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Frank G. Kauffman

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# Family Preservation: Perceptions of Effectiveness

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Frank G. Kauffman

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*This qualitative study examines the attributes or perceptions of service providers and overseers as to the effectiveness of intensive family preservation services provided by a social services agency in Tucson, Arizona. The services provided are patterned after the Homebuilders' model developed in 1974 in Tacoma, Washington. Data collection was generated from interviews and focus groups with the in-home service providers, the program supervisor, and investigators and case managers with Child Protective Services (CPS). Although placement prevention rates (PPR) are the dependent variable in most studies on this form of intervention, this study seeks to understand those characteristics of the model that contribute to successful outcomes with client families. Those appear to be the short-term intervention coupled with a non-judgmental approach to client families and the clinical supervision provided by the program supervisor.*

This study seeks to understand the perceptions of family preservation service providers, program supervisors, and child protective services workers regarding the effectiveness of in-home family preservation services provided to families with children identified as being at risk for abuse and neglect. Particularly, it discusses the perceived effectiveness of services provided under the family preservation model patterned after the Homebuilders' model implemented in Tacoma, Washington, in 1974. Under this model, intensive in-home services are provided for a period of four to six weeks by a master level clinician in order to prevent the out-of-home placement of children in a non-relative setting for two weeks or more. The worker spends at least ten or more hours per week teaching and modeling improved parenting skills, including communication skills, anger management, and other skills required to improve family functioning and reduce the risk for ongoing abuse and neglect.

The Homebuilders' model offers considerable flexibility when planning service delivery around the schedule of working mothers and their families. Although many client situations allow service delivery during the period of "nine to five," this model is equally well suited to meet the schedules of working moms as well as those who are required to perform "work-related activities" under Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF). The service providers working in the family preservation program for the agency Our Town Family Center, the subject of this paper, were available to meet the scheduling needs of the majority of client families referred for services.

The term, "in-home" is used to describe where services are delivered as well as to add credibility to the basic premise underlying the family preservation model. Generally, two of the most common barriers to providing these types of services are

communication and transportation. Working with families in the natural setting of their homes allows service providers an opportunity to demonstrate and model appropriate behaviors. Additionally, it allows workers to observe what is working and what is not working as the client families interact in the privacy of their homes.

It should be pointed out that providing services under this model can be equally effective when working with families at all socio-economic levels. The experience of the workers cited in this article is that families with at-risk children represent all socio-economic levels and backgrounds.

A number of outcome studies (Kinney, Madsen, Fleming, & Haapala, 1977; Schwartz, AuClaire and Harris, 1986; Kinney, Haapala and Booth, 1991; Berry, 1992; Bath and Haapala, 1994) suggest that the provision of in-home family preservation services is positively correlated with increases in placement prevention rates (PPR) with some noted limitations. Independent variables, including severity, prior history, and consistency of treatment, impact some of those studies. Multiple risk factors, including poverty, substance abuse, and family isolation, also impact outcomes (Whittaker, 1990). Further, Dr. Lisbeth Schorr (1991) found that the more risk factors experienced by a family, the "greater the damaging impact of each." The impact of each factor is not additive, rather, "risk factors multiply each other's destructive effects" (p.261). Additionally, Bath and Haapala (1994) argue that children referred for services due to neglect were more likely to be removed from the home following intervention than those experiencing other forms of abuse.

Other studies of programs that are patterned after the Homebuilders' model (Pecora, 1991; Fraser, Pecora & Haapala, 1991) find that they are at least equally effective in preventing out-of-home placements of abused and neglected children.

Thus, the question becomes what are those features of the Homebuilders' model that contribute to the apparent success of the program? The focus is not on outcome effectiveness but rather the perceptions of the reasons for success and failure by significant actors in the system. Therefore, a series of questions is posed as described in the methodology section. Table 1 compares the effectiveness of traditional family preservation programs by service period and placement prevention rates with those of the Homebuilders' model. The data are not intended to suggest that the clients participating in the programs cited are representative of the clients referred to Our Town Family Center. Rather, for those who were referred, the data strongly suggest that the Homebuilders' Model is at least or more effective in placement prevention rates in less time. When compared with longer service periods, the Homebuilders' model is more effective as an intervention with families with children at risk for abuse and neglect.



**Table 1. Comparison Programs, Service Period, and Placement Prevention Rates**

Program	Service Period	Placement Prevention Rates
West Branch, Iowa	5 months	81%
Rochester, New York	7 months	89%
Madison, Wisconsin	13 months	90%
Homebuilders	4-6 weeks	92%

Source: Smith (1982), Cited in Kinney, Haapala, and Booth (1991).

This study examines the attributions or perceptions of the strengths and weaknesses of a particular family preservation program adopted by an agency in Tucson, Arizona. The Our Town Family Center has been identified as the only agency in Arizona that contracts to provide family preservation services to families with children at risk of abuse and neglect utilizing the Homebuilders' model.

Characteristics of the model include a single, master's level counselor or therapist providing intensive family preservation services for a period of four to six weeks. Services average ten or more hours per week. Case loads average two to three families per worker. Other agencies providing in-the-home services to families employ the traditional model consisting of a master's level counselor or therapist and para-professional providing services for periods up to 120 days. Case loads average six families per team.

Client families are referred for services by Child Protective Services, Division II, Pima County, after a determination is made that the client family can benefit from receiving the services provided by Our Town Family Center. Families selected to receive services are representative of the larger population of families living in Pima County, Arizona. It is recognized that out of the total number of calls alleging child abuse or neglect, a smaller number are referred for services.

The person investigating the allegations of abuse or neglect makes a determination that the family is in need of services and could benefit from receiving services whether or not the allegations of abuse or neglect were substantiated. Although the child may not be at "imminent" risk for removal from the home, it is determined that their continued safety will be ensured as the family participates in services.

