

PARADE MAGAZINE

Nobody's Children

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What's Ahead for Our Runaways?

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They need more facilities, more personnel -- but, most of all, a change in your attitude.

For four weeks, PARADE has been discussing a "social nightmare" -- the problem of America's teen-age runaways. As one boy's story showed, they drift away from home yearning for affection; often they find only misery instead. Even the most progressive states handle them haphazardly. What can be done? Here are PARADE's suggestions.

"The runaway problem," says Richard Clendenen, executive director of the Senate Juvenile Delinquency Subcommittee, "dates from the creation of a neither fish-nor-fowl status between childhood and adulthood. A child used to be grown up at 16; now he's not grown up at 20. Modern America created this problem; modern America will have to solve it."

But how? So little spadework has been done (indeed, most states only dimly realize a problem exists) that a pat, three-simple-steps solution can't be suggested. America must start from scratch, with a change in thinking. The bum's-rush treatment must be discarded; it simply kicks a kid around until he winds up warped, twisted -- and often with a gun in his pocket.

Year by year, the number of runaways has been climbing until some estimates run as high as 300,000 a year. All this time, responsible agencies (even in your town) have been burying their heads in the sand. Until everyone owns up to the problem, the battle can't be won.

And it can't be won single-handed, as California and Florida have learned. Much more aware of the problem because they are overrun with runaways, the two states have been stalemated by "home states" that just can't be bothered with runaways.

Trapped by one of these stalemates is 15-year-old Donald, a New Yorker who fled to Miami after his father died and his mother was placed in an institution.

Donald reached Florida almost broke, and spent a week living on hot dogs and sleeping on park benches before police picked him up. He claimed to be 18, so he spent a week in the adult section of the city jail. Then his true age was discovered and he was transferred to Juvenile Hall. That was 60 days ago.

"We can't get New York to take this boy back," says Miami's Judge Walter H. Beckham. "They don't want him even if we pay the transportation. They're using all kinds of subterfuge to dodge their proper responsibility. And we're not going to send him back unless some agency accepts supervision of his case."

Whose Responsibility Is He?

When a runaway hits the road, with or without parental consent, every state along his route has a responsibility to stop him. The state that eventually does flag him down, and his home state, also have these important duties.

The home state should agree to pay his fare home; investigate why he ran away; recommend whether he should return home, be placed in a foster home, given a job or assigned to a different school.

The state that stops him should pay his board during the investigation; house him in a foster home or camp designed for children, not adults; try to place him in new surroundings if a return home seems an awkward solution.

Which states have examined and accepted these responsibilities? Even California and Florida, the most forward-looking of all, drag their feet on the "home end" of a case -- according to states that have dealt with them. But until the states begin pulling together, no campaign to assist runaways will make much headway.

A good start would be an interstate compact, or agreement, guaranteeing cooperation to see that the child's best interests are served. The Joint Council of State Governments has mapped a tentative compact, paralleling the present agreement on adult parole violators.

Under its terms, each state would accept its responsibilities toward its legal residents, and would agree to supervise the probation of a child returned home from another state. The compact would cover kids who stepped over the line into "delinquency" as well as untainted runaways.

Before such a compact could be approved by the states, Congress would have to pass an enabling act allowing them to negotiate. The Hendrickson Committee introduced this measure at the recent session, but no action was taken. Even if action were taken, the Joint Council is frankly pessimistic about the chances of approval by the states.

An interstate compact, with each state shouldering its own burden of responsibility, also would divide the heavy cost of up-to-date programs more justly. As things stand now, Clendenen says, "Those states which recognize their social responsibility to the nation's young are being penalized." California shells out several hundred thousand dollars a year for returns alone; some less progressive states may spend only a few hundred. But often these same states furnish a high proportion of "nobody's children."

A new, more realistic yardstick ought to measure distribution of Federal funds. The present formula of basing grants for child welfare on proportion of rural population has no relation to the runaway problem. Again, states with the most acute problem get a short count.

The Federal Government, which has been stepping carefully to avoid treading on sensitive "states' rights" toes, should adopt a more vigorous role -- in terms of money as well as action. Certainly a teenager who runs from New Jersey to California is as much a Federal case as a fugitive from justice who covers the same ground.

Obviously, some money must be spent. Recently the National Probation and Parole Association reported that 100,000 children between 7 and 17 -- both runaways and delinquents -- are still held behind bars. And the Children's Bureau found that only 50 per cent of 611 large cities had any juvenile officers at all. Up-to-date juvenile facilities are called for. Juvenile staffs need to be bigger and better trained. This is primarily a long-range investment.

\$4,000 a Year per Child

"It costs \$4,000 a year to keep a kid in one of our training schools," says Ralph B. Wright of the California Youth Authority. "But if the kid's problems are solved at home, or he's stopped earlier in his journey, this cost is avoided."

Some of the more elaborate plans for dealing with runaways would cost a good deal more. For instance, the California Conference on Children and Youth, held last winter in Sacramento, discussed construction of a coast-to-coast string of youth hostels. The hostels would cater to the adventuresome streak in youngsters and be open to runaways as well as those traveling with parental permission. Not only shelter but supervision would be provided. The cost, the delegates admitted, might be high, but the dividends ought to be well worth the investment.

Less sweeping is Clendenen's idea of a modified CCC, which would enlist teenagers in state-forest work gangs and help them fill up the yawning years between childhood and maturity.

But these are long-term projects, aimed at solving the runaway problem by squaring off

against the whole puzzler of the "between years." Revolutionary as they are, they undoubtedly deserve serious study. But the runaway problem is here, today, and it needs an *immediate cure*.

As a start, every state and every community ought to take stock of the runaway problem--a thorough analysis, beginning with a census of the runaway population and a hard look into every phase of the program. Facilities should be examined and evaluated. Procedures should be scrutinized, criticized and tightened. Personnel should be re-educated.

A complete, white-glove inspection of this sort would be a solid foundation for a farsighted program to deal with the problem. And these steps also could be taken immediately to bring questions and answers into sharper focus:

- The Children's Bureau should draw up a code of uniform procedure and recommend its adoption by every agency.
- Each state attorney general should study the possibilities of entering into an interstate compact.
- An educational program should be launched to teach police to recognize and halt runaways sooner.
- The Social Security Act should be amended to raise to 18 the age limit for runaways returned with Federal funds.
- Each state should provide for regular, systematic reports on the number of runaways handled and their disposition.
- The next Child Welfare Conference should conduct a thorough study of long-range methods of coping with runaways.

If all this were suddenly done overnight, the runaway problem still would not vanish. The seeds have been planted; America will be reaping the harvest for a long time to come. But an aggressive offense against it would at least indicate that we were coming out of our slumber and looking at the problem squarely.

Until America opens its eyes -- and arms -- to "nobody's children," you, your neighbors and your community stand indicted on the counts leveled against you in somber tones by 16-year-old Bob Jones. His trip from Yonkers, N.Y., to California taught him, he says, that "nobody is interested in us -- the people, the cops, nobody. The cops just shove us along and shove us along. They're sure not doing their duty. Nobody is."

"There were times when I was so hungry I was tempted to break in somewhere, to steal, just to get food. I was lucky, that's all, that I didn't."

Suppose Bob hadn't been lucky; suppose he had yielded that last inch to temptation. And suppose you were on a jury trying him for burglary, or robbery, or murder. What would be your verdict, America? Whom would you convict?