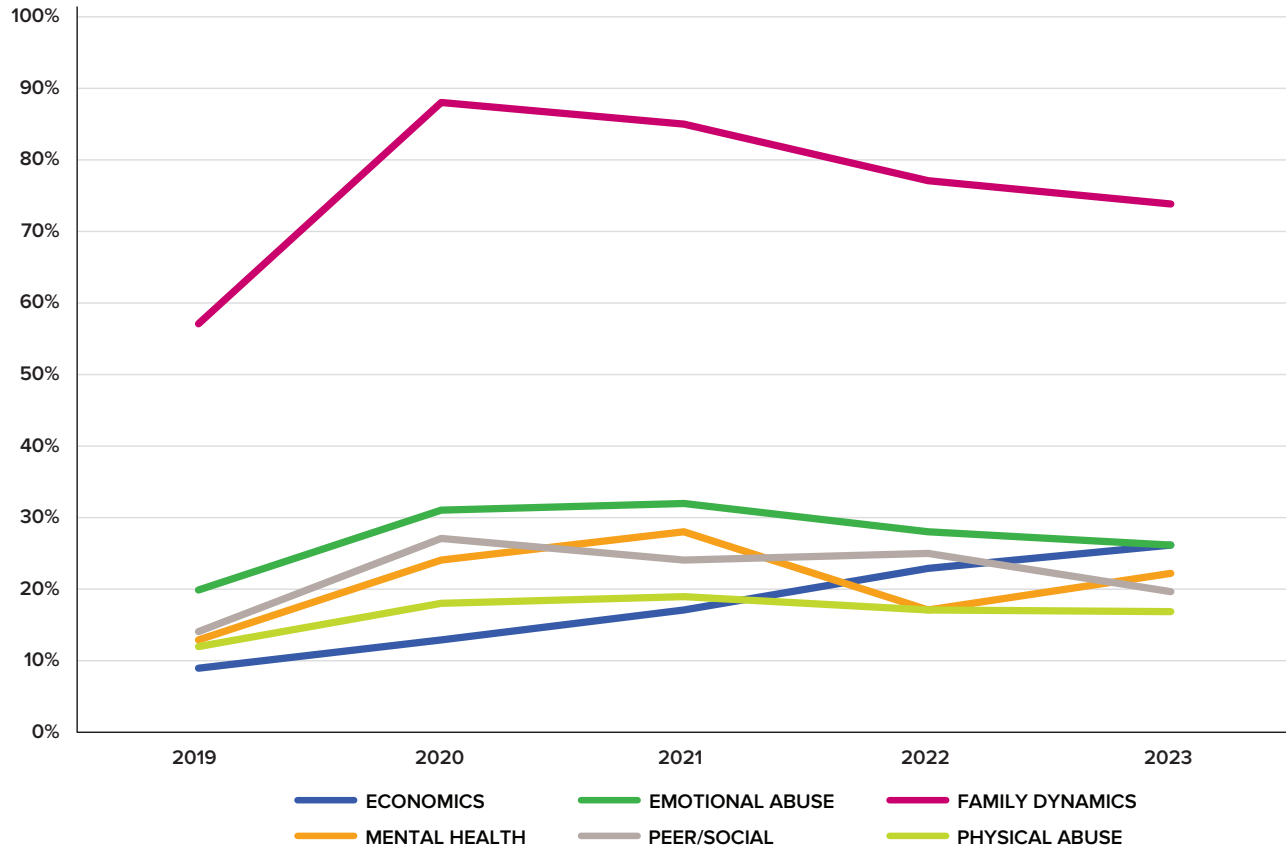


How Have the Reasons for Crisis Intervention Changed Over Time?

Figure 22 shows the proportion of contacts who reported the top six most common reasons for crisis intervention services. The top six (versus five) most common reasons for outreach are included here due to variance in the top five presenting issues over the five-year period. Between 2019 and 2020, contacts reporting family dynamics increased from 57% to 88%, and then decreased to 74% by 2023. Economics also increased steadily from 9% in 2019 to 26% in 2023. Physical abuse remained in the top five presenting issues for 2019-2022 but dropped off in 2023.

