



Timothy Montoya Task Force Meeting Agenda

January 4, 2023 | 8am-11am

Virtual - Zoom

Facilitators: Keystone Policy Center

Trace Faust | Berrick Abramson | Cally King

Time	Agenda Topic	Facilitator / Presenter
8:00 am	<ul style="list-style-type: none">Announcing selection of Co-ChairTask Force Member outreach	Stephanie Villafuerte
8:05 am	<ul style="list-style-type: none">Legislative ChargeTask Force Syllabus	Jennifer Superka
8:20 am	System operations and processes <ol style="list-style-type: none">What happens when a child runs away?What happens while a child is missing from care?What happens upon their return?	Jennifer Superka Keystone facilitators
9:25 am	Stretch Break	Full Group
9:30 am	An updated examination of the predictors of running away from foster care in the United States and trends over ten years (2010-2019)	Dr. Tara Richards and Caralin Branscum, PhD student, School of Criminology and Criminal Justice, University of Nebraska Omaha
10:30 am	<ul style="list-style-type: none">Wrap-upNext Steps	Keystone facilitators
10:45 am	Public Comment	
11:00 am	Closing	Keystone Facilitators



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An updated examination of the predictors of running away from foster care in the United States and trends over ten years (2010–2019)

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ABSTRACT

Background: Among the more than 400,000 children in foster care, there is a small group who will run away from care and face increased risks of negative outcomes. Previous studies on the predictors of running away from care use limited samples or outdated data.

Objective: The present study replicates and extends prior research by presenting an updated analysis of predictors of running away from foster care as well as 10-year trends in the prevalence and predictors of running from care.

Participants and setting: This study uses the Adoption and Foster Care Analysis and Reporting System (AFCARS) data to assess the runaway status of 597,911 children who were involved in foster care in 2019. Longitudinal trend analyses utilize AFCARS data from 2010 to 2019.

Method: Using chi-square/*t*-tests and binary logistic regression analyses, this study investigates individual- and case-level predictors of running away from foster care programs.

Results: Findings show that girls (OR = 1.29, $p < .001$), African American children (OR = 1.89, $p < .001$), and older children (OR = 1.61, $p < .001$) are at increased risk of running away from foster care. Removal reasons such as child substance abuse (OR = 1.65, $p < .001$), abandonment (OR = 1.38, $p < .001$), and child behavioral problems (OR = 1.31, $p < .001$) are also associated with an increased risk. Analysis of 10-year trends shows a steady decline in running from care: 1.40% in 2010 to 0.98% in 2019. The profile of risk factors is stable overall, with a few notable exceptions.

Conclusions: The percent of children running from foster care is at a 10-year low. Prevention and intervention efforts regarding running from care must focus on the needs of African American and Hispanic children, especially girls, as well as children with substance use or behavior problems. Given that programs rarely have prospective information regarding why children leave care and the negative consequences of labeling children as “runaways,” shifting language to “missing from care” should be considered.

1. Introduction

There are more than 400,000 children in foster care programs in the United States (U.S.) at any given time (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2018). Children may be placed in foster care because of abuse or neglect in their family of origin, parental

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abandonment, death, or incarceration, among other reasons (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2018). Among children in foster care, some may run away or otherwise go missing from their foster care placements, thereby increasing their risk of victimization and a host of other negative outcomes (e.g., substance use, dropping out of school; Courtney & Zinn, 2009; Crosland & Dunlap, 2015; Lutzman et al., 2019).

Given the risks of running from foster care placement, prior research has focused on the individual- and case-level factors that predict running from care; however, most studies rely on data from single states/jurisdictions or specific care settings, (e.g., Courtney et al., 2005; Crosland & Dunlap, 2015; Nesmith, 2006). The one previous study that utilize national data – the National Adoption and Foster Care Analysis and Reporting System (AFCARS) – relied on a single year of data, from 2009, and has become quite dated (Lin, 2012).

The present study aims to replicate and extend prior research by using AFCARS data to present (1) a multivariate analysis of predictors of running from care using the most recent data (2019) as well as (2) trends in predictors from 2010 to 2019. Findings show that running behavior dramatically decreased over the 10-year study period, and that most predictors of running remained stable. Findings are discussed in the context of prevention and intervention strategies for addressing running behavior among children in foster care as well as priorities for future research and practice.

1.1. Running behavior in foster care programs

Children involved in foster care are about twice as likely to run away than children in the general population (Sedlak et al., 2005), and while many children who run from care return after approximately one week, roughly a quarter are missing from care for five or more weeks (Courtney et al., 2005). Running from a foster care placement is associated with an increased risk of many harmful behaviors. For example, children who have run away from care report higher rates of substance abuse (Courtney & Zinn, 2009), crime perpetration (Crosland & Dunlap, 2015; Yoder et al., 2003), truancy from school, and dropping out of school (Crosland & Dunlap, 2015; Sullivan & Knutson, 2000), compared to children who have not run from their foster care placement. Running from foster care has also been associated with an increased risk of sexual exploitation and trafficking (Cohen et al., 1991; Lutzman et al., 2019; Yates et al., 1988), repeated victimization (Hoyt et al., 1999; Yates et al., 1988), exposure to STDs/STIs (Booth et al., 1999; Courtney et al., 2005), and attempted suicide (Yates et al., 1988).

Given that children who run from care are particularly vulnerable to violence and victimization, understanding the predictors of running from care is paramount. Prior research has included qualitative case studies (e.g., Clark et al., 2008) or interviews with children who have run from their foster care placements (e.g., Courtney et al., 2005). In addition, quantitative research has predominantly analyzed administrative data from single state child welfare systems (e.g., Illinois, Courtney et al., 2005) or specific care settings (e.g., family foster care, Nesmith, 2006; specialized foster care, Fasulo et al., 2002).

Taken together, these prior studies identify a host of individual- and case-level predictors of running from foster care. For example, research shows that girls (Fasulo et al., 2002; Sunseri, 2003) and children of color (African American or Hispanic children; Dworsky et al., 2018; Wulczyn, 2020; American Indian/Alaska Native children; Nesmith, 2006) are at an increased risk for running away from care. Additionally, running behavior peaks around 16 to 18 years of age (Courtney et al., 2005; Sunseri, 2003). Other individual-level risk factors include substance abuse (Courtney et al., 2005; Courtney & Zinn, 2009; Eisengart et al., 2008; McIntosh et al., 2010), previous running behavior (Bowden & Lambie, 2015; Courtney & Zinn, 2009; Sunseri, 2003), mental and physical disabilities (Clark et al., 2008; Courtney et al., 2005; Courtney & Zinn, 2009), and sexual minority/LGBTQ+ identity (Fish et al., 2019; Wilson & Kastanis, 2015).

In addition to individual characteristics, there are several placement-level factors associated with running from care. Using a sample of over 14,000 children in Illinois who had run away from care and returned, Courtney et al. (2005) found that children who were not placed with their siblings were more likely to run from placement than children who were placed with their siblings. Similarly, children ran away more often when placed in group homes—instead of foster families—and with foster families who are not relatives, compared to placement with foster families who are relatives (Courtney et al., 2005). Furthermore, placement history and instability are strongly associated with running behavior. For instance, children are more likely to run away from care when they experience greater numbers of removals from their family of origin and more changes in their foster care placements (Bowden & Lambie, 2015; Courtney & Zinn, 2009; English & English, 1999; Zimmerman et al., 1997).

In addition to the aforementioned research, one study to date has examined the population of children in foster care using the Adoption and Foster Care Analysis and Reporting System (AFCARS) data from 2009 (Lin, 2012). Lin's analysis substantiated the general demographic profile of children who are at greatest risk for running away – females, children of color, and older youth. She also found that children who are removed from their family of origin at an older age are more likely to run than those who are younger at first removal and that physical and mental health diagnoses are correlated with a higher risk of running away (Lin, 2012).

1.2. Theoretical explanations for running behavior

Broadly, the literature suggests that children run away from home as a coping behavior (Cochran et al., 2002; Courtney et al., 2005; Crosland & Dunlap, 2015; Safyer et al., 2004). Running behavior predecessors include perceived or actual family hostility towards or rejection of the child (e.g., as in the case of a child who identifies as LGBTQ+), caregiver or interfamilial conflict, depressive symptomatology, and abuse (Cochran et al., 2002; Safyer et al., 2004; Thrane et al., 2006). Taken together, Hammer et al. (2002) summarize the nature of why children run away by noting that, “children may leave to protect themselves or because they are no longer wanted in the home” (p. 2).

Crossland et al. (2018) have specifically reasoned children run away from foster care due to broad categories of *running to* and *running from* behaviors. To elaborate, *running to* behaviors were categorized as seeking out friends, family, and a sense of normalcy (e.g., parties, sporting events, and extracurricular activities) (see also Courtney et al., 2005). For instance, research has found that children are more likely to run away from care when their families of origin are comprised of a single-parent caregiver, compared to two-parent households (Lin, 2012), perhaps because the child fills a responsibility as a caretaker to their sole parent or is a caretaker to siblings. In contrast, *running from* behaviors were characterized as those aimed at avoiding negative environments such as foster care staff, families, and peers that make them feel unwanted, unloved, or prevent them from engaging in activities the child desires (e.g., dating; Crosland & Dunlap, 2015; Courtney et al., 2005; Fasulo et al., 2002). To that end, research shows that children in foster care placements report higher rates of physical and sexual abuse from their caregivers than children not living in foster care placements (Euser et al., 2014) as well as higher rates of exposure to violence (e.g., violence in their neighborhoods, violence between caregivers) (Turney & Wildeman, 2017).