Child Protective Services (CPS) administers and oversees the direct service delivery practice of agencies providing services. This suggests that the impact or effect of the model of service delivery implemented by Our Town Family Center influences the perceptions of CPS managers and caseworkers, supervisory personnel of Our Town Family Center, and the caseworkers employed by this agency. By examining the perceptions of these individuals and groups, one can derive a comprehensive picture of the perceived impact of the program on client families. These perceptions may or may not be features of the homebuilders' model; rather, they represent the attributions or

beliefs about why the program is successful or not by those who deliver the services and those that oversee the program. "In that sense, it is important scientifically to identify these perceptions since they will form the bases upon which service deliverers will claim success (or explain the lack thereof), and they will form the bases upon which the program model is exported to other jurisdictions or continued in a single jurisdiction (Kauffman, 2002, p. 3)."

### **Perceptions in the Literature**

An examination of the literature relative to the perceived effectiveness of family preservation services intervention reveals a paucity of information. Numerous authors, including those cited above, analyze and discuss placement prevention rates as the dependent variable measuring the effectiveness of family preservation service interventions. Mary Banach (1999) conducted a pilot study incorporating qualitative methods in order to assess the coping mechanisms of service providers as they dealt with boundary and termination issues with client families. She determined that service providers were able to develop and maintain boundaries via cognitive "mechanisms," maintaining program structure when working with clients, worker role clarification, "self-assessment," and clinical supervision (p. 237). The study also discussed the workers' views of their client families and how that impacted service delivery.

Another study by Hilbert, Sallee, and Ott, (2000) does examine the perceptions of family preservation practitioners. Their exploratory, qualitative study utilizing a five-question survey assessed family preservation practitioners' perceptions regarding the strengths and weaknesses of the services they provided to client families. The goal of the study was to determine if there was a correlation between years of practice, type of agency, or focus of service and perceived outcomes of client families. The study identified 13 perceived strengths of which 30.8% of the respondents considered keeping families together as the single most important strength. While just over 20% thought that recognizing the family as expert in their service intervention was the 2<sup>nd</sup> most important, another 20% thought that their interventions were strengths-based, and 17.85% felt that a focus on the family was more effective than focusing on individual family members. The authors suggest that the strengths reflect the "ideological" positions of the respondents to the model of in-the-home services. Perceived weaknesses or limitations identified in the above study centered round the following: lack of support (28.4 %); continued endangerment of children (21.3%); lack of cooperation of family (17.5%); and ambiguity of service theory (16.9%).

### **Methodology**

This study is important because it seeks to add context to the claim that family preservation services reduce the placement rates of children at risk. The literature suggests that family preservation services reduce out-of-home placements but does not



offer much information or speculation as to why the reduction takes place. This approach attempts to describe the setting in which the Homebuilders' model was implemented in terms of relevant actor's perceptions. In this case, the concern of the study is with identification of qualitative characteristics of the service delivery model, which are *perceived* to contribute to the successful outcomes experienced by client families with at-risk children, and not with the reasons that other outcome studies purport.

Questions as to the perceived effectiveness of the family preservation services program administered by Our Town Family Center were designed to elicit information from three perspectives; Child Protective Service workers; service providers; and the supervisor at Our Town Family Center. Child Protective Services workers represent an external perspective of both Our Town Family Center workers and client families referred to them for services. Their perspective includes not only the services rendered by Our Town Family Center, but also other agencies that contract, in the state, to provide similar services to families and children at risk for abuse and neglect. They are familiar not only with the service characteristics of Our Town Family Center, but also with the families they refer to Our Town Family Center. CPS workers participating in the study were volunteers rather than a purposive sample. For purposes of this study, their contribution represented their experiences in child welfare over time.

Child Protective Services workers were asked two "global" assessment questions—one was to classify the quality of services as one of five categories, very effective, effective, neutral, sometimes effective, or ineffective. The other asked them to rate the overall services provided by Our Town Family Center based on the same scale. Additionally, they were asked to elaborate, in open-ended fashion their opinions regarding effectiveness and why they believed they were or were not effective. Fifteen case managers and investigators responded, providing additional comments rich in context as to their experience working with Our Town Family Center.

The second perspective is that of Our Town Family Center service caseworkers. They are responsible for assessment, service planning, and direct service delivery to client families. They not only have the responsibility for providing services to at-risk families, but also must structure services to be consistent with the Homebuilders' model. Thus, the caseworker is the bridge between the "approach to family services and the families who are the target of those services" (Kauffman 2002, p. 46).

Questions posed to this group of respondents were designed to assess the service characteristics they believed contributed to their success with client families. The questions consisted of the following: (1) what, in your opinion, contributes to the successful outcomes from client families participating in your family preservation program? (2) How would you improve the services you provide to client families? and (3) how would you rate the overall effectiveness of the program, very effective, effective,

neutral, sometimes effective, or ineffective? This also was asked as an open-ended question in order for them to elaborate and qualify their overall assessments.

The third perspective is that of the Our Town Family Center supervisor responsible for the program's success. She has approximately 20 years of experience as a marriage and family therapist. She holds a master's degree in counseling and clinical psychology and a certification in Marriage and Family Therapy. Her role is threefold:

1. She is the single informant who best understands the nature and intent of the Homebuilders' model for family preservation services;
2. She is responsible for training the caseworkers in the service delivery characteristics of the model; and
3. She consults with the caseworkers regarding the progress of client families working on identified goals and objectives.

The program supervisor was asked three questions: (1) What in your opinion contributes to the successful outcomes of client families served by your counselors and therapists? (2) What are the strengths of your family preservation services program? and (3) what are the weaknesses?

### Results

Table 2 outlines the responses of CPS workers and the caseworkers and supervisor at Our Town Family Center to the closed-ended questions addressing the overall effectiveness of the family preservation services provide by Our Town Family Center.

