

Most runaway teens return home with help of family ties, study finds

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(PhysOrg.com) -- Runaways who maintain contact with pro-social peers and have parental support, especially from their mothers, tend to return home.

The teen years can be a tumultuous time, as many parents know, a time when adolescents begin to flex their mental muscles, testing boundaries and turning to peers rather than parents for advice. Sometimes emotions and arguments can become so intense that things get out of hand and the child runs away.

While past research on runaway teens has tended to focus on the antisocial and high-risk behaviors of taking to the streets and the causes leading to kids running away — including [family violence](#) and abuse — a new UCLA study has found that common stereotypes of homeless youth are largely inaccurate.

Reporting in the current edition of the Journal of Research on Adolescence, Norweeta G. Milburn, a research psychologist in the department of psychiatry at the Semel Institute for Neuroscience and Human Behavior at UCLA, and colleagues found that most homeless young people actually return home soon after they leave and, in terms of development as adolescents, are possibly less chronically troubled than their reputation may indicate.

The keys seem to be maintaining relationships with pro-social or mainstream peers (non-runaways), staying in school and the support of

parents, especially a teen's mother. All of these factors influence teens to return home.

"Our finding goes against the grain of what most people envision a homeless teenager's life to be — a life filled with maltreatment, substance abuse, disorganization, conflict and violence," Milburn said.

"While that is certainly true of chronic runaways, in fact, more than two-thirds of newly homeless youth leave the streets, resolve their family differences and go home. Further, the key appears to be that a family intervention, no matter how brief, can improve the chances that new runaways will go home and stay home."

Most research has focused on the one-third of adolescents who chronically run away. A frequent cause of that, Milburn said, is indeed family abuse.

"Parents of adolescents who become long-term homeless often have a history of substance use and physical abuse that lessens their ability to parent effectively and increases the propensity for conflict," she said.

The family, however, can play a positive role in the lives of homeless adolescents, Milburn noted, especially newly homeless adolescents.

"For these teens, relationships with their family may be problematic, but being on the streets may be worse," she said.

For the study, the researchers followed 183 newly homeless adolescents over a two-year period in Los Angeles and found that staying engaged with their pro-social peers and staying in school influenced the runaway [teens](#) to return home. Particularly key was support from their mothers.

"The importance of a supportive mother is striking and appears to be especially influential for the teen," Milburn said. "A majority of the

newly homeless adolescents in this sample reported having a mother from whom they could receive emotional support."

Most important of all, though, said Milburn, is early intervention, "before [family](#) relationships deteriorate and negative peer influences take hold."

Provided by University of California Los Angeles ([news](#) : [web](#))

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