2. Current study

Prior research has demonstrated that running away is concentrated among children in foster care and that children who run away from care are at an increased risk of violence and other harmful outcomes. While prior research has examined the individual and system-level predictors of running away from care, most of these prior studies have focused on single jurisdictions/states or specific care settings (e.g., Courtney et al., 2005; Crosland & Dunlap, 2015). Further analyses by Lin (2012) provided a foundation for understanding the national landscape of children who run away; however, these studies represent an analysis of a single year (2009) of annual national data and have become quite dated. To this end, the present study provides a 10-year update to Lin's (2012) analysis by replicating her research using 2019 AFCARS data and providing an analysis of trends in predictors of running from care from 2010 to 2019.

3. Methodology

3.1. Sample

Data for this study were drawn from the Adoption and Foster Care Analysis and Reporting System (AFCARS) from the National Child Abuse and Neglect Data System (NCANDS). These data contain case-level information for all children in foster care or who are adopted through states' child welfare agencies. The U.S. Department of Health and Human Services houses the annual data collection effort. Data reporting to AFCARS is mandatory for all Title IV-E agencies. Each fiscal year the AFCARS data reflects the reporting period between October 1 of the prior year and September 30 of the current year. For example, the AFCARS data for the fiscal year 2019 was collected between 10/1/2018 through 9/30/2019. This study first examined the 597,911 children in foster care in 2019; AFCARS data for years 2010 to 2019 was used for an analysis of 10-year trends.

3.2. Measures

Following previous research by Lin (2012), we included children's age, sex, and race/ethnicity as well as seven independent control variables: children's age at first removal, number of removals from the family of origin, number of placements, duration of current placement, reason for removal, clinically diagnosed disability, and original family structure. Census region was also included in the present analysis.

3.2.1. Dependent variable

The child's *runaway status* was derived from the AFCARS variable for the child's current placement in foster care. The AFCARS report defined a child's placement as one of the following: (1) pre-adoptive home, (2) foster family home, relative, (3) foster family home, non-relative, (4) group home, (5) institution, (6) supervised independent living, (7) trial home visit, and (8) runaway. The only placement that was excluded in this study was "supervised independent living" since the foster care youth lives independently. For this study, placement was dichotomized (0 = not runaway (includes all other placement settings), 1 = runaway).

3.2.2. Independent variables

Sex was coded dichotomously (0 = male; 1 = female). Since the AFCARS report only provides the child's birth date, the *child's age* was computed by subtracting the date of birth from the reporting year. Like Lin (2012), children were excluded if they were younger than 0 years-old (which occurred in the event of errors in the dataset) and older than 23 years-old. Lin explains the decision to include individuals between 18 and 23 years-old was made because some states (e.g., Massachusetts and Connecticut) have extended foster care services to age 23 (Child Welfare League of America, 2009). *Race/ethnicity* was coded as five mutually exclusive categories (1 = White, non-Hispanic, 2 = African American, non-Hispanic, 3 = American Indian/Alaskan Native, non-Hispanic, 4 = Asian, 5 = Other, non-Hispanic (including Hawaiian/Other Pacific Islander, and more than one race, and 5 = Hispanic)). We replicated Lin's (2012) derived measure for the *age at first removal* from the caretaker of origin. This measure was created by subtracting the child's birth year by the first removal year. Children who were younger than 0 years-old (because of a coding error) and older than 17 years-old at time of first removal were omitted from the sample.

We also replicated Lin's (2012) three indicators for placement instability. First, we measure the *duration* in months a child had been

in their most recent foster care episode. To do this, we take the number of days between the date of placement in the most recent foster care setting and the end of the fiscal year and divide by 30.417. Second, the remaining two indicators were pulled directly from the AFCARS report. The first of these indicators consists of the *number of placement settings* in the current foster care episode. This includes the child's current placement. The second indicator consists of the *total number of removals* from the child's home of origin over the child's entire life, including the current removal.

Reason for removal from original family is comprised of 13 circumstances that are dichotomously coded (0 = no, 1 = yes) and include: (1) physical abuse, (2) sexual abuse, (3) neglect, (4) parent substance use (drugs or alcohol), (5) child substance use (drugs or alcohol), (6) child disability, (7) child behavior problem, (8) parent death, (9) parent incarceration, (10) caretaker inability to cope, (11) abandonment, (12) relinquishment, and (13) inadequate housing. *Clinically diagnosed disability* was collected in the AFCARS report through several variables. First, a series of five dichotomous variables indicated that a child had been clinically diagnosed with any of the following disabilities: intellectual disability,¹ visual or hearing impairment, physical disability, emotionally disturbed, and other condition that requires special care (e.g., asthma, AIDS, autistic spectrum disorder). Additionally, the AFCARS reported whether a child had been diagnosed with *any* disability in which "yes" referred to the children who had responded "yes" to any of the previous dichotomous variables. In this variable, children who responded with "no" and "not yet to be determined" were collapsed into a single category. This was done because "no" indicated that a child had undergone clinical testing and had been found to have no disability, whereas "not yet to be determined" indicated that a child had not been assessed by a professional. In this study, clinically diagnosed disability was operationalized categorically (0 = no disability/not yet determined (reference group), 1 = intellectual disability, 2 = visual or hearing impaired, 3 = physical disability, 4 = emotionally disturbed, 5 = other disability). The AFCARS data reports *original family structure* using five categories (1 = married couple, 2 = unmarried couple, 3 = single female family (reference group), 4 = single male family, 5 = undetermined families). Lastly, we also added the U.S. *census region* where the child was located. We used the U.S. Census Bureau's official regions (1 = Northeast, 2 = Midwest, 3 = South (reference group), 4 = West).

3.3. Analytical strategy

We begin by presenting an analysis of the 2019 AFCARS data. Descriptive statistics were calculated for all study variables and a series of bivariate analyses were conducted to assess significant differences between children who did and did not run away (Table 1). Independent samples *t*-tests were used to assess all continuous variables, and chi-square analyses were used to assess all categorical variables. Then, a binary logistic regression model was estimated to evaluate the independent effects of all study variables on runaway status (see Table 2). The results of the binary logistic regression are presented as an odds ratio. Odds ratios can be interpreted as the relative odds of an outcome (here, runaway status) dependent on an independent variable (e.g., a child's age, race, disability status). Finally, we replicated our binary regression model using AFCARS data for 2010 to 2018 to examine trends in the prevalence and predictors of runaway behavior over the ten years since Lin's (2012) study (i.e., 2010 to 2019; see Tables 3 and 4). Regarding missing data, approximately 9.16% of data for the independent variables were missing from the AFCARS files. Specifically, 21 variables had <1% missing data; 2 variables had 1–3% missing data; and 1 variable had 3.65% missing data. We also assessed for cell missingness and found that cell missing was 0.61%. Alpha was set at $p < .05$ for all analyses.

4. Results

Descriptive statistics for youth in foster care in 2019 as well as bivariate comparisons for children who did and did not run away from foster care are presented in Table 1. Regarding runaway status, findings showed that running away from foster care is a rare event: less than 1% (0.98%) of children's foster care placement was listed as "runaway". Children in foster care ranged from 0 to 23 years old ($M = 8.27$; $SD = 5.56$). Children who ran away from foster care were significantly older ($M = 16.87$; $SD = 1.88$) than children who did not run away ($M = 8.18$; $SD = 5.52$, $t = -120.53$, $df = 597,909$, $p < .001$). Girls comprised slightly less than half of children in foster care (48.31%); however, were significantly more likely to runaway (54.97%) ($\chi^2 = 105.29$, $df(1)$, $p < .001$).

There were statistically significant racial differences between children who ran away from foster care and children who did not. Despite White children making up 46.58% of the foster care population, they only comprised 30.94% of children who ran away from foster care ($\chi^2 = 760.51$, $df(5)$, $p < .001$). In contrast, African American children comprised the highest proportion of children who ran away from care (33.22%), despite only consisting of about 22% of the foster care population. In addition, Hispanic children were also disproportionately represented as having run away (26.37%) ($p < .001$). The age a child was first removed from their family of origin ranged from 0 to 18 years old ($M = 5.79$, $SD = 5.13$). Children who ran away from foster care were more likely to be older when removed from their family of origin ($M = 12.01$, $SD = 4.90$), compared to children who did not run away ($M = 5.73$, $SD = 5.09$), $t = -94.06$, $df = 597,909$, $p < .001$.

All three indicators of placement instability were significantly different for children who did and did not run away from foster care. First, children in care had been removed on average 1.24 times ($SD = 0.57$, $Range = 1-18$); however, children who had runaway had been removed an average of 1.58 times ($M = 1.58$, $SD = 0.89$) compared to children who did not run away ($M = 1.24$, $SD = 0.56$), $t = -45.67$, $df = 597,909$, $p < .001$. Second, while children had an overall average of 2.78 prior foster care placements ($SD = 3.36$, $Range$

¹ AFCARS continues to use the term "mental retardation", however, the term intellectual disability is now the preferred term by the federal government and has been codified in the Federal Register for the evaluation of mental impairments in children and adults (see Social Security Administration, 2013).