**Table 2. Overall effectiveness of the services provided by Our Town Family Center**

Source	Very Effective	Effective	Neutral	Sometimes Effective	Ineffective	#
CPS	46%	23%	-	23%	-	15
Providers	80%	20%	-	-	-	5

### Child Protective Services Workers

Fifteen CPS workers out of a total of approximately 40 workers responded to the survey instrument. Their responses, although generally positive, centered on a single theme—since there were only two agencies providing in-the-home services, families referred for services were subject to being placed on a waiting list. Once they were accepted for services, Our Town Family Center was “very helpful” in working with those families. Other responses included the following:

- Our Town Family Center has been more than willing to work with our difficult families and to tackle substance abuse issues ( an additional risk factor) within the family;

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- Our town Family Center was a “very helpful service to maintain children in the home and that they may not otherwise (be) able to remain with their families;
- Believe Our Town Family Center to be very effective “hope the contract continues”;
- Next to day care, family preservation is the best weapon we have to find child abuse and neglect; “it is expensive, but so are tickets to a basketball game”;
- Our Town Family Center does not keep CPS up to date on the progress of families referred for services; and
- Four to six weeks of services are a “quick fix” based on the recidivism rates of “frequent flyer” families who have received prior services and re-enter the system presenting much the same issues.

It should be noted that the last two respondents rated the overall effectiveness as “effective” and “sometimes effective,” respectively. None of the respondents felt that the services were “ineffective.” In fact, all of the respondents appeared to balance their responses with respect to the services provided by Our Town Family Center. Three of the fifteen respondents (20%) criticized some aspect of the agency’s service characteristics and rated the program as “effective.” It is to be expected that all approaches to service delivery are idiosyncratically received by clients, thus producing higher than average recidivism rates across the spectrum of all mental health services. Services provided under the Homebuilders’ model would be expected to encounter resistance from those who are accustomed to a more traditional approach to service provision (i.e., services for up to 90 or 120 days).

### **Our Town Family Center Caseworkers**

Three themes emerged from these respondents: (1) establishing mutual trust with client families; (2) providing intensive services for 30 days; (3) avoiding the tendency to label clients as having some sort of diagnosis based on a diagnostic model, such as the Diagnostic and Statistical manual of Mental Disorders, 4<sup>th</sup> edition (1994). The respondents agree that mutual trust is critical to positive outcomes with client families. Many times these families have been shuffled around in the system and feel betrayed by the system and its ability to assist them in their period of crisis. Establishing mutual trust, they feel, helps the family move past the denial phase evidenced by “presenting a good show” during the first days of service. Presenting a good show is an effort to deny they have a problem saving some element of pride or dignity.

The short service period places some pressure on both the worker and the client family to begin to identify family strengths and to begin working on identified goals and objectives as outlined in the treatment plan. When the family understands there is a finite length of time, they tend to be motivated to treat the problem seriously and to work



closely with the caseworker. They begin services "by saying goodbye at the beginning of services."

The third theme, labeling clients, automatically establishes boundaries that hinder caseworker's work with families. Labels tend to contribute to feelings of failure or of being "categorized" by what client families see as a hostile and uncaring system. Additionally, labels tend to represent implicit and explicit role expectations that encourage clients to "act out" behaviors they believe are associated with the label.

Lastly, the caseworkers identified the clinical and site supervision provided by their supervisor as critical factors for their success in working with client families. The supervisor not only considers the client family's welfare but that of the caseworkers. They report that the supervisor is available to assist them with their own issues or "self-care." The supervisor is "fearless" when it comes to personal or group issues that may affect their ability to work effectively with client families. When an issue does arise, "the door is closed and no one leaves until the issue is resolved." The goal is to "process, process, process, and focus, focus, focus." This allows the workers to be "pure" solution focused therapists and counselors. The only recommendation for improvement identified by the caseworkers would be their ability to extend services, on a case-by-case basis, in order to ensure successful implementation of learned skills and behaviors of client families. Otherwise, 80% felt their services were "very effective" and 20% believed they were "effective." They recognize there will be those client families with multiple risk factors who have been involved in the system for a period of time who become resistant to learning new skills and behaviors designed to improve family functioning.

### **Program Supervisor**

The program supervisor believed that a number of factors contributed to their success working with client families with children at risk for abuse and neglect. They are:

- Respecting each family's unique culture not only as it relates to ethnic background or religion, but to how they stay together and function as a system;
- The supervisor's availability to caseworkers and client families, the "parallel process of supervision and therapy";
- Level of intensity of services;
- "Client-centered" services;
- The cooperative relationship between caseworker and client family;
- Their cooperative relationship with Child Protective Services; and
- The caseworker is a "jack of all trades" in the provision of the varied services required by client families.

Each of the above characteristics identified by the program supervisor contributes to the successful outcomes represented by a majority of the client families they serve. Although they may differ somewhat from those identified by the caseworkers, combined they form a model of service delivery that incorporates the characteristics of the Homebuilders' model. The relationship of the client family to the caseworker eliminates the impact of the "bureaucracy" as the family moves toward more positive and functional behaviors. By interacting directly with the caseworker, the family is able to learn how to successfully negotiate with the larger social service delivery system. This learning is thought to contribute to the family's future successes after services have terminated. It is assumed they will be able to function independently but also be aware of what services are available and how to access those services.

As for weaknesses or limitations of their program, the supervisor also felt there were times when they would have preferred to extend services to specific families. However, the demand for their services, as reflected in the long waiting periods, prohibits them from extending services.

An additional limitation was the scarcity of qualified master's level workers in the area. Although indirectly this would impact services to client families, it reinforces her commitment to train and support experienced professionals. Low fees for services coupled with the fact that most counselors and therapists would rather not work in the client's home makes the job somewhat unattractive. In a clinical setting clients usually are there because they want to be. Not all families referred for in-the-home services are necessarily willing participants.

