

# Dead-End

**T**he first time Maria\* ran away, she didn't bring anything with her. "I wanted to be free and independent," says 15-year-old Maria, who admits she was "hanging out with the wrong people." Maria's mother didn't want her daughter going to parties and had just taken away her phone. So Maria cut school with a friend who had previously run away; they thought they would stay at someone's house for the night.

Instead, they ended up on the streets of a dangerous neighborhood in San Francisco. "It felt unsafe," says Maria. "There was lots of drug use and prostitution." After three days, Maria returned home because she missed her family. But she ran away again and again. "I always thought I'd be staying with another person, but I always ended up on the street," she says.


*\*Names have been changed.*

Why would teens like Maria give up the comforts of home for uncertainty and danger? "It's rarely just one thing," says Maureen Blaha, executive director of the National Runaway Switchboard (NRS), of the reasons that teens sometimes run away. "It's been building up, and they think anything is better than home." But even if things are bad at home, life on the street could be much worse.

## What Can Go Wrong

One risk of running away is finding yourself with no place to sleep. Many runaway youths actually do manage to stay with relatives or friends at first. They may attempt what's called "couch surfing"—going from one friend's house to another night after night. But eventually, they'll probably have to hit the road and search for a shelter or another place to crash.

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**Teens who leave home may not know  
what they're running to.**

By Julie Mehta

# Street

Studies show that 12 percent of runaway and homeless youths have spent at least one night sleeping outside—on a park bench, under a bridge, or on a rooftop.

Finding a bed is just one of many challenges runaway teens face. They live in danger of being robbed or attacked. A study of teen runaways in the Midwest found that more than 20 percent had been beaten up multiple times, and more than a quarter had been robbed.

Any food and money that runaways manage to save or acquire quickly runs out, and hunger often provokes desperate measures. “When kids run from home, initially they are very vulnerable to perpetrators and often become victims of crime,” says Blaha. “After a while, in order to survive, they become the perpetrators. So they may be hungry and go into a convenience store and steal something

to eat, or they may be cold and will do whatever it takes in order to have a place to sleep.”

Another big problem for runaway teens is substance abuse. The study of midwestern runaways found that roughly two-thirds had used alcohol and marijuana, and more than 20 percent had tried methamphetamines and hallucinogenic drugs. Runaways may think drugs will help numb the grim realities of their lives.

## Who Runs?

You may know someone who has risked these hazards by running away. Between 1.6 million and 2.8 million youths run away each year, according to studies cited on the NRS Web site. And while 57 percent of runaways who call NRS have been away from home less than a week, 24 percent have been away as long as a month and 3 percent longer than six months.





**If teens  
decide to  
leave home,  
the door isn't  
always closed  
behind them.**

Getty Images

Almost half the runaways calling the switchboard say family conflict is the reason they left home. “Typically this is not just a child problem—it’s a family problem,” says Ted Feinberg, assistant executive director of the National Association of School Psychologists. Situations such as divorce and new stepparents can make the roller-coaster ride of adolescence feel even more turbulent.

For 15-year-old Kev,\* the problems started long before he ran away. He’d had conflicts with his stepdad for years, especially after his half brother and half sister were born. “I know a lot of kids who’ve run away,” Kev says, “and it’s usually because they don’t feel loved at home. I used to get all the attention.”

The tension escalated when Kev fell in love with a girl his stepdad didn’t like. “My mouth often gets me into trouble,” the Pennsylvania teen admits. He’d been grounded for two weeks

with no phone or TV privileges. Then he got a call from his girlfriend, and his stepdad “flipped out.” Kev left home and ended up at a shelter.

Other teens run away because they fear telling their parents about a pregnancy or revealing they are gay. Causes that don’t involve family can include a recent breakup, difficulties at school, substance abuse, or mental health issues such as depression. In rare cases, teens may even be lured away by someone they met online, realizing too late that the person is not what he or she claimed to be.