FIGURE 22

Trends in Reasons for Crisis Intervention, 2019-2023

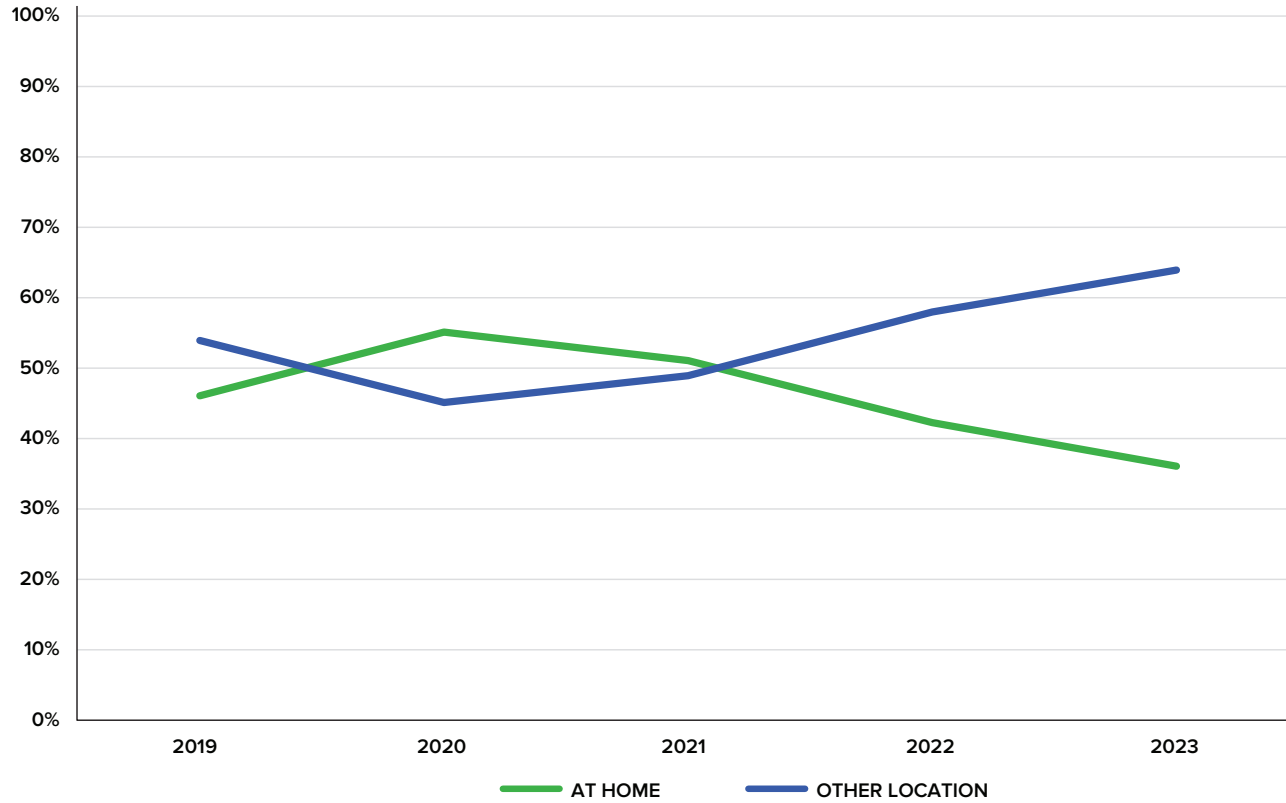


How Has Youth’s Location at Time of Contact Changed Over Time?

Figure 23 shows the proportion of contacts who reported that youth were at home at the time they reached out to NRS compared with being somewhere else. Between 2019 and 2020, the proportion of contacts who reached out to NRS while a youth was at home increased from 46% to 55%, which then fell to 36% by 2023.