### **Conclusion**

The perceptions of service providers and overseers are that the family preservation program services provided by Our Town Family Center are an effective intervention for families with children at risk for abuse and neglect. Responses from CPS overseers and the services providers, working collaboratively with their supervisor, reflect their individual perceptions as to what factors contribute to the success of their program. Although these perceptions differed somewhat from those in the Hilbert et al. (2000) study which suggested that keeping the family together, involving the family in the treatment plan, a strengths-based intervention, and a holistic approach were the most important aspects of providing services, they are similar to the extent that the respondents have definite/concrete theories to support their perceptions regarding the effectiveness of in-the-home interventions for families with children at risk for abuse and neglect. Specific themes for successful intervention emerged from the respondents (i.e., establishing mutual respect, limited service periods, avoidance of labeling clients, clinical supervision, respecting family culture, client centered services, and a holistic approach treating the client families as a system), reflect the components of the service delivery model.



The clinical and personal supervision provided by the program supervisor are critical for the success of the program. According to Kinney et al. (1991 p. 160), this style of supervision is important for a number of reasons: (1) helping severely troubled families in debilitating conditions is difficult at best; (2) supervisors cannot expect staff to do what is expected unless they know what is expected; (3) decisions are made most effectively if those who will be affected by them have input into them; (4) communication and teamwork contribute to successful outcomes; and (5) people work best if they are supported and validated.

Finally, CPS overseers' perceptions are critical since they are mandated by the State to provide efficient and effective services to at-risk families. Their perceptions as to the effectiveness of the agency's program translate into whether or not the agency will continue to provide services under their contract. The agency has been awarded five annual contracts since the program was introduced in 1991. The agency's willingness and qualifications to accept the more difficult cases also reflects the positive perceptions of Child Protective Services.

This study suggests that the fundamental elements of the Homebuilders' model (i.e., short, intensive service periods, small caseloads, close supervision, and non-judgmental approach of the workers) do produce positive outcomes for client families. One might conclude that the model is not only an effective service delivery intervention for families at risk for child abuse and neglect, but also for other interventions, including preparing families to transition from welfare-to-work, families struggling to escape alcohol and substance abuse, or learning family self-sufficiency. Additionally, it is recommended that future studies on the impact of family preservation services focus on outcomes other than placement prevention rates as the dependent variable. Rather, on the impact of services on family functioning over the short, intermediate, and long term following services. Placement prevention rates are one indicator of future abuse and neglect of children along with family functioning and family cohesiveness.

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**Frank G. Kauffman, PhD** is an Assistant Professor in the School of Social Work at Southwest Missouri State University. He can be reached at 901 South national Avenue, Springfield, MO 65804.





## Family Reunification among Two Groups of Runaway Adolescents Utilizing Emergency Shelters

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Sanna J. Thompson, Liliane Cambraia Windsor, and Kim Zittel-Palamara

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*Limited research has addressed reunification of runaway youths with their families following an emergency shelter stay; however, recent studies have shown that those who reunify with their families following a shelter stay have more positive outcomes than those relocated to other residences. This study evaluated differences between two samples of runaway youth utilizing youth emergency shelters in New York (n = 155) and Texas (n = 195) and identified factors associated with reunification among these two groups of adolescents. Less than half (43.7%) of the youths were reunited with their families. Among New York runaway youths, those who had lived primarily with someone other than a parent before shelter admission, were physically abused, or neglected were less likely to return home. Among youths admitted to emergency shelter services in Texas, those with longer shelter stays, living primarily with someone other than a parent before shelter admission, or being pregnant or a parent were less likely to reunify. This study provides valuable information concerning family reunification following shelter service use; however, additional research is needed to delineate youth, family, and shelter system factors that distinguish successful from unsuccessful reunification over an extended period of time.*

Family reunification is a term that has expanded in recent years as increased understanding of this complex process has developed. With the implementation of the Adoption Assistance and Child Welfare Act of 1980 (Pub. L. 96-126), the importance of continuity and stability in parent/child relationships was formally recognized (Davis, Ganger, Landsverk, & Newton, 1996). This law made explicit the objectives of placement prevention and permanency planning, and linked family preservation and reunification services to making reasonable effort to keep families together (McGowan, 1990). Rather than family reunification being viewed simply as the physical reunion of children with their biological families (Maluccio, & Fein, 1994), this legislation redefined family reunification as "the planned process of reconnecting children in out-of-home care with their biological families to help them achieve and maintain their optimal level of reconnection" (Maluccio, Warsh, & Pine, 1993).



Reintegrating children and youth with their families is typically associated with child welfare services. However, one population of adolescents often forgotten in discussions of reunification is runaway youths. Their transience and need for suitable housing makes reunification or out-of-home placement decisions necessary. Federally funded youth emergency shelters are required to “develop adequate plans for ensuring the safe return of the youth according to the best interests of the youth” (Missing, Exploited, and Runaway Children Protection Act of 2000, Pub. L. 106-71, pg. 4). Thus, these providers must address issues of reunification with all youth admitted to their facilities.

Runaway adolescents often report family environments that exhibit high levels of family conflict, poor communication, dysfunction, abuse, and/or neglect (Kipke, Montgomery, & MacKenzie, 1993; Kipke, Montgomery, Simon, & Iverson, 1997; Kolbe, 1997; Lawder, Poulin, & Andrews, 1986; Rotheram-Borus, 1993). Many of these families have histories of unstable housing situations, and parents often are characterized as emotionally unavailable and lacking effective parenting skills (Whitbeck, 1999). A sizable proportion of these youth report that leaving home is not a choice; but rather are forced out by parents encouraging them to leave, abandoning them, or subjecting them to intolerable levels of maltreatment (Kurtz, Jarvis, & Kurtz, 1991; Dadds, Braddock, Cuers, Elliott, & Kelly, 1993; Rotheram-Borus, 1993).

