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Nobody's Children

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WHO'S A RUNAWAY

Third in a Series (*Reprinted*)

How Americans dodge their responsibility to provide care and comfort for nobody's children'.

AN ARMY of runaways, perhaps 300,000 strong, is on the move in America. In the first article of this series, PARADE disclosed how they are ignored by the public and kicked around by police. Last week, one boy's story showed they can be helped-if help comes in time. But it rarely does. Today we see why.

Who's to blame for the current mess in handling wandering teenagers?

All over the country, PARADE asked this question. After a while, the answer came to resemble a vaudeville routine: the person being questioned always jerked his thumb over his shoulder and said, "That guy back there." If you followed this thinking to its natural conclusion, you decided that the existence of "nobody's children" was nobody's fault.

Actually, the existence of these 300,000 kids is *everybody's* fault.

But who will admit it? Not the Federal Government, which sees the problem as one for the states. Not the states, which point out that runaways cross state lines and therefore are a Federal headache. Not local officials, who just blame everybody in a scatter-shot way.

The worst symptom of the problem is "floating" - giving a kid the bum's rush instead of treating him humanely. Every policeman admits "floating" is an evil. But few own up to doing it.

Yuma, Arizona, police boasted: "Not a kid gets through here!" A few minutes later, a PARADE investigator found two California boys thumbing rides on the main street. A Miami juvenile-court official told PARADE proudly, "We give every child under 17 welfare handling." But a directive from the same court states:

"We are beginning to get cases of 16-year-old boys . . . [who have not] committed any crime other than being a runaway from home . . . It has been the policy of the court for some time not to take jurisdiction in such cases . . ."

If police admit it's shortsighted, why do they "float" runaways? Hard-heartedness could be one reason. But Martha, 14, an Alabama girl picked up in Miami, told PARADE that policemen all along her route dug into their pockets to stake her to meals and rooms. Similar stories came from other young hoboes -- boys and girls alike.

The basis of "floating" can be boiled down to two lacks: funds and facilities. All too often, the alternative is lodging the youth in a ramshackle jail, trying to alert his home state to take an interest in him, haggling with his parents over bus fare.

When Karl Holton, chief probation officer of Los Angeles County, testified before the Senate Juvenile Delinquency Subcommittee, he estimated the county's annual outlay for runaway care at \$60,000 to \$70,000.

"We have had two children for over eight months," he told the Senators. "That alone will cost \$200 a month. Probably there will be no one to help defray the cost of going back, and if the children need an attendant, and if they live on the East Coast-well, you can figure it out for yourself."

Federal 'Help'

Washington does help to finance runaway returns, in a rather left-handed way. After pressure from Miami's Judge Walter H. Beckham and others, Congress amended the Social Security Law in 1950 to allow rural-child-welfare funds to be used for returns.

But there were several catches. Only children 15 or under were covered. And the states actually didn't get a cent more. If they wanted to use Federal funds to buy tickets home for runaways, some other phase of the welfare program suffered. So the amendment was largely ignored.

Further, the law required the state to act in the child's "best interests"; this meant a full investigation at home. As a final roadblock, states were required to exhaust all other chances of paying the fare before using Federal funds. All this ate up several months; most states figured it was cheaper to give the kid a homeward shove in the first place.

And the Federal grants were based on the number of children living in rural areas. But the problem can't be measured in these terms. The states that receive the most runaways are not primarily rural but urban.

So the states have turned to their own fund-raising systems, which are only slightly less complex. They dip into poor-relief appropriations, or child-welfare funds, or special nest eggs set up by court order. Or they call in a private agency, like the Travelers' Aid Association. Last year, Travelers' Aid underwrote the homeward trips of 2,070 boys and 939 girls.

Most communities try to dun the child's parents for his fare. These attempts often are fruitless. Herman Stark of the California Youth Authority estimates that in 50 per cent of the cases handled by his agency, the parents just aren't interested ("Subject got there. Let him get back same way," one wired) and in another 25 per cent they haven't got the money.

If an empty treasury doesn't persuade a policeman to "float" runaways, the lack of machinery or facilities for handling them usually does. Only a handful of towns have a place to lodge juveniles -- detention homes, camps or juvenile "tanks" in the jail -- that can be called even adequate. Fewer yet have trained personnel to delve into the kids' troubles on a sociological basis. And the number with *enough* personnel to do a thorough job is somewhere near zero.

Even New York City falls short in this regard. Although children under 16 are well cared for in the municipal Children's Center, the only refuge for runaway boys 16 and over is the privately run Home for Homeless Boys, which has no supervision, no program -- and no funds. Neither the city nor the Community Chest helps out, and the superintendent, the Rev. Harry C. Eva, sometimes has solicited in the streets to keep the kids eating. But this gentle, 80-year-old minister never turns anyone away, so several hundred boys are lodged there each year.

Only a few communities are in a class with Phoenix or Los Angeles, both of which have up-to-date homes that stress outdoor work and planned recreation. More often they rank with Pennsylvania, where, a survey showed, 20 of 67 counties use some part of the county jail to house runaways.

California, host to an estimated 2,000 runaways a month, has dreamed up a revolutionary -- and controversial -- method of returning some of them. Four times a year, a "deportation train" heads east, dropping off youngsters all along its route. In a year, several hundred kids get home this way; a typical trip, in April, took 52.

Usually the train is run in two sections. One starts at Sacramento, the other at Los Angeles; they hook up at Barstow. On the April trip, one

boy rode as far as Boston. Usually, however, the train breaks up at St. Louis and the youngsters are assigned to other trains, often in care of an attendant.

Although under 24-hour supervision, the kids have a wonderful time, according to T. O. Heer of the Youth Authority. For many, it's their first train ride. Cracked one boy, "I rode the rods out here and California's sending me home in style."

Not a few are disconsolate at being sent home. "I don't care if I live or die," one boy told Heer as the train chugged him back to a broken home. A girl, being returned to a New York reform school after running away 35 times, ranted bitterly at her mother. "If she had stayed home once in a while, I wouldn't be in this trouble," the girl said.

Railroad Fare: \$35,000

Four trains a year costs California \$35,000. The state figures it's getting a bargain. Otherwise, the runaways' board bills in industrial schools and forestry camps would keep mounting. The CYA tries to pressure parents into paying for the trip, but it seldom works. Last year, the state regained only \$2,300.

The system has been in operation for some years and has been tried by the state of Washington, but it still kicks up a fuss. "I often wonder what happens to these youngsters when they're just dumped off a train like that," Dr. Martha M. Eliot, Chief of the U.S. Children's Bureau, commented to PARADE.

Heer and Stark insist, however, that case studies are made of every runaway before he's assigned to the train. Some agency at home must agree to supervise his parole. Often the courts refuse to send a kid home "no matter how loud the parents holler," Heer says. In such cases the CYA finds jobs or arranges schooling for the youth in California.

At least this one state is taking active steps to do something about the problem, even if some critics do call it "floating in reverse." Swamped with runaways and quite often stymied by uncooperative home states, which flatly refuse to help out, California has hit upon the deportation train as its best way out.

"We get 'em wholesale," Holton told the Senate committee, "so we have to send 'em back wholesale."

Unfortunately, the nationwide problem of runaway teenagers, extending into every city and hamlet from coast to coast, won't be solved until all America realizes that these kids aren't wholesale freight at all.

Until that day comes, they are passengers on a speeding train to potential crime -- routed via Misery, Depravity and several other whistle stops between.