Table 1
Descriptive statistics for children in foster care and bivariate differences based on runaway status ($N = 597,911$).

Variable	$M (SD)/\%$		$\%/M^{\text{Diff}}$	
	Total sample $N = 597,911$	Runaway $n = 5867$		Non-runaway $n = 592,044$
Female	48.31%	54.97%	48.24%	6.73%***
Race/ethnicity				
White	46.58%	30.94%	46.74%	-15.80%***
Black/African American	22.00%	33.22%	21.89%	11.33%***
American Indian/Alaskan Native	2.31%	1.98%	2.31%	-0.33%***
Asian	0.50%	0.55%	0.50%	0.04%***
Other	8.05%	6.95%	8.06%	-1.11%***
Hispanic	20.56%	26.37%	20.50%	5.87%***
Clinically diagnosed disability				
No disability	74.36%	58.96%	74.51%	-15.55%***
Intellectual disability	0.52%	0.14%	0.53%	-0.39%***
Visually or hearing impaired	0.79%	1.43%	0.78%	0.65%***
Physical disability	0.27%	0.09%	0.27%	-0.19%***
Emotionally disturbed	10.68%	24.29%	10.55%	13.74%***
Other disability	13.38%	15.10%	13.37%	1.74%***
Original family structure				
Single female	47.77%	52.51%	47.72%	4.79%***
Married couple	18.02%	18.82%	18.02%	0.80%***
Unmarried couple	24.74%	13.04%	24.85%	-11.82%***
Single male	5.55%	10.53%	5.50%	5.03%***
Unknown	3.92%	5.10%	3.91%	1.19%***
Removal reason				
Physical abuse	12.92%	11.32%	12.93%	-1.62%***
Sexual abuse	4.05%	6.05%	4.03%	2.02%***
Neglect	65.65%	51.68%	65.78%	-14.11%***
Parent substance abuse	40.41%	16.33%	40.65%	-24.32%***
Child substance abuse	2.32%	6.58%	2.28%	4.30%***
Child disability	1.92%	2.68%	1.91%	0.76%***
Child behavior problem	7.61%	34.55%	7.35%	27.20%***
Parent death	0.85%	1.38%	0.85%	0.53%***
Parent incarceration	7.55%	4.40%	7.58%	-3.18%***
Caretaker inability to cope	14.37%	18.19%	14.33%	3.85%***
Abandonment	4.96%	12.00%	4.89%	7.11%***
Relinquishment	0.99%	2.10%	0.98%	1.12%***
Inadequate housing	11.76%	7.65%	11.80%	-4.15%***
Census region				
South	37.27%	28.45%	37.36%	-8.91%***
Northeast	11.93%	15.20%	11.90%	3.31%***
Midwest	26.89%	25.94%	26.90%	-0.96%***
West	23.90%	30.41%	23.84%	6.57%***
Age	8.27 (5.56)	16.87 (1.88)	8.18 (5.52)	8.69***
Range = 0–23		Range = 0–22	Range = 0–23	
Age at first removal	5.79 (5.13)	12.01 (4.90)	5.73 (5.09)	6.28***
Range = 0–18		Range = 0–17.99	Range = 0–18	
Duration (months)	9.44 (11.64)	5.00 (6.83)	9.49 (11.67)	-4.49***
Range = 0–252		Range = 0–116	Range = 0–252	
Number of previous placements	2.78 (3.36)	6.67 (7.60)	2.75 (3.27)	3.92***
Range = 1–97		Range = 1–89	1–98	
Number of total removals	1.24 (0.57)	1.58 (0.89)	1.24 (0.56)	0.34***
Range = 1–17		Range = 1–8	1–18	

* $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$, *** $p < .001$.

= 1–99), children who ran away had four additional prior placements ($M = 6.67$, $SD = 7.60$) compared to children who did not run away ($M = 2.75$, $SD = 3.30$, $t = -89.38$, $df = 597,909$, $p < .001$). Third, children who had runaway had spent approximately four months less time in their current placement ($M = 5$, $SD = 6.83$) than children who did not run away ($M = 9.49$, $SD = 11.67$), $t = 29.38$, $df = 597,909$, $p < .001$.

Regarding reason for removal, most children in foster care were removed from their primary caregivers for reasons of neglect (65.65%) or parental substance abuse (40.41%), while 7.61% were removed for the child's own behavioral problems. In comparison, 34.55% of children who had run away from foster care were removed from their family of origin for behavioral problems, compared to children who did not runaway (7.35%) ($\chi^2 = 6111.28$, $df(1)$, $p < .001$). In contrast, children who experienced neglect were under-represented in the runaway group compared to the non-runaway group, 51.68% and 65.78%, respectively ($\chi^2 = 512.57$, $df(1)$, $p < .001$). Moreover, caretaker inability to cope was significantly related to runaway status, (18.19% versus 14.33%, $\chi^2 = 70.08$, $df(1)$, $p < .001$) as was children's disability status (2.68% versus 1.91%, $\chi^2 = 18.05$, $df(1)$, $p < .001$), child substance abuse problems (6.58%

Table 2
Binary logistic regression model examining predictors of runaway status among children in foster care (N = 597,911).

Variable	B	SE	95% CIs		OR
Female	0.25	0.03	1.22	1.36	1.29***
Race/ethnicity					
Black/African American	0.64	0.04	1.77	2.03	1.89***
American Indian/Alaskan Native	0.37	0.10	1.19	1.76	1.45***
Asian	0.21	0.18	0.86	1.77	1.23
Other	0.43	0.06	1.37	1.71	1.53***
Hispanic	0.60	0.04	1.69	1.96	1.82***
Clinically diagnosed disability					
Intellectual disability	-0.78	0.36	0.23	0.93	0.46
Visually or hearing impaired	0.23	0.12	1.00	1.58	1.26
Physical disability	-0.54	0.46	0.24	1.43	0.58
Emotionally disturbed	0.05	0.03	0.98	1.12	1.05
Other disability	-0.16	0.04	0.79	0.92	0.85***
Original family structure					
Married couple	-0.21	0.04	0.76	0.88	0.81***
Unmarried couple	-0.02	0.04	0.90	1.06	0.98
Single male	0.13	0.05	1.03	1.25	1.14**
Unknown	-0.04	0.06	0.85	1.09	0.96
Removal reason					
Physical abuse	-0.03	0.04	0.89	1.06	0.97
Sexual abuse	-0.10	0.06	0.81	1.01	0.90
Neglect	0.16	0.03	1.10	1.24	1.17***
Parent substance abuse	-0.10	0.04	0.84	0.98	0.91*
Child substance abuse	0.50	0.06	1.47	1.85	1.65***
Child disability	-0.35	0.09	0.60	0.84	0.71***
Child behavior problem	0.27	0.03	1.22	1.40	1.31***
Parent death	-0.01	0.12	0.79	1.24	0.99
Parent incarceration	-0.07	0.07	0.82	1.06	0.93
Caretaker inability to cope	0.05	0.04	0.98	1.13	1.05
Abandonment	0.32	0.04	1.27	1.51	1.38***
Relinquishment	0.06	0.10	0.88	1.29	1.06
Inadequate housing	0.05	0.05	0.95	1.17	1.06
Census region					
Northeast	0.27	0.05	1.20	1.43	1.31***
Midwest	0.26	0.04	1.20	1.39	1.30***
West	0.61	0.04	1.70	1.98	1.84***
Age	0.48	0.01	1.59	1.63	1.61***
Age at first removal	0.01	0.00	1.00	1.02	1.01**
Duration (months)	-0.06	0.00	0.94	0.94	0.94***
Number of previous placements	0.03	0.00	1.03	1.04	1.03***
Number of total removals	0.12	0.02	1.09	1.18	1.13***
Intercept	-12.11	0.12	-	-	-
F (DF)	20,141.24 (36)***				
Nagelkerke R square	0.32				

Note: Reference Categories: White, No disability, Single female, and South.

* $p < .05$.

** $p < .01$.

*** $p < .001$.

Table 3
Ten year trends for the prevalence of children running away from FC programs (2010–2019).

Year	Children in foster care programs N	Children who ran away N	Prevalence of children who ran away %
2010	534,056	7456	1.40%
2011	535,944	7340	1.37%
2012	526,366	6235	1.18%
2013	542,315	6121	1.13%
2014	569,333	6344	1.11%
2015	592,639	6537	1.10%
2016	594,285	6470	1.09%
2017	610,723	6707	1.10%
2018	608,826	6162	1.01%
2019	597,911	5867	0.98%
10-Year average	571,239.80	6523.90	1.14%

Table 4
Ten year trends for the predictors of children running away from FC programs (2010–2019).