Community-based emergency youth shelters are the primary settings for interventions designed to meet the complex needs of approximately 1.5 million youths in the United States who run away from home each year (Finkelhor, 1995; Greene, Ringwalt, & Iachan, 1997). Federally funded emergency youth shelters provide a variety of crisis and custodial services, including individual, group, and family counseling; educational and vocational services; recreational activities; alcohol and drug counseling; and information, referral, and outreach services (Rohr, & James, 1994). The primary focus of these programs is to de-escalate the crisis, establish communication between the youths and their families, attempt to stabilize the home environment, and reunify youths with their families whenever possible. Among youths discharged from these shelters nationwide, more than half (58%) reunite with their parents following a shelter stay (Thompson, Maguin, & Pollio, 2003).

Although runaway youths report a variety of challenges in their homes, recent studies have shown that those who reunify with their families following a shelter stay experience more positive outcomes than those relocated to other residences. In an exploratory study of 70 runaway youths in the Midwest, researchers found that youths reintegrated with parents following a shelter stay reported more positive outcomes in terms of school, employment, self-esteem, criminal behavior, and family relationships than adolescents discharged elsewhere (Thompson, Pollio, Bitner, 2000). In a similar

study of 261 shelter-using runaway youth, short-term outcomes (6 weeks post discharge) were significantly more positive for reunified youth than those discharged to other locations (Thompson, Pollio, Constantine, Reid, & Nebbitt, 2002). Other research also demonstrated that youth who fail to reunify with family have longer shelter stays, increased hopelessness, suicidal thoughts and behaviors, report more family problems, and have a more pessimistic view of the future than those who return to their families (Teare, Furst, Peterson, & Authier, 1992; Teare et al., 1994).

Information concerning reunification among runaway youth and their families is limited, and no published research, to date, could be found that evaluates reunification across multiple sites. A great deal of the research on runaway youths has been conducted in the Midwest (i.e., (Thompson, Pollio, & Bitner, 2000; Thompson et al., 2002; Whitbeck, 1999; Whitbeck, & Simons, 1990), and in large coastal cities (i.e., Kipke et al., 1993; Kipke et al., 1997; Rotheram-Borus, 1993; Rotheram-Borus, Mahler, Koopman, & Langabeer, 1996), but studies in other areas of the U.S. are nearly non-existent. Analyses of the Runaway Homeless Youth Management Information System for 1997 (RHY MIS) show that runaway youth problems, such as suicide, substance use, and physical/sexual abuse vary widely across regions of the U.S. (Thompson et al., 2003); however, very little is known concerning differences in youth and family characteristics or outcomes experienced by youth utilizing shelters in various regions of the U.S. (Teare, 2001). To address this gap, this study (1) examined differences in individual and family factors among two samples of runaway adolescents utilizing youth emergency shelters in New York and Texas, and (2) identified factors associated with reunification among these two groups of youth.

## Methods

### Sample and Procedures

The data for this study were collected from consecutive entrants to shelters for runaway youths in two comparable mid-sized cities in New York and Texas. These federally funded shelters are similar to other youth emergency shelters offering services to runaway youths across the U.S. (Greene, & Ringwalt, 1997). They concurrently serve ten male and ten female adolescents (12 to 18 years of age) and provide basic crisis and counseling services.

Within 48 hours of the youth's admission to the shelter, these agencies are required to contact each youth's parent or guardian; thus, parental consent for the youth's participation in the study was sought during that time. Youths were approached and recruited for participation only after parental consent was attained. The research project was explained, as was the voluntary nature and confidentiality of their responses. Following the youth's assent, they were engaged in several brief, self-report



questionnaires concerning their personal characteristics and activities, as well as questions related to family and friends.

One hundred fifty-five (n=155) youths admitted to a shelter in western New York state during the data collection period (1999-2000) participated; six refused to participate or did not complete the survey. One hundred ninety-five (n=195) youths admitted to a shelter in northern Texas during 2001-2002 participated; seven refused. Youths often were not approached if they were admitted for a very brief period, as these youths typically were seeking respite from parental conflict or abuse and were returned to parental homes or another long-term residential living situation relatively quickly. Therefore, only those identified by shelter staff as runaways and who were admitted to the shelter for at least 24 hours were recruited for participation.

Shelter staff also collected information on each youth admitted using the Runaway Homeless Youth Management Information System (RHY MIS). RHY MIS is an automated data collection system developed by the Administration for Children and Families (ACF), and its use is required in all federally funded youth shelters nationwide. Shelter staff recorded information during the intake process, during the youth's shelter stay, and at discharge.

### **Variables**

The dependent variable was measured as the placement of the youth at discharge from the shelter (parent's home, adult relative/friend's home, foster care, institutional setting, or "the street"). This variable also was recoded to identify reunification with parent(s) or relocated elsewhere.

Independent variables included demographic, personal, and family characteristics reported by the youth; these were coded as dichotomous or categorical, except age, the number of times the youth ran away, the number of days "on the run," and the number of days the youth stayed in the shelter. Youth demographics (see Table 1) included age in years, gender, ethnicity, and the youth's past living situation before admission to the shelter.

Youths were asked to identify specific problems they experienced, such as substance use, educational challenges, depression or suicidal thoughts/attempts, and family difficulties, including physical/sexual abuse or neglect. A series of questions queried each area, which were later coded as whether or not the youth reported a problem in that area. For example, questions associated with education included, "have you had poor grades in school?", "have you ever been told you have a learning disability?", "were you ever been expelled from school?", and "were you ever truant from school?".