### **Fleeing From Pain**

It’s easy to look at the examples above and assume that runaways should just work out their problems with their families. But in other cases, talking things out isn’t the answer—teens are actually in danger. Some young people run away from homes where they face abuse, neglect, or family members battling their own drug or alcohol problems.

The trouble began for 17-year-old Ryan\* when he was a toddler and his mentally ill father took off. Ryan’s mother became addicted to crystal meth and physically abused him. Social services eventually placed the Arizona teen with his uncles in Nevada, but the abuse continued there.

One day he decided to leave his uncles and go back to his mom, despite knowing she was still on drugs. “I had school and football practice in the morning, and I just got on the bus and went back to Arizona,” Ryan remembers. But once he got there, “things went even more downhill.”

Ryan stayed with his mother at a hotel until she was arrested; then he had nowhere to go. He slept in his mom’s car until he sold it for bus fare back to Nevada. Now he lives at a group home, is back in school, and has a job.

Ryan suggests that teens in similar situations look for help from local agencies before trying to escape on their own. “The principal always knows something about where to get help. Even a teacher. Ask people you like and trust. You could even get [Child Protective Services] involved. Don’t give up trying to get help.”

*\*Names have been changed.*

## Resist the Road

Before running, Blaha suggests, teens should stop and ask themselves three questions:

1. Is there anything I can do to change the situation?
2. What would need to change in order for me to stay home?
3. How will I survive if I run away?

She encourages teens to call the NRS before they decide to leave. “We have 16,000 resources in our database,” Blaha says. “We can help them develop a plan of action.”

Callers talk to volunteers such as Amanda Hetherington, 17, who’s answered more than a hundred calls at NRS headquarters in Chicago. She says teens who call often feel they aren’t being heard: “We talk about their support system. Sometimes they’ll have an aunt or grandma who can serve as a go-between. ... Sometimes a friend can help. Or maybe they can try getting involved in extracurriculars. ... Usually there’s at least one thing they haven’t thought of.”

If teens decide to leave home, the door isn’t always closed behind them. For Maria, staying

at a group home for a while helped her realize the love she had at her real home. She’s returned to her family, stopped running away, and is trying to rebuild relationships with old friends.

## A Different Path

If you have a friend who’s talking about running, you can help make him or her think twice. “You aren’t doing your friend or yourself a favor in keeping quiet in a situation that could be dangerous. You have to let an adult know,” says Feinberg. “You can maybe say, ‘I’ll go with you to the counselor if you’re nervous.’”

Kev’s best friend ran away because of a conflict with his own stepdad. When the friend returned home, Kev went with him for moral support. As for Kev, he and his mother decided it would be a good idea for him to live with an uncle for a while.

“Running away is not the best thing to do. You’ll fall behind in school and may end up dropping out,” Kev says. “I have things I want to do, like every kid. It will take some time, but I know I will turn my life around.” **CH2**



The National Runaway Switchboard partnered with Ludacris (above, right) in late 2006, after the success of his song “Runaway Love” (featuring Mary J. Blige, at left). In the following 12-month period, the switchboard received 150,000 calls, a 50 percent increase, according to executive director Maureen Blaha.

# RESOURCES ON THE RUN

The National Runaway Switchboard (NRS) can set up conference calls with parents. It can also relay messages if a teen isn’t ready to talk with his or her family directly. In partnership with the Greyhound bus company, the NRS runs the Home Free program: Runaways ages 12 to 20 can get a free bus ticket home by calling 1-800-RUNAWAY (1-800-786-2929) or visiting [www.1800runaway.org](http://www.1800runaway.org).

Safe Place helps youths access support services through convenience stores, fast food restaurants, fire stations, and libraries. Wherever the Safe Place logo is displayed, staff can connect young people with immediate help.

Learn more at [www.nationalsafeplace.org](http://www.nationalsafeplace.org).