	2010	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	10-Year average	
Married couple	1.02	1.00	0.96	0.98	1.00	1.08	0.99	1.04	1.08	0.81	0.99	
Unmarried couple	0.72	0.72	0.71	0.77	0.75	0.82	0.75	0.76	0.87	0.98	0.78	
Single male	1.00	0.92	0.95	1.00	1.05	1.13	1.07	1.03	1.06	1.14	1.03	
Unknown	1.00	0.92	1.06	0.90	0.97	1.12	0.88	0.99	1.10	0.96	0.99	
Female	1.50	1.34	1.37	1.37	1.41	1.45	1.45	1.42	1.33	1.29	1.39	
Black/African American	1.54	1.55	1.55	1.46	1.53	1.62	1.55	1.56	1.77	1.89	1.60	
American Indian/Alaska Native	1.21	1.88	1.92	1.61	1.57	1.36	1.56	1.76	1.51	1.45	1.58	
Asian	1.44	1.64	1.56	1.34	1.33	0.90	0.94	1.06	1.01	1.23	1.24	
Other	1.35	1.29	1.56	1.52	1.49	1.45	1.37	1.40	1.50	1.53	1.45	
Hispanic	2.09	2.23	2.07	1.87	1.86	1.89	1.78	1.79	1.69	1.82	1.91	
Intellectual disability	0.51	0.46	0.53	0.75	0.43	0.62	0.43	0.43	0.30	0.46	0.49	
Visually/hearing impaired	1.15	1.26	1.52	1.76	1.44	1.02	1.12	1.18	1.08	1.26	1.28	
Physical disability	0.76	0.84	0.52	0.92	0.84	0.53	0.35	0.88	0.38	0.58	0.66	
Emotionally disturbed	0.95	0.99	1.17	1.27	1.14	1.06	1.09	1.12	1.15	1.05	1.10	
Other disability	0.96	0.94	1.09	1.25	1.18	1.04	0.99	0.91	1.03	0.85	1.03	
Northeast	0.69	0.62	0.75	0.66	0.61	0.81	0.90	0.91	0.81	1.31	0.81	
Midwest	0.92	1.00	1.11	1.29	1.30	1.31	1.47	1.23	1.19	1.30	1.21	
West	1.46	1.53	1.55	1.77	1.96	2.06	2.20	1.86	1.84	1.84	1.81	
Age at first removal	1.01	1.01	1.01	1.02	1.02	1.01	1.02	1.02	1.01	1.01	1.01	
Duration (months)	0.94	0.94	0.94	0.93	0.93	0.93	0.94	0.94	0.93	0.94	0.94	
Number of previous placements	1.04	1.04	1.04	1.04	1.04	1.04	1.04	1.04	1.03	1.03	1.04	
Number of total removals	1.12	1.10	1.13	1.17	1.14	1.14	1.20	1.20	1.12	1.13	1.15	
Age	1.59	1.58	1.60	1.57	1.63	1.59	1.59	1.62	1.63	1.61	1.60	
Physical abuse	0.94	1.04	1.04	0.95	0.95	1.00	0.95	0.92	1.04	0.97	0.98	
Sexual abuse	0.97	0.99	0.98	0.86	0.96	0.95	0.89	0.85	0.85	0.90	0.92	
Neglect	1.14	1.22	1.16	1.20	1.11	1.13	1.14	1.17	1.09	1.17	1.15	
Parent substance abuse	1.09	1.14	1.27	1.10	1.23	1.18	0.99	0.91	0.94	0.91	1.07	
Child substance abuse	1.43	1.47	1.55	1.40	1.32	1.43	1.38	1.39	1.39	1.65	1.44	
Child disability	0.77	0.78	0.71	0.79	0.75	0.66	0.67	0.56	0.58	0.71	0.70	
Child behavior problem	1.06	1.19	1.14	1.14	1.11	1.07	1.13	1.30	1.26	1.31	1.17	
Parent death	0.99	0.99	1.15	1.06	1.23	1.07	0.85	0.84	0.86	0.99	1.00	
Parent incarceration	1.00	0.94	0.93	0.97	0.86	0.83	0.96	0.88	0.99	0.93	0.93	
Caretaker inability to cope	1.19	1.20	1.09	1.10	1.03	1.02	1.01	1.07	1.04	1.05	1.08	
Abandonment	1.36	1.41	1.51	1.60	1.55	1.48	1.42	1.37	1.35	1.38	1.44	
Relinquishment	0.88	1.07	1.05	0.89	1.07	1.07	0.98	1.00	1.06	1.06	1.01	
Inadequate housing	1.14	0.99	1.12	1.17	1.10	1.01	1.02	1.11	1.07	1.06	1.08	
Notes:	p < 0.05,	p < 0.01,	p < 0.001	Reference Categories: White, No disability, Single female, and South								

versus 2.28% $\chi^2 = 474.62$, $df(1)$, $p < .001$), abandonment (12.00% versus 4.89%, $\chi^2 = 623.60$, $df(1)$, $p < .001$), and sexual abuse (6.05% versus 4.03%, $\chi^2 = 60.97$, $df(1)$, $p < .001$). In contrast to Lin's (2012) findings, these analyses also demonstrated that voluntary relinquishment of parental rights was overrepresented among children who ran away: relinquishment of parental rights was present in 2.10% of children who ran away from foster care compared to 0.98% of children who did not run away, $\chi^2 = 74.33$, $df(1)$, $p < .001$.

Regarding clinically diagnosed disabilities, there were statistically significant differences between children who ran away from foster care and children who did not, $\chi^2 = 1284.03$, $df(5)$, $p < .001$. However, inconsistent with Lin's (2012) analysis of 2009 AFCARS data, the present analysis using 2019 data did not find that children who had runaway were overrepresented across each type of disability. Specifically, children who had runaway had higher rates of being visually or hearing impaired (1.43% versus 0.78%), having an emotional disturbance (24.29% versus 10.55%), and having "other" disabilities (15.10% versus 13.37%), compared to children who had not runaway; however, children who had runaway were underrepresented among children with an intellectual disability (0.14% versus 0.53%) or a physical disability (0.09% versus 0.27%).

Regarding original family structure, nearly half of children in foster care had been removed from a single-female caregiver (47.77%) compared to a married couple (18.02%) or a single-male caregiver (5.55%). Original family structure was significantly related to running away from foster care, $\chi^2 = 644.17$, $df(4)$, $p < .001$. Children who had been removed from a single male caregiver of origin (10.52%) and single female care giver of origin (4.81%) were most disproportionately overrepresented among children who had run away, while children who had been removed from an unmarried couple were most disproportionately underrepresented among children who had run away. In contrast to Lin's (2012) findings, children removed from married couples were also overrepresented—although only slightly—among children who had run away (18.82% versus 18.01% for non-runaways).

Most foster care children were in the southern census region (32.27%). Children who ran away, however, were most likely to be in the northeast (15.19% versus 11.90%) and western (30.38% versus 23.84%) census regions ($\chi^2 = 281.28$, $df(3)$, $p < .001$).

Next, a binary logistic regression model was estimated to examine the relationship between the independent variables and runaway status. To begin, age and female sex was associated with running away. Specifically, for every year of age, the odds of running away increased by 1.61 ($p < .001$), while girls had 1.29 times greater odds of running away than boys ($p < .001$). Additionally, African American, Native American, children of "Other" races, and Hispanic children were at an increased odds of running away compared to White children with an increase in the comparative odds of 89%, 45%, 53%, and 82% respectively.

There were also significant relationships between running away and the age at first removal, number of removals, number of foster care placements, and duration spent in foster care. Specifically, for every year older a child was at the time of their first removal, there was 1.01 times greater odds of running away ($p = .008$) and each additional removal was associated with 1.13 greater odds of running away ($p < .001$). Additionally, each additional placement was associated with 1.03 greater odds of running away ($p < .001$), while each additional month a child spent in their current foster care placement was associated with a 6% decrease in the odds of running away from the placement ($p < .001$).

Regarding the relationship between removal reason and runaway status, neglect ($OR = 1.17$, $p < .001$), child substance abuse ($OR = 1.64$, $p < .001$), child behavior problems ($OR = 1.31$, $p < .001$), and abandonment ($OR = 1.38$, $p < .001$) were each associated with an increase in the odds of a child running away from placement compared to children who were not removed for those respective reasons. Comparatively, parental substance abuse was associated with a 9% decrease in the odds of running away compared to children who had not been removed for parental substance abuse ($p = .01$). Removal due to a child's disability status was associated with a 29% reduction in odds of running away ($p < .001$).

Among children with clinically diagnosed disabilities, those with an 'intellectual disability' were associated with a 54% reduction in the odds of running away ($p = .03$) while having an 'other disability' was associated with a 15% decrease in the odds of running away compared to those with no disability. In addition, children who had been removed from families of origin consisting of married couples had a 19% decrease in the odds of running away ($p < .001$), compared to children whose family of origin included a single female household. Children from single male households of origin, in contrast, had 1.13 times greater odds of runaway from their foster care placement ($p = .007$). Finally, census region was related to running away with children from the Northeast, Midwest, and Western regions all associated with an increased odds of running away compared to children in foster care in the Southern census region ($p < .001$).

Lastly, we present a series of binary logistic regression analyses that chart 10-year trends for running behavior from foster care from 2010 to 2019. First, we present 10-year trends for the prevalence of running away from foster care programs (see Table 3). In 2010, about 1.40% of children in the AFCARS data were identified as having run away from foster care. Over the 10-year study period there has been a consistent decline in the percentage of children who run away from care, with 2019 data showing that 0.98% of children in the AFCARS data had run from care.

Next, we present 10-year trends in the odds ratios for individual- and case-level variables predicting running away from care (see Table 4). Findings show an overwhelmingly stable profile of predictors from 2010 to 2019; however, there are some notable exceptions. For example, in 2019 (and 2015) single male households of origin is a significant predictor of running behavior, but not in other previous years. In addition, children who identified as Asian were significantly more likely to run away from foster care in years 2010 to 2012, but not since 2012. Further, inadequate housing has been sporadically related to an increased risk for running from care; however, not since 2018.