Family characteristics were evaluated using the Family Functioning Scale (FFS) (Tavitian, Lubiner, Green, Grebstein, & Velicer, 1987). The FFS consists of 40 items

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that measure five dimensions of family functioning: positive family affect ("People in my family listen when I speak"), rituals ("We pay attention to traditions in my family"), worries ("I worry when I disagree with the opinions of other family members"), conflicts ("People in my family yell at each other"), and communication ("When I have questions about personal relationships, I talk with my family member"). Respondents rated items on a seven-point scale (1 = never to 7 = always), and items were summed for the five subscales and a total score. Internal consistency reliability ranges from  $\alpha=.90$  for positive family affect to  $\alpha=.74$  for family conflicts (Tavitian et al., 1987).

### **Data Analysis**

Descriptive analyses were conducted across the entire sample, followed by *t*-tests and chi-square analyses to test for significant differences between the two shelter samples. Because of significant differences between the two groups, separate analyses were conducted to identify correlates of family reunification and predictors of family reunification for each group of shelter youth. Variables that were significant in correlation analyses within each group were entered into a separate logistic regression model to determine the likelihood of family reunification while controlling for these variables. Categorical independent variables with more than two categories were transformed into dummy variables and assigned reference categories (e.g., the reference category for ethnicity was European American). In the logistic models, these categorical variables yield exponentiated *B*s or odds ratios (ORs) that reflect the likelihood of a positive response relative to a defined reference category, after controlling for all the other effects in the model. For this study, the ORs reflect the likelihood of an individual or family characteristic occurring relative to youth's reunification with their family. Partial regression coefficients (*B*) for each independent variable show how much the value of the dependent variable (reunification) changes when the value of the independent variable changes.

## **Results**

### **Sample Demographics**

The overall sample ( $N = 350$ ) averaged about 15 years of age and was predominately female (see Table 1). The dominant ethnicity reported by these adolescents was White or African American, and nearly half had been living with parents at the time they ran away and were admitted to the youth emergency shelter. Youths reported running away an average of 5 times, and more than half of the respondents indicated they had smoked cigarettes, drunk alcohol, and used marijuana.



### Differences between Groups

Results of chi-square and t-tests indicated several significant differences between the two groups of runaway youths across individual characteristics, as shown in Table 1. The average age of New York youths was significantly greater than those in Texas, but the proportion of males and females was similar between the two groups. Ethnic differences were significant between the two groups; the greatest difference was in the proportion of African American youths. A greater proportion of youths from New York reported living primarily with parents at the time of admission to the shelter; whereas, a greater percentage of youths from Texas reported living on the streets or in a temporary situation before admission. Significant differences were found between the two groups concerning substance use, as a higher percentage of New York youths reported using alcohol and marijuana. Nearly half of the participants reported truancy or expulsion from school; however, a greater proportion of New York youths reported this difficulty than did those from Texas. The number of runaway episodes for Texas youths was nearly twice that of New York youths, as was the number of days the Texas youths stayed at the shelter. A higher percentage of Texas youths reported being neglected by their family than their New York counterparts; sexual and physical abuse was more frequently reported in Texas than New York.

**Table 1. Sample Characteristics**

Demographics	Total Sample N=350	New York N=155 (%)	Texas N=195 (%)	X <sup>2</sup>
Gender				0.02
Male	154 (44.1)	69 (44.5)	85 (43.8)	
Female	195 (55.9)	86 (55.5)	109 (56.2)	
Ethnicity				28.39**
European American	147 (42.1)	61 (39.4)	86 (44.3)	
African American	132 (37.7)	76 (49.0)	56 (28.9)	
Hispanic	36 (10.3)	14 (9.0)	6 (3.1)	
American Indian	9 (2.6)	3 (1.9)	2 (1.0)	
Asian	3 (0.9)	1 (0.6)	22 (11.3)	
Mixed	22 (6.3)	0 (0.0)		
Living situation before admission				15.78**
Parent's home	158 (45.9)	78 (50.3)	80 (42.3)	
Adult relative/friend	130 (37.8)	56 (36.1)	74 (39.2)	
Foster home	15 (4.4)	6 (3.9)	9 (4.8)	
Institutional program	20 (5.8)	7 (4.5)	13 (6.9)	
Street/temporary situation	21 (6.2)	6 (3.9)	13 (6.9)	

Demographics	Total Sample N=350	New York N=155 (%)	Texas N=195 (%)	X <sup>2</sup>
Youth a parent/pregnant	34 (10.3)	18 (11.6)	16 (8.3)	1.0
Ever drank alcohol	180 (60.2)	79 (69.9)	101 (54.3)	7.2**
Expulsion from school	153 (43.9)	88 (56.8)	65 (33.5)	32.9**
Neglected	77 (22.1)	47 (30.3)	74 (37.9)	12.3**
Physically abused	79 (22.6)	24 (15.5)	55 (28.4)	-2.50
Sexually abused	31 (8.9)	4 (2.6)	27 (13.9)	-3.30
Reunified with family	153 (43.7)	66 (42.6)	87 (44.6)	44.87**
	Mean (SD)	Mean (SD)	Mean (SD)	t-test
Age	15.3 (1.7)	16.0 (1.5)	14.8 (1.7)	7.07**
Number of times ran away	4.9 (11.*)	3.4 (3.5)	6.1 (15.6)	-1.97*
Number of days away from home	5.52 (17.1)	3.9 (2.4)	7.6 (23.4)	-2.05
Number of days in shelter	12.53 (13.7)	9.3 (6.7)	15.4 (17.3)	-2.17*

\*  $p \leq .05$ , \*\*  $p \leq .01$

### Predictors of Family Reunification

#### New York Runaway Youths

Correlation analyses showed that the following variables were associated significantly with reunification among youths in New York: youth's age ( $r = -.17$ ,  $p = .03$ ) last living with parents or others ( $r = .30$ ,  $p = .001$ ), physically abused ( $r = -.17$ ,  $p = .03$ ), neglected ( $r = -.16$ ,  $p = .04$ ), and total score on family functioning scale ( $r = .24$ ,  $p = .003$ ). The logistic regression model for New York youths, as shown in Table 2, indicated that youths who had lived primarily with someone other than a parent before shelter admission were 32% less likely to reunite with parent(s) (OR = .68). Youths who reported they had been physically abused by a parent were 26% less likely to reunify (OR = .74); those who reported neglect also were less likely to return home (OR = .55).