FIGURE 23

Trends in Youth Being at Home at Time of Contact with NRS, 2019-2023

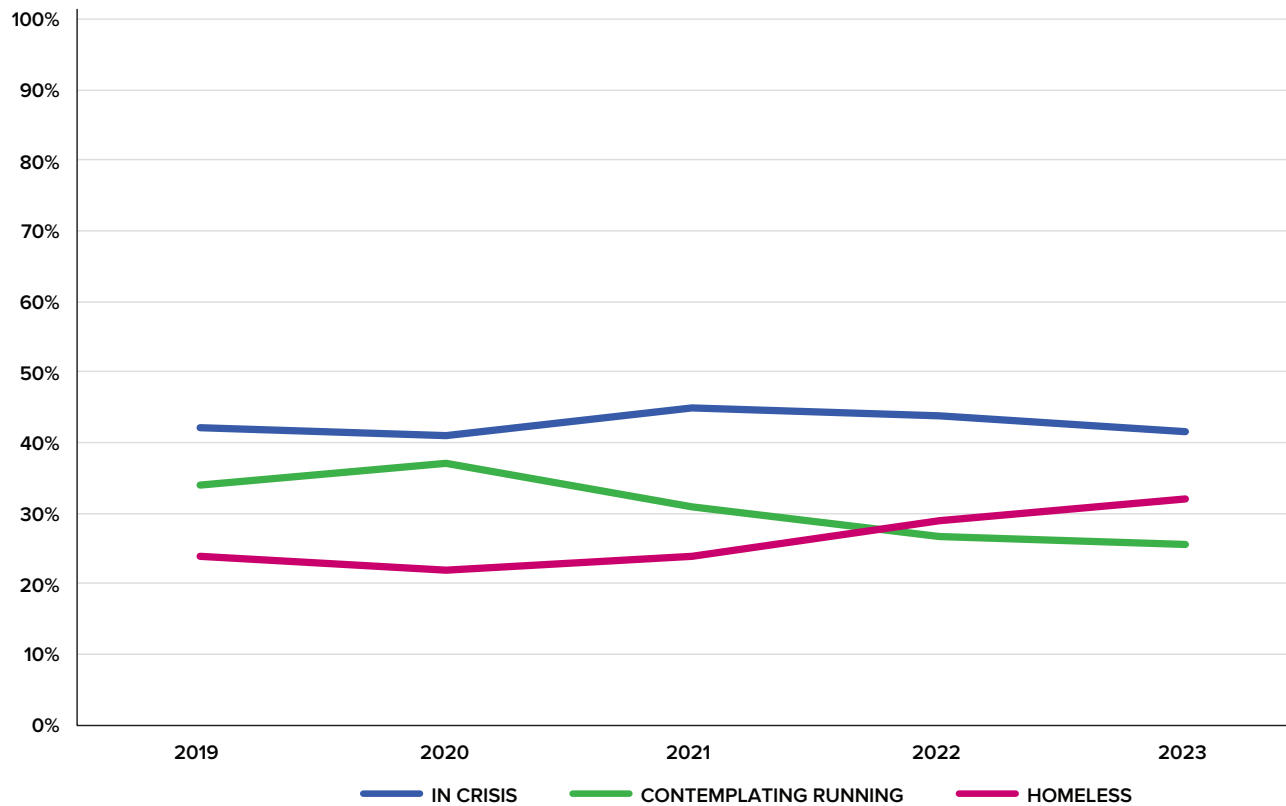


How Has Youth’s Crisis Status at Time of Contact Changed Over Time?

Figure 24 shows changes in the distribution of contacts by youth’s crisis status at the time at which they reached out to NRS, comparing youth in crisis, youth who were contemplating running away, and youth who were experiencing homelessness, including those who had run away, been asked to leave, or were suspected to be missing. Between 2019 and 2023, the proportion of contacts who were contemplating running away decreased from a high of 37% in 2020 to a low of 26% in 2023, whereas the proportion of contacts that were experiencing homelessness increased from 24% in 2019 to 32% in 2023. The proportion of contacts that reported being in crisis increased from 42% in 2019 to 45% in 2021, and then returned to 42% in 2023.

FIGURE 24

Trends in Youth’s Crisis Status at Time of Contact with NRS, 2019-2023



CONCLUSION

The findings from this report highlight the diversity in the population of contacts who reach out to NRS for crisis intervention services. The bulk of contacts are young people advocating on their own behalf who want to connect with NRS for support and resources to address issues related to their safety and well-being. During each crisis interaction, NRS provides non-judgmental, non-sectarian, and non-directive support that aims to empower young people.

The contacts who reached out to NRS for support in 2023 were disproportionately White/Caucasian and female. The bulk of contacts under the age of 18 reported concerns about family dynamics, followed by economics and emotional abuse.

In 2023, more than 75% of contacts learned about NRS through the internet and nearly 60% of contacts reached out through the live chat service. As more young people learn about NRS' live text option, contacts may come to prefer the ease, comfort, and security of texting that they find with the live chat service.

In terms of referrals, alternate youth housing was the most discussed referral option after NRS' services, friends, and family. This may point to valuable opportunities for additional training for NRS' crisis intervention services team to consider which contacts could benefit from formal (e.g., transitional housing) or informal (e.g., host homes) housing arrangements, which may build on young people's natural supports.

2023 Demographic Differences

This report revealed striking demographic differences in who reaches out to NRS, how they reach out, and why they reach out. Notably, in 2023, contacts under the age of 18 were much more likely to reach out via live chat than hotline calls, as were contacts who identified as Other/Multiracial and transgender/nonbinary, compared with their counterparts of other racial/ethnic and gender identities. Contacts under the age of 18 more often reported family dynamics and emotional abuse as reasons for reaching out, as compared with contacts ages 18 and older, who more commonly reported economics as a reason for outreach. Of note, contacts between the ages of 12-14 more commonly reported mental health as their reason for reaching out for support compared with other age groups. Family dynamics and emotional abuse were also most reported by transgender/nonbinary, compared with males and females. Young people aged 18-21 years old were most likely to report mental health as a reason for outreach. They were also most likely to report being in crisis, as opposed to experiencing homelessness or contemplating running away, and reaching out to NRS from somewhere other than their homes.