Finally, the relationship between the different disability types and running behavior has been intermittently related to running behavior across the 10-year period. For example, although not a significant predictor of running from care in 2019, visual/hearing impairments and emotional disturbances have been identified as increasing the likelihood of running in previous years, while both intellectual disabilities and physical disabilities have been associated with a decreased likelihood. In comparison, having an 'other disability' has been previously identified as both increasing and decreasing the risk of running behavior.

5. Discussion

Prior research on running away from foster care has primarily used interviews with children who have run from care or administrative record reviews from single state/jurisdictions or specific care settings (e.g., Courtney et al., 2005; Crosland & Dunlap, 2015; Nesmith, 2006). Lin (2012) provided the first national profile on children who run away from foster care using 2009 AFCARS data. Although AFCARS data is collected annually, we know of no other study that has sought to replicate Lin's analysis with additional years of data or examine patterns over time. The present research provides a 10-year update regarding predictors of running from foster care using 2019 AFCARS data and examines trends in the prevalence and predictors of running from care from 2010 to 2019.

First, in regard to our primary aim, the analyses presented here replicated most findings from Lin (2012). Consistent with prior work (Clark et al., 2008; Fasulo et al., 2002; Lin, 2012; Sunseri, 2003), the present study found that girls were more likely to run away from care compared to boys. In addition, race was the strongest predictor of running from care with children of color at a greater risk of running away compared to White children. Specifically, we found that African American children were at the greatest risk of running away; then Hispanic children, children from "Other" races, and American Indian/Alaska Native children. In comparison, Lin's (2012) findings showed that Hispanic children had the highest risk of running away, then American Indian/Alaska Native children, children from "Other" races, and African American children. Additionally, the present results showed that Asian children were not statistically more or less likely to run compared to White children; however, Lin's (2012) previous findings showed that Asian children were nearly 54% more likely to run away than White children.

Regarding disabilities, 'other' disability diagnoses – asthma, autism spectrum disorder, and cancers – were associated with a decreased risk of running away (see also Courtney & Zinn, 2009). In contrast, Lin (2012) found that multiple disability types (e.g., visual/hearing impairments, intellectual disabilities) were associated with a reduced risk of running away compared to having no disabilities. Further, Lin's findings regarding original family structure were partially replicated. Like in Lin's analysis children who had been removed from married couples were less likely to run than those who had been removed from single female households of origin; however, diverging from Lin's findings, the present analysis showed that children who were removed from single-male households were at a greater risk of running away compared to children who had been removed from single female households.

Also consistent with Lin (2012), the present findings showed that child substance abuse was the most important removal reason when anticipating risk of running away; here, child behavior problems were also an important risk factor. Further, the present study found that children who ran away from foster care were more likely to be older (approximately eight years older; see also Lin, 2012; Sunseri, 2003). Also, in line with prior research, all three indicators of placement instability – duration in care, number of placements, and number of removals – were related to increased risk of running away (Bowden & Lambie, 2015; Courtney & Zinn, 2009; Lin, 2012). The present findings showed that children who ran away were in their current foster care placement for an average of four fewer months than children who did not runaway, compared to an average of seven fewer months in Lin's study. Similarly, children who ran away had an average of four more placements and more removals from their family of origin than children who did not runaway. This is consistent with research by Lin (2012) and Clark et al. (2008) which demonstrated that multiple placement settings increased the risk of running away; however, the most salient indicator of placement instability both here and in Lin's research was number of removals.

Regarding 10-year trends in running away from care, findings first showed that the percent of children in foster care who ran away steadily declined from about 1.4% in 2010 to less than 1% in 2019. Further, the profile of predictors of running behavior was overwhelmingly stable – females, children of color, children with substance use or behavior problems, older children, and those with greater placement instability were more likely to run from care – however, some notable exceptions were identified. For example, over the 10-year period running behavior among Asian children dramatically reduced, and the relationship between disability and running behavior was intermittent and in some instance changed directions over time.

While these data are limited in their ability to make causal inferences regarding changes in prevalence and predictors of running behavior, national efforts to reduce disparities in foster care have possibly contributed the noted decline. For example, a series of pieces of federal legislation (e.g., Multiethnic Placement Act of 1994, Family First Prevention Services Act of 2018) have supported a national shift in foster care system priorities to focus on reunification between children and families of origin. Additionally, state legislatures have taken responsibility to reduce racial disparities in the foster care system—specifically, 29 bills in 19 states (NCSL, 2021). Given that children of color are most likely to run away from foster care, the steady decline in running behavior may be a product of efforts to reduce racial disproportionalities.

5.1. Limitations and areas of future research

While the present research provided a much-needed update to the prior national-level research on running away from foster care, several limitations should be noted. First, the AFCARS consists of administrative data collected from 50 individual states and the District of Columbia and thus is vulnerable to inconsistencies in the definitions used and differences in standards for collection and measurement across state systems. The very nature of such a large data collection effort comes with risks for untraceable variation and potential errors. For instance, there were some abnormally high values on certain variables; however, consultation with the statisticians at NCANDS indicated that these outliers should be accepted as true values. It is worth noting that we conducted sensitivity analyses to ensure that these few outliers did not impact the presented estimates. Second, these data reflect a point-in-time count of profiles for children in foster care. In other words, these data do not represent every instance of running away for every child in foster care annually, and thus provide a conservative estimate of the true scope of this issue. In this regard, these data do not allow for the tracking of a child's prior history of running away, nor does it include potentially important risk factors such as the placement setting

from which a child ran away or LGBTQ+ identity. In addition, these data do not allow for a direct test of *why* children had run away from care, and relatedly, why the rates of running from care declined. Longitudinal analysis of children who run away from foster care is a critical area for future research but will require changes to how the AFCARS data is collected and reported. In addition, further analysis of the impacts of efforts to reduce racial disparities in foster care on running away from care is sorely needed, as children of color are most likely to run from care. Understanding the contextual reasons that predict running away are paramount to developing effective prevention and intervention programming.

Finally, the AFCARS data only identifies children as having run away (i.e., as one of the AFCARS placement settings). There is no distinction for children who are “missing from care” (i.e., the youth has been reported as a missing person) even though it seems unlikely that the reason or reasons a child is not present in placement is often known, i.e., that they ran away. This distinction as a runaway rather than a missing child minimizes the role of individual foster caretakers and the larger system regarding the supervision and welfare of children in foster placements and likely mischaracterizes the context in which many children leave or are forced from their placements (e.g., due to violence or victimization, coercion by predatory adults) (Lacey, 2019). Further, children labeled as a “runaway” are at risk for delinquency status and involvement in the youth justice system which may have a host of negative consequences and ripple effects (Lacey, 2019). Future research must focus on how and when a child is identified as a missing person rather than a runaway and whether and how this distinction is made in administrative records. Given the limitations of current data systems it is impossible to know the scope of missingness among children in foster care. Finally, research focusing on missing persons has found that American Indian/Alaska Native and African American youth are at particular risk of going missing (Richards, Wright, Nystrom, Gilbert & Branscum, 2021). Given the disproportionate involvement of children of color as both foster children (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2018) and children who have run away from foster care, future research must consider the role of system involvement in research on missingness among children and the implications for prevention and intervention (see Nystrom et al., 2022).

5.2. Policy implications

Despite these limitations, there are six important policy implications for foster care services, practitioners, and researchers. First, the present analysis shows that of the variables examined, racial identity is the strongest predictor of running away from foster care with African American and Hispanic youth at particular risk for running behavior. These findings must be considered within the larger context of foster care experiences for children of color. Prior research shows that children of color are disproportionately involved in the foster care system (Dworsky et al., 2018; Wulczyn, 2020) and are often removed from their families of origin due to behaviors deemed to be neglectful such as inadequate nutrition or housing (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2018). However, these neglectful behaviors are also synonymous with poverty suggesting that families may be better served by supportive services rather than removals. Second, prior research shows that African American children are overrepresented in group homes and institutions rather than family foster homes (Biehal & Wade, 2000), which may at least partially explain the current findings as children are more likely to run from group homes (Nystrom et al., 2022). Likewise, most foster caregivers are White and thus it is likely that even when children of color are placed in family foster homes, they are placed with caregivers of different racial and/or ethnic identities which may negatively impact the caregiver's ability to serve the child in a culturally competent way (Courtney et al., 2005; Iglehart, 1994). Taken together, policies that address the disproportionate representation of children of color in foster care as well as their disparate representation in group settings and with foster families that have different racial/ethnic identities will also likely address disproportionate rates of running away among children of color.

Foster care services should take time early on to identify the reasons why a child might run away from foster care placement and provide preventative intervention measures. As noted by Lin (2012) older children are more likely to know how to run and where to go. In addition, children who are older when they enter foster care have likely enjoyed significant autonomy in their families of origin and may have served as the caretaker for siblings or other family members. As such, new rules in a foster care setting limiting where they can go, when, and with who are often met with resistance (see Courtney et al., 2005). Further, adolescence is a time when individuals begin to assert their autonomy and question rules and authority. Thus, making adolescents an active part of placement decisions as well as negotiating placement plans regarding rules and responsibilities (e.g., curfews, chores) with the child and caregiver will likely reduce the likelihood of running away (see Clark et al., 2008; Michael, 2005).