**Table 2. Logistic Regression Model to Predict Family Reunification among New York Youth**

Predictor Variables	B (SE)	Odds Ratio	p-value
Youth age	-.08 (.07)	.92	.20
Primarily resided with parents	-.39 (.11)	.68	.001
Youth reported physically abused	-.30	.74	.03
Youth reported neglected	-.59	.55	.01
Total family functioning	.01 (.004)	1.01	.11
Model chi-square (df)	41.71	(5)	.000
Nagelkerke R square	.15		



Texas Runaway Youths

Variables that were correlated significantly with reunification among youths admitted to emergency shelter services in Texas included living with parents or others at admission ( $r = -.17$ ,  $p = .02$ ), length of stay in the shelter ( $r = -.26$ ,  $p = .001$ ), whether the youth was a parent/pregnant ( $r = -.23$ ,  $p = .001$ ), had been expelled from school ( $r = -.16$ ,  $p = .03$ ), physically abused ( $r = -.21$ ,  $p = .004$ ), sexually abused ( $r = -.15$ ,  $p = .03$ ), or neglected ( $r = -.16$ ,  $p = .02$ ). The logistic regression model of Texas youths, as shown in Table 3, indicated that for each day youths stayed in the shelter, they were 3% less likely to reunify ( $OR = .97$ ), and youths that had lived primarily with someone other than a parent before shelter admission were 32% less likely to reunite with parent(s) ( $OR = .68$ ). Youths who were pregnant or identified themselves as parents were 90% less likely to reunify ( $OR = .10$ ).

**Table 3. Logistic Regression Model to Predict Family Reunification among Texas Youth**

Predictor Variables	<i>B (SE)</i>	Odds Ratio	p-value
Primarily resided with parents	-.39 (.15)	.68	.01
Number of days in shelter	-.03 (.01)	.97	.004
Youth pregnant or a parent	-2.28 (1.1)	.10	.04
Expelled from school	-.04 (.22)	.96	.87
Youth reported physically abused	-.13	.88	.53
Youth reported sexually abused	-.50	.61	.12
Youth reported neglect	-.35	.70	.36
<b>Model chi-square (df)</b>	<b>34.49</b>	<b>(7)</b>	<b>.000</b>
<b>Nagelkerke R square</b>	<b>.26</b>		

**Discussion**

The findings of this study comparing runaway youths in two areas of the country demonstrate the effect of youth's characteristics and family factors on the likelihood of reunification following an emergency shelter stay. The results are notable in that less than half of the adolescent participants in both shelters were reunited with their families (NY = 42.6%, TX = 44.6%). While no data are available that provide rates of reunification for this population of adolescents, one study of runaway youths utilizing shelter services nationwide found that approximately 58% were reunited with their parents (Thompson et al., 2003). These rates are comparable to reunification of children placed in foster care, group homes, or residential treatment centers. For example, "returning home" was the stated reason for 60% of those discharged from foster care in New York (*Year 2000 Annual Report to the Governor and Legislature*, 2000), and 37%

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were discharged to parental homes in Texas (*Legislative Data Book*, 2002). These estimates suggest that reunification among runaway youths is similar to that for other child welfare populations.

Various explanations account for the relatively small percentage of youth who reunite with families. One possible explanation may be a reflection of the parent's ambivalence concerning their child's return. Parents may struggle with whether or not bringing their runaway adolescent back into the home is in the best interest of the child and other family members. This indecisiveness may affect their motivation to work toward achieving reunification (Fein & Staff, 1993). Parents also may experience pessimistic attitudes toward their child and experience less attachment due to their child's past negative or "acting-out" behaviors (Robertson, 1992; Whitbeck, Hoyt, & Ackley, 1997).

Another explanation for only half of the youths reunifying with family may be that the adolescent fears continuing conflict, neglect, or abuse. Nearly one quarter of the youths in this study reported being physically abused and/or neglected. Among runaway youths in New York, physical abuse and neglect were primary predictors of not returning home. These negative home environments not only motivate them to run, but increase tension when reunification is attempted (Kennedy, 1991; Kurtz, Hick-Coolick, Jarvis, & Kurtz, 1996; Tyler, Hoyt, & Whitbeck, 2000). Youths experiencing abuse and neglect within the home may fear re-abuse and reject efforts to return to these unhealthy family environments.

It is notable, however, that among runaway youths from both shelters who had been living with their parents at the time they ran away were more likely to reunify. This suggests that youths who have had continual contact with parents are more likely to have relationships that promote reunification. From a socialization perspective (Whitbeck, 1999), prosocial bonding with parents, even if tenuous, encourages youths to return to their families rather than continuing transience. Some research has suggested that parents of runaway youths assume little responsibility for the events or problems that led to the child's runaway episode (Safyer, Thompson, Maccio, Zittel-Palamra, & Forehand, in press); thus, youths who return home may be a reflection of the youth's concern about their relationship with the family and a demonstration of their desire to overcome conflict and difficulties in the relationship (Ringwalt, Greene, Robertson, 1998).