Trends Over Time (2019-2023)

Drawing on five years of crisis intervention services data, we were able to illuminate trends from 2019 to 2023 in who reaches out to NRS, how they reach out, and why they reach out. These analyses captured the height of the COVID-19 pandemic, which dramatically altered how people interacted with each other and how society operated, specifically between 2020 to 2021. Some trends that emerged early in the pandemic, such as an increase in the proportion of young people under age 15 reaching out to NRS and a larger proportion of contacts reporting family dynamics and mental health concerns, have either leveled off or reversed. For instance, at the height of the pandemic in 2020, 55% of contacts reported youth were at home at the time of outreach to NRS, which had dropped to 36% by 2023, a substantial decrease.

Further, the proportion of contacts who reported that a young person was experiencing homelessness increased from 2019-2023, while the proportion of those contemplating running away decreased.

Other trends that emerged and have maintained over this five-year period have been a decrease in the proportion of White/Caucasian contacts and an increase in the proportion of Black/African American contacts as well as an increase in the use of the live chat service and a decrease in the use of forums and emails. These findings point to the value of NRS' crisis intervention services, which are flexible and can meet the diverse needs of young people and those who care about them, demonstrating equity no matter the circumstances.

Emerging Opportunities for Prevention

In 2023, one-third of contacts (36%) said that a young person was still home at the time they reached out to NRS. While this is lower than the proportion of contacts reported in 2020 (55%), there remain significant prevention opportunities through outreach to families and households with youth.

From 2019-2023, family dynamics has remained the top presenting problem, emphasizing the importance of exploring family structure and enhancing family strengthening programs to serve as an avenue for homelessness prevention. These programs can improve family relationships and foster supportive family environments, leading to young people feeling safer and more secure at home. Further, connecting families with needed resources such as healthcare, mental health services, financial and housing assistance, among others, may help to lessen parental/caregiver stress, reduce conflict, and improve family relationships.

In addition, contacts under the age of 18 were more likely to be at home, suggesting the best chance for prevention is earlier in young people's lives, before adversities and risks escalate to an experience of homelessness. Findings on youth's crisis status add credibility to this conclusion, with the chances of youth experiencing homelessness increasing with age. As compared with their peers, contacts who identified as Other/Multiracial and as transgender/nonbinary more often reported that a youth was at home at the time of outreach to NRS. Contacts representing these subgroups also more often reported contemplating running away, as compared with their peers. Thus, there may be additional, unique prevention opportunities for youth who identify as Other/Multiracial and as transgender/nonbinary. Programs should continue to develop culturally responsive and gender-affirming prevention and intervention programs that might help ensure the stability and safety of young people who have not yet become homeless.

Furthermore, from 2019-2023 there was an increase in the use of live chat services, and NRS began offering live text services in 2023, suggesting that the functionality of these contact methods present an accessible way for contacts to reach out. Ensuring young people feel safe, comfortable, and secure when reaching out for help, and continuing to normalize help-seeking behaviors through public service and awareness campaigns, may open the door to valuable new opportunities for youth homelessness prevention.

2023 HIGHLIGHTS

Report Summary

- 74% of contacts were youth who connected directly with NRS on their own behalf
- Just over half of contacts were under the age of 18 (52%)
- Contacts who connected with NRS were primarily White/Caucasian and female
- 58% of contacts used NRS' live chat feature and 33% called the hotline
- The most frequently reported reasons for seeking crisis intervention were family dynamics (74% of contacts), economics (26%), emotional abuse (26%), mental health (22%), and peer/social issues (22%)
- At the time of outreach, contacts said that 36% of youth were still at home
- Contacts reported that 42% of youth were in crisis and 26% were contemplating running away
- 63% of contacts discussed referral options with NRS crisis services staff and volunteers
- 24% of contacts received at least one referral for additional services

2023 by the Numbers

- 14,648 live chats
- 8,219 hotline calls
- 1,091 emails
- 936 forum posts
- 390 live texts
- 6,154 contacts accepted referrals
- 460 Home Free youth tickets issued



National Runaway Safeline (NRS)

Founded in 1971, the National Runaway Safeline (NRS) is a national non-profit organization committed to ensuring youth in crisis, youth who have run away, and youth experiencing homelessness or housing instability are safe and off the streets.

As a national leader and home for the federally supported National Communication System (NCS), NRS provides crisis services 24 hours a day, 7 days a week, to youth and families, offers prevention tools and educational resources, and collaborates with national and local nonprofit partners to raise much needed awareness about youth homelessness. Each year, NRS makes more than 125,000 connections to hope and help through hotline (1-800-RUNAWAY), online (1800RUNAWAY.org), and prevention services.

For additional information, visit www.1800RUNAWAY.org or follow us on **Facebook**, **Instagram**, and **Threads** @1800RUNAWAY and on **TikTok** and **YouTube** @nationalrunawaysafeline.

Chapin Hall



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 develop 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.

Family and Youth Services Bureau (FYSB)



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.