Fourth, and relatedly, factors that are predictive of running away have been contextualized in the literature as *running to* and *running from* behaviors. Courtney et al. (2005) cite those children leave placements because they are running to families of origin, friends, and romantic partners. In this regard, it is unsurprising that children were more likely to run away when removed from single-parent households of origin compared to dual-parent households (Lin, 2012). One reason for this is the child may fill a caretaker role to their sole parent or a sibling(s). Although these data did not allow for examination of siblings and separation from siblings, prior research shows that children in foster care who remain with siblings are less likely to run from care (Courtney et al., 2005). Placing siblings together when possible and helping to maintain children's relationships with their families of origin may reduce running behavior. Further children were more likely to run away when the reason they were removed cited neglect, child substance abuse, child behavior problems, and abandonment which could be due to combination of *running to* and *running from* behaviors that contextualize their rationale for leaving care (Courtney et al., 2005; Crosland, Joseph, Slattery, Hodges & Dunlap, 2018; Finkelstein et al., 2004). Thus, ensuring that caretakers are adequately trained to support children with substance abuse and/or mental health challenges and providing supportive services to children who are most at-risk should reduce running from care.

Lastly, the AFCARS data does not distinguish children who “runaway” and children who are “missing from care,” which is problematic because there is no way to know, prospectively, if leaving care was done so on their own or under the influence or harm of

another. Put another way, this process assigns a status offense to children whose motivations for not being present in their foster placement are unclear. Subsequently, assigning a runaway status obscures important placement-level and systemic-level factors that underpin why the child is not present in their foster placement (e.g., trafficking, abuse, leaving to unite with parents or siblings) and may have ripple effects for the child regarding the youth justice system.

6. Conclusion

Considering the limited research on the prevalence and predictors of running behavior among children in foster care, the current study provides a 10-year updated examination using national data on foster-care involved children. In this regard, the prevalence of children running from care has steadily declined since Lin's (2012) prior analysis of 2009 data. Further, there was relative stability in the predictors of running behavior across the 10-year study period, with few notable exceptions. Importantly, racial identity remained the strongest predictor of running away from foster care, with African American and Hispanic children experiencing the highest risks; child substance use was also a consistent and strong predictor of running from care. In light of prior research contextualizing why children run from foster care as well as emerging research on the prevalence of youth of color (Richards et al., 2021) and youth of color in foster care among missing persons cases (Nystrom et al., 2022), future research and practice would be likely better served by shifting terminology from children who are "run aways" to those who are "missing from care".

Declaration of competing interest

The authors have no conflict of interests to declare.

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Examining missingness among children in out-of-home care placement in Nebraska

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ABSTRACT

Background: Little is known regarding the prevalence and context of missingness (i.e., being reported as a missing person) among children in out-of-home (OOH) care.**Objective:** The present research examines the relationship between missingness and OOH care placements as well as predictors and case contexts of children missing from OOH care.**Methods:** Point-in-time count data of reported missing persons in Nebraska and administrative records on children's OOH placements are used. Bivariate significance tests examine group differences; case contexts are explored through content analysis of OOH case reviews.**Results:** About 30 % of Nebraska's missing children are in OOH care. Bivariate tests show that children missing from OOH care are older and are more likely to be Black and less likely to have their race listed as "unknown" than children missing from their families of origin. Children in OOH who are missing are also more likely to be in group care, on probation, and have greater placement instability compared to children in OOH care who are not missing. Case contexts of missingness include unmet substance use and mental health challenges, experiences with violence and victimization, and few bonds to school.**Conclusions:** Screening and interventions for high-need children in OOH care and their caregivers are necessary to prevent children from going missing from placements.

1. Introduction

While prior research has explored running away from foster care (e.g., Branscum & Richards, 2022; Lin, 2012), little is known regarding the prevalence and context of missingness (i.e., being reported as a missing person) among children in out-of-home (OOH) care placements. In fact, although the problem of missing persons has gained national attention – especially regarding missing Native American and African American persons (e.g., Richards et al., 2021) – the term missing is rarely used to describe children who are not present at their OOH placements. Instead, prior research, as well as state and administrative departments and data systems, often classify these children as runaways (Lacey, 2019). Whether classified as runaways or missing persons, children who are not present at their OOH placement are at greater risk for criminal or sexual victimization, drug or alcohol abuse, criminal activity, and human trafficking, among other risks (Bowden & Lambie, 2015; Clark et al., 2008; Gambon et al., 2020; Latzman et al., 2019). Using data from

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a point-in-time count of reported missing persons and administrative records on children's OOH placements, the present research examines the relationship between missingness and OOH care placements. In addition, for children who were in OOH care placements, individual- and case-level factors are assessed to explore the predictors of missingness and the case contexts of children missing from OOH care.

2. Predictors of running away from OOH care placements

Prior research has established that a portion of children in OOH care are not present in their placements at any given time, (e.g., have run away); however, estimates regarding the prevalence of running away among children in foster care vary widely from less than 2 % (Branscum & Richards, 2022; Lin, 2012) to 71 % (Biehal & Wade, 1999) across different samples and jurisdictions. Studies have identified a range of individual risk factors thought to increase the likelihood a child will run away from placement, including the child's age, gender, race, substance use, and mental health history, among others. Regarding age, studies suggest that teenagers (those age 13 and older) are more likely to run from care than younger children (Branscum & Richards, 2022; Courtney et al., 2005; Courtney & Zinn, 2009; Dworsky et al., 2018). In addition, research suggests that children who are removed from their home at an older age are more likely to run than those who are younger at first removal. For example, Lin (2012) found that children who run from placement are on average 5 years older at their first removal than those who do not run.

Females are significantly more likely to run than males (Branscum & Richards, 2022; Dworsky, Wulczyn, & Huang, 2018; English & English, 1999; Fasulo et al., 2002; Kim et al., 2015; Sunseri, 2003). Studies have also shown that children of color are also more likely to run from their placements (Branscum & Richards, 2022); however, studies have been inconsistent regarding whether children from a particular racial or ethnic group are more likely to run away. For example, Wulczyn (2020) found that African American and Hispanic children are more likely to run from placement than their White peers. Similarly, Lin (2012) found that African American girls are most likely to run. In contrast, Nesmith (2006) found that American Indian children had twice the odds of running away as White children.

Prior studies have also suggested that children with substance use disorders are more likely to run away from foster care than those without substance use disorders (Branscum & Richards, 2022; Courtney et al., 2005). Likewise, mental health diagnoses have been associated with running away from foster care (Clark et al., 2008; Courtney et al., 2005; Courtney & Zinn, 2009; Kim et al., 2015). Further, Lin (2012) found that foster children who ran away from their placements had higher rates of disabilities (including mental health disabilities) than foster children who did not run away (but see Branscum & Richards, 2022).

In addition to individual-level risks, several placement-level factors associated with running away from a foster care placement have been identified. For example, children in group placements are more likely to run away from care than those in family placements (Courtney et al., 2005; Witherup et al., 2008), as are children placed with a non-relative as compared to those placed with a relative (Courtney et al., 2005). Placement instability has also been linked to running away: children with 2 placements or fewer are less likely to run from care compared to children with more than 2 placements (Children's Bureau U.S., 2018); higher numbers of separations from home are also related to an increased likelihood of running from placement (Branscum & Richards, 2022; Clark et al., 2008; Courtney et al., 2005). Finally, case plan goal may be connected to running from a foster care placement. Kim et al. (2015) found that children whose long-term care plans included foster care and/or whose case plan goal was not reunification were more likely to run than those with plans for shorter stays in foster care, family reunification, or adoption.

3. Why children run from OOH care

There are myriad reasons a child might run from a foster care placement, and studies tend to agree that running is a coping behavior for children in care (Lin, 2012). Collectively, scholars note that children run away because they are either *running to* or *running from* someone or something (Courtney et al., 2005; Crosland et al., 2018; Crosland & Dunlap, 2015). For example, Courtney et al. (2005) examined administrative data for over 14,000 children who ran from care over the course of 10 years between 1993 and 2003 and interviewed 42 children who had run away from foster care and then returned. Running behavior was organized into four broad categories: (1) running to family of origin, (2) returning to friends and the streets, (3) touching base and maintaining relationships, and (4) running at random.

Similarly, a review by Crosland et al. (2018) classified the reasons children reported running from their foster placements using this dichotomy; though they used the terms *access* (i.e., running to) and *avoidance* (i.e., running from). They found that children ran to positive social supports such as family and friends and ran from negative social interactions, such as those with foster care placement staff and peers that left them feeling unloved or unvalued. The desire for "normalcy" was another key reason children ran away. In interviews, children reported running to friends, parties, and extracurricular activities that made them feel normal (i.e., activities that a child not in OOH care would experience).

Although prior research has explored the risk factors and context for running away from foster care, the present research aims to shed light on the prevalence and context of *missingness* among children in OOH care placements. On January 20, 2020, a point-in-time count of missing persons in Nebraska was conducted and uncovered that two-thirds of Nebraska's reported missing persons were children (i.e., in Nebraska, minors aged 18 years or younger) (see Richards et al., 2021; Sutter et al., 2020). Using data from this point-in-time count of reported missing persons and administrative records on children's OOH care placements from the Nebraska Foster Care Review Office, the present research examines the relationship between missingness and OOH care placements among children who had been reported missing in Nebraska. Then, among children who were in OOH care placements, individual and case-level factors were assessed to explore predictors and contexts of missingness. The following research questions guided the analyses:

RQ1: Among children who had been reported missing, what was the prevalence and context(s) of children who were in OOH care placements compared to children who were not in OOH care placements?