Other factors also appear to play a role in reunification but differ between the two sites. In this study, youths from Texas who stayed at the shelter for a shorter period of time were more likely to reunite with their families. It is likely that youths with brief shelter stays are those who run away due to a conflict or crisis event with their parents, rather than experiencing long-term, on-going difficulties (Maluccio & Fein, 1994). For these adolescents, shelters can provide respite while helping to re-establish



communication, resolve conflict with the family, and address the crisis event (Greene, et al., 1997). Conversely, youths with extended shelter stays are exposed to additional services, such as life skills training, government benefits, health care services, and information and referrals to medium- or long-term transitional living programs (Dalton, & Pakenham, 2002). These youths are more likely to be transitioned into out-of-home residences, such as Independent Living Programs (ILP) that offer life skills and employment training, educational assistance, counseling, and peer support (Kinard, 2002).

The most significant predictor of family reunification for Texas runaways was not being pregnant or a parent. Research has shown that mothers of childbearing daughters treat their children less affectionately than do mothers of non-childbearing adolescents. Mother's harsh treatment toward her child has been correlated with high financial stress and extensive time spent caring for her daughter's child (East, & Jacobson, 2003; Jaccard, Dodge, & Dittus, 2003). The conflicts generated by the teen pregnancy and child bearing may increase the difficulties in reuniting pregnant youths with their families as parenting youths may require other living situations (Whitbeck et al., 1997). Thus, transitional living arrangements or other forms of stable housing may be more appropriate for these youths than reunification with family (Shane, 1989).

Identification of differences between these two participating shelters in diverse regions of the U.S. should encourage agencies to develop policies and services that target the specific issues of youths in their unique communities. For example, youths accessing shelters in New York were older; thus, transitioning them to independent living situations may be more appropriate than for the predominately younger adolescents in Texas. In addition, abuse and neglect among runaway youths in New York was associated significantly with not returning home. These shelters, then, must be particularly focused on evaluating the youth's abuse history and targeting interventions that might address these issues while the adolescent remains in the shelter. Certainly, reunification strategies must take these issues into account. Comprehensive family evaluations are warranted before the adolescent is returned home (Whitbeck, et al., 1997). If family reunification is preferable, a treatment plan tailored to the specific needs of the whole family, not just the runaway adolescent, should be developed (Teare et al., 1992). Interventions should be ongoing, family-based, and facilitate the adolescents' developmental needs and promote improved family functioning (Safyer, et al., in press). Youths and their parents must be involved in intervention strategies aimed at halting the progression of negative interactions and learn strategies to improve relationships once the youth is reunified with the family. Returning youths to the environment from which they ran, without attempting to change that environment, typically leads to continued

familial problems and youths running away repeatedly (Baker, McKay, Hans, Schlange, & Auville, 2003; Whitbeck et al., 1997).

Given the magnitude and seriousness of the problems among runaway youths and their families, child advocates recommend reunification only for low risk families or for families that have shown significant progress and cooperation in changing dysfunctional behavior (Gelles, 1996). As shelter providers play a pivotal role in reunification strategies, they must determine whether or not the child is returning to a precarious, fragmented, even abusive family with few community or extended family supports available. Runaway shelters must assess these issues and initiate systematic investigations of abuse before an appropriate discharge location can be determined. Shelters currently adhere to policies that focus efforts on finding stable housing, rather than "reunification at any cost" (Runaway and Homeless Youth Act, 2000 - P.L. 106-71); thus, providers must work with parents and youths concerning issues important in reunification decisions (Adams, & Adams, 1987).

### **Limitations**

It is important to keep in mind the limitations of this study when reviewing the results. Although the two groups of youths were recruited to provide homogeneous and comparable samples, it should be noted that youth participants were from disparate regions of the country. Separate analyses were conducted, and both agencies were federally funded shelters with very comparable programs; however, some programmatic disparity is inevitable and cannot be accounted for in this study. The samples do not appear to be biased, as demographics of youths in this study are similar to statistics of youths using federally funded shelters nationwide (Thompson, Maguin, & Pollio, 2003).

These data also are youth self-reported, which cannot be independently verified. The inherent difficulty is due to the retrospective nature of the information being queried and the subject's reliability, especially concerning sensitive issues. Adolescent participants may have under-reported various characteristics they believe have a negative connotation (Safyer et al., in press), such as parental abuse, neglect, or number of runaway episodes. Thus, these high-risk behaviors may be more extensive and problematic than the results demonstrate. Highly sensitive assessments of physical abuse, sexual abuse, and neglect also are needed. In this study, shelter staff members collected information about these issues using non-standardized methods, using clinical judgment to determine appropriate timing, and questions to gather this sensitive information. In addition, the research team asked structured questions concerning these issues. While these various methods intended to produce reliable information, the short-term stays of many of the youths and the highly sensitive nature of the material make the results of these self-report measures somewhat questionable.



Despite the limitations, this study addresses a gap in the literature concerning family reunification following youths' admission to emergency shelter services. Further research is needed, however, that delineates youth, family, and shelter system factors that not only address reunification strategies, but also distinguish successful from unsuccessful reunification over an extended period of time. Few studies have been conducted that identify effective post-service intervention options aimed at improving successful reunification; even less research has focused on youths who do not reunify with their families. Thus, future research efforts demand employment of longitudinal methods to evaluate strategies best suited to improve family reunification efforts and identify intervention options to meet the continuing needs of these youths and their families.

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**Sanna J. Thompson**, PhD and **Liliane Cambraia Windsor**, MSSW, are at the University of Texas at Austin, School of Social Work. **Kin Zittel-Palamara**, PhD, is at the State University of New York at Buffalo.

Correspondence may be addressed to Sanna J. Thompson, PhD, University of Texas Austin, Substance Abuse Research Center, 1717 West 6<sup>th</sup> Street, Suite 240, Austin, TX 78703. Her phone is (512) 232-0604 and her Fax is (512) 232-0617. Her email is [SannaThompson@mail.utexas.edu](mailto:SannaThompson@mail.utexas.edu).

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