RQ2: Among children who were in OOH care placements, who is missing from the OOH care placements (i.e., what individual- and case-level factors predict missingness among children in out-of-home care)?

RQ3: What is the context(s) of children missing from OOH care placements?

4. Methods

4.1. Data and sample

Data were drawn from two distinct sources (1) a point-in-time count of persons officially reported missing in the state of Nebraska on January 20, 2020, and (2) administrative records from the Nebraska Foster Care Review Office (FCRO) for children described as in an OOH placement or having just been in an OOH care placement and nearing permanency completion on January 20, 2020. Data for the point-in-time count of officially reported missing persons was collected from three publicly available data sources: (1) the Nebraska Missing Persons List (NMPL), (2) the National Missing and Unidentified Persons System (NamUs), and (3) the National Center for Missing and Exploited Children's (NCMEC) missing persons list. On the day of the point-in-time count, January 20, 2020, the NMPL database was accessed and the list of all persons missing from Nebraska on that date and their associated case information were recorded in a SPSS database. These data were then cross-checked against the national lists from NamUs and NCMEC and any additional persons missing from Nebraska that were not reflected on the NMPL were added to the dataset. Data collection was conducted by three Ph.D. level graduate assistants (see Richards et al., 2021 for a full description of the study design and methods).

The list of names of missing children identified in the point-in-time count of officially reported missing persons was then cross-checked with the administrative records from the FCRO. The FCRO is an independent state agency responsible for the oversight of the permanency, safety, and well-being of all children in OOH care in Nebraska. The FCRO defines OOH as "... 24-hour substitute care for children placed away from their parents or guardians and for whom a state agency has placement and care responsibility" (FCRO, 2021, p. 4). This term includes OOH placements due to child abuse or neglect as well as delinquency status.

The FCRO's role is to independently track children in OOH care, collect and analyze data related to these children, and make recommendations on conditions and outcomes, including any needed corrective actions. The FCRO is statutorily mandated to maintain an independent tracking system of all children in an OOH placement in the state. The tracking system is used to provide information about the number of children entering and leaving care as well as other data regarding children's needs and trends in OOH placements, including data collected as part of the FCRO case file review process.

During each FCRO case file review, an FCRO staff person (System Oversight Specialist) facilitates the monthly meeting of 4–10 specially trained community members from a variety of disciplines (local board). The board determines each reviewed child's needs based on the summary document provided by the System Oversight Specialist that contains information from the files of agency(s) involved in the child's case (i.e., DHHS, Probation, or both) along with any input received from the parties to the child's case, other research, and the system's actions to date. From this analysis, the board makes recommendations for next steps for the child's case. The System Oversight Specialist formalizes the review findings and recommendations with rationale into a document that is then shared with the legal parties on the child's case, including the Court.

The first FCRO case file review after children's removal from the home is usually scheduled to occur at approximately 6 months post-removal. Children are then re-reviewed about every 6 months for as long as they remain in OOH care. Whenever possible FCRO reviews are scheduled to occur so that the formal review document is received by the court and legal parties in time to be considered and acted upon before the child's next court hearing.

A Ph.D. level graduate student research assistant was embedded at the FCRO to serve as a data intern for this special project on missingness among children who had been in OOH placements in Nebraska. The data intern worked closely with FCRO staff to develop the deidentified project dataset and to clean and analyze these data. The study design was reviewed by the University of Nebraska Institutional Review Board and deemed a program evaluation, not human subjects research.

4.2. Measures

4.2.1. Officially reported missing persons data

For each case, the *first and last name*, *age at missing*, *sex* (0 = male, 1 = female), *race* (Uniform Crime Report [UCR] racial categories: 1 = White, 2 = Black, 3 = American Indian/Alaska Native, 4 = Asian or Pacific Islander, or 5 = Unknown), and *date of missingness* was recorded. *Years missing* was calculated by subtracting the date the child went missing from the date of data collection (i.e., January 20, 2020).

4.2.2. Foster care review office data

Cases were de-identified using a unique *FCRO ID number*. For each case the following demographic data was collected, *age* was calculated by subtracting the date of birth from the date of data collection (i.e., January 20, 2020), *sex* (0 = male, 1 = female), *race* (FCRO racial categories: 1 = White, Non-Hispanic; 2 = Black, Non-Hispanic; 3 = American Indian or Alaska Native, Non-Hispanic; 4 = Asian/Native Hawaiian, Non-Hispanic; 5 = Hispanic; 6 = Multiracial, Non-Hispanic; 7 = Other Race, Non-Hispanic; and 8 = Unknown Race) and *date of missingness*.

Times in care (lifetime) included the number of care episodes over the child's lifetime, *number of placements (lifetime)* included the

number of placements over the child's lifetime, and *days in current placement* indicates the number of days the child had been in the placement type they were assigned on January 20, 2020. *Placement at point in time (PIT)* indicates the type of placement the child was assigned on January 20, 2020 (see Appendix for PIT definitions) (1 = foster home, relative or kinship; 2 = foster home, non-relative; 3 = group home; 4 = institution (i.e., medical hospital, psychiatric facility, etc.); 5 = supervised independent living; 6 = trial home visit; 7 = detention facility; 8 = near permanency placement (i.e., adoptive home approved/licensed). *Agency involvement* comprised the state agency or agencies responsible for supervising the child's OOH placement as of January 20, 2020 (1 = Nebraska Department of Health and Human Services/Child and Family Services, 2 = Nebraska Department of Health and Human Services/Child and Family Services and Probation, 3 = Nebraska Department of Health and Human Services/Office of Juvenile Services and Probation, 4 = Nebraska Department of Health and Human Services/Office of Juvenile Services, and 5 = Probation Only). *Reviewed* indicated whether the child had a FCRO review within 6 months of January 20, 2020 (0 = no, 1 = yes).

4.3. Analytic plan

Analysis proceeded over several phases. To begin, the population of children who had been officially reported missing as of January 20, 2020, was compared with FCRO administrative records on January 20, 2020, to identify which children were in an OOH care placement when they were reported missing. Next, the population of children who were in OOH care placements on January 20, 2020, was examined and children who appeared in the population of officially reported missing persons were compared to children who did not appear in the population of officially reported missing persons. Then, the subsample of children who (1) had been officially reported missing from their OOH placements and (2) had a review from the FCRO was compared with the subsample of children who had been officially reported missing from their OOH placements but had not had a review from the FCRO. For each of these analyses, descriptive statistics and bivariate means tests were estimated to identify significant differences between groups. Alpha was set at $p < .05$ for all quantitative analyses.

Finally, qualitative data from the case files for missing children in OOH care who had a FCRO review were examined to provide insight into the case contexts related to missingness. A doctoral level research assistant read each narrative review and coded the narrative regarding any situational factors related to running away (e.g., substance use, experiences with violence). Coding was guided by prior research regarding why children run from care (e.g., Courtney et al., 2005; Crosland et al., 2018; Crosland & Dunlap, 2015). Case contexts were not mutually exclusive: each identified factor for each case was coded, and thus, multiple factors could be associated with a child's case. The prevalence of each theme was calculated as a total frequency and percentage (see Table 4) and narrative examples of different contexts were included using pseudonyms.

5. Results

Regarding the population of children (i.e., minors, ages 18 years or younger) who had been officially reported missing in Nebraska as of January 20, 2020, the majority were male (52.00 %) and White (55.38 %) (see Table 1). Nearly one third was Black (28.08 %), while approximately 7 % were American Indian/Alaska Native or listed as an "unknown race", respectively. Missing children ranged in age from 3 to 18 years old and were 15.89 years old on average ($SD = 1.85$). They had been missing from 0 to 15 years and 0.52 years on average.

The first research question concerned the relationship between missingness and OOH care among children in Nebraska. To address

Table 1

Descriptives for sample of officially reported missing children on 1/20/2020 and comparisons across children in out-of-home placements versus children not in out-of-home placements ($N = 381$).

	Total sample $N = 381$		Children in out-of-home placements $n = 114$		Children not in out-of-home placements $n = 267$		t/x^2 test
	N	%	n	%	n	%	
Sex							$\chi^2 (1) = 0.003$ $p = .956$
Female	183	48.00	55	48.25	128	47.94	
Male	198	52.00	59	51.75	139	52.06	
Age at missing	$M = 15.89$; $SD = 1.85$ Range = 3–18 years		$M = 16.01$; $SD = 1.30$ Range = 12–18 years		$M = 15.84$; $SD = 2.04$ Range = 3–18 years		$t (322.447) = -1.045$ $p = .148$
Race							$\chi^2 (4) = 12.484$ $p = .014$
White	211	55.38	56	49.12	155	58.05	
Black	107	28.08	43	37.72	64	23.97	
Asian	4	1.05	0	–	4	1.50	
American Indian/Alaska Native	30	7.87	11	9.65	19	7.12	
"Unknown race"	29	7.61	4	3.51	25	9.36	
Years missing	$M = 0.52$ $SD = 1.56$ Range = 0–15 years		$M = 0.16$; $SD = 0.43$ Range = 0–2 years		$M = 0.67$; $SD = 1.82$ Range = 0–15 years		$t (327.355) = 4.320$ $p < .001$

research question one, we crosschecked our population of missing children with data from the FCRO. Results indicated that nearly 30 % of children who had been officially reported missing as of January 20, 2020, were in an OOH care placement. Children missing from OOH care placements were statistically similar to children who were missing from their families of origin regarding age and sex; however, children who were missing from OOH care placements were statistically different from children who were missing from their families of origin regarding race and years missing. Specifically, children who were missing from OOH care placements were more likely to be Black whereas children who were missing from their family of origin were more likely to be listed as an “unknown” race. In addition, children who were missing from OOH placements were missing for significantly less time than children who were missing from their family of origin, an average of 0.16 years compared to 0.67 years, $t(327.355) = 4.320, p < .001$.

Research question two was concerned with the individual- and case-level factors predictive of being reported missing among all children in OOH care. To address this research question, we examined the FCRO records for all children who were in OOH care placements on January 20, 2020 ($N = 4103$) and compared children who had been officially reported missing ($n = 114$) with children who had not been officially reported missing ($n = 3989$) (see Table 2). Results showed no significant differences regarding sex across children who had and had not been officially reported as missing. Conversely, findings indicated that children who had been officially

Table 2

Descriptives for FCRO sample and bivariate comparisons between children who were missing from out-of-home placement and children who were not missing from out-of-home placement ($N = 4103$).

Variable	Total sample $N = 4103$		Missing from placement $n = 114$		Not missing from placement $n = 3989$		t/χ^2 test
	N	%	n	%	n	%	
Sex							$\chi^2(2) = 0.404$ $p = .817$
Female	1927	46.97	56	49.12	1871	49.60	
Male	2169	52.86	58	50.88	2111	52.92	
Age at PIT count	$M = 10.17$; $SD = 5.91$ Range = 0–19 years		$M = 16.76$; $SD = 1.31$ Range = 12–19 years		$M = 9.98$; $SD = 5.89$ Range = 0–19 years		$t(277.834) = -43.958$ $p < .001$
Race							$\chi^2(6) = 22.730$ $p < .001$
Hispanic	817	19.91	24	21.05	793	19.88	
White, not Hispanic	1876	45.72	38	33.33	1838	46.08	
Black, not Hispanic	799	19.47	36	31.58	763	19.13	
American Indian/Alaska Native, not Hispanic	183	4.46	9	7.89	174	4.36	
Asian, Native Hawaiian and other Pacific Islander, not Hispanic	37	0.90	0	–	37	0.93	
Other race or unknown, not Hispanic	46	1.12	3	2.63	43	1.08	
Multiracial, not Hispanic	345	8.41	4	3.51	341	8.55	
Number of times in care, lifetime	$M = 1.52$; Median = 1.00 $SD = 0.98$; Range = 1–12		$M = 2.59$; Median = 2.00 $SD = 1.66$; Range = 1–8		$M = 1.49$; Median = 1.00 $SD = 0.94$; Range = 1–12		$t(115.094) = -7.022$ $p < .001$
Number of out-of-home placements, lifetime	$M = 4.10$; Median = 2.00 $SD = 4.97$; Range = 1–62		$M = 8.89$; Median = 7.00 $SD = 7.65$; Range = 1–37		$M = 3.96$; Median = 2.00 $SD = 4.81$; Range = 1–62		$t(115.564) = -6.850$ $p < .001$
Days in placement at PIT or last placement before missing	$M = 199.49$; Median = 134.00 $SD = 208.45$; Range = 4–2287		$M = 103.52$; Median = 59.00 $SD = 134.96$; Range = 5–919		$M = 202.23$; Median = 138.00 $SD = 209.53$; Range = 4–2287		$t(129.087) = 7.553$ $p < .01$
Placement at PIT or last placement before missing							$\chi^2(7) = 105.426$ $p < .001$
Foster home (relative or fictive/kinship)	1575	38.39	14	12.28	1564	39.13	
Foster home (non-relative)	1156	28.17	32	28.07	1124	28.18	
Group home	236	5.75	19	16.67	217	5.44	
Institution	249	6.07	16	14.04	233	5.84	
Supervised independent living	43	1.05	3	2.63	40	1.00	
Trial home visit	389	9.48	1	0.88	388	9.73	
Detention facility	245	5.97	9	7.89	236	5.92	
Near permanency placement	210	5.12	20 ^a	17.54	190	4.76	
Agency involvement at PIT							$\chi^2(5) = 244.286$ $p < .001$
NDHHS/CFS only	3279	79.92	30	26.32	3249	81.45	
NDHHS/CFS and probation	149	3.63	16	14.04	133	3.33	
NDHHS, OJS, and probation	111	2.71	2	1.75	109	2.73	
NDHHS and OJS only	8	0.19	1	0.88	7	0.18	
Probation only	555	13.53	65	57.02	490	12.28	

reported missing were significantly older on average than children who had not been officially reported missing, 16.76 years old compared to 9.98 years old, $t(277.834) = -43.958, p < .001$. In addition, a statistically greater percentage of Black children were officially reported missing compared to not officially reported as missing, while a statistically lower percentage of White children were officially reported missing compared to not officially reported as missing, $\chi^2(6) = 22.730, p < .001$. Regarding placement stability, children who had been officially reported missing had greater numbers of episodes in care during their lifetime on average (2.59 versus 1.49), $t(115.094) = -7.022, p < .001$, and greater numbers of placements during their lifetime on average (8.89 versus 3.96), $t(115.564) = -6.850, p < .001$, compared to children who had not been officially reported missing. Further, children who had been officially reported missing had been in their current placement significantly fewer days than children who had not been officially reported missing, a median of 59 days compared to 138 days, $t(129.087) = 7.553, p < .001$.

Placement type was further explored by examining children's placement type on January 20, 2020, or among children who were missing from care, their most recent placement type before going missing from care. Significant differences regarding placement type across children who had and had not been officially reported missing were identified, $\chi^2(7) = 105.246, p < .001$. Significantly greater percentages of children who were officially reported missing were in group homes, institutions, independent living placements, detention facilities, and near permanency placements, while significantly greater percentages of children who had not been officially reported missing were in relative/kinship foster home placements and trial home visits. Of note, of the 20 children who had been reported missing from a near permanency placement, all 20 had been returned home to their family of origin. Finally, there were significant differences regarding the types of agency supervision among children who had and had not been officially reported missing, $\chi^2(5) = 244.286, p < .001$; significantly greater percentages of children who had been officially reported missing were under the supervision of Probation, while significantly lower percentages were under the supervision of Nebraska Department of Health and Human Services/Child and Family Services only.

Table 3

Descriptives for sample of missing children in out-of-home placements who had a FCRO review versus missing children in out-of-home placements who did not have a FCRO review ($n = 114$).

	Reviewed ($n = 53$)		Not reviewed ($n = 61$)		t/χ^2 test
	n	%	n	%	
Sex					$\chi^2(1) = 2.218$ $p = .136$
Male	23	43.40	35	57.38	
Female	30	56.60	26	42.62	
Age at PIT	$M = 16.22; SD = 1.47$ Range = 12–18		$M = 16.29; SD = 1.14$ Range = 13–18		$t(97.505) = -0.274$ $p = .784$
Race					$\chi^2(5) = 0.267$ $p = .998$
Hispanic	11	20.75	13	21.31	
White, not Hispanic	18	33.96	20	32.79	
Black, not Hispanic	17	32.08	19	31.15	
American Indian/Alaska Native, not Hispanic	4	7.55	5	8.20	
Asian, Native Hawaiian, and other Pacific Islander, not Hispanic	0	–	0	–	
Other or unknown race, not Hispanic	1	1.89	2	3.28	
Multiracial, not Hispanic	2	3.77	2	3.28	
Listed as missing from care in FCRO at PIT	32	60.38	21	34.43	$\chi^2(1) = 1.048$ $p = .306$
Number of times in care, lifetime	$M = 1.98; Median = 2.00$ $SD = 1.12; Range = 1–5$		$M = 3.11; Median = 3.00$ $SD = 1.86; Range = 1–8$		$t(100.187) = -3.996$ $p < .001$
Number of out-of-home placements, lifetime	$M = 12.72; Median = 10.00$ $SD = 7.84; Range = 1–37$		$M = 5.57; Median = 4.00$ $SD = 5.72; Range = 1–31$		$t(93.771) = 5.484$ $p < .001$
Days in placement at PIT or last placement before missing	$M = 72.51; Median = 36.00$ $SD = 78.50; Range = 5–354$		$M = 130.45; Median = 76.00$ $SD = 165.46; Range = 13–919$		$t(88.278) = -2.438$ $p = .017$ $\chi^2(7) = 39.222$ $p < .001$
Placement at PIT					
Foster home (relative or fictive/kinship)	13	18.31	1	2.33	
Foster home (non-relative)	30	42.25	2	4.65	
Group home	9	12.68	10	23.26	
Institution	7	9.86	9	20.93	
Supervised independent living	2	2.82	1	2.33	
Trial home visit	1	1.41	0	–	
Detention facility	5	7.04	4	9.30	
Near permanency placement	4	5.63	16	37.21	
Agency involvement at missing					$\chi^2(4) = 81.388$ $p < .001$
NDHHS/CFS	28	52.83	2	3.28	
Probation only	7	13.21	58	95.08	
NDHHS/CFS & probation	16	30.19	–	–	
NDHHS/OJS only	–	–	1	1.64	
NDHHS/OJS & probation	2	3.77	–	–	

Research question three aimed to address the context of missingness among children who were in OOH placements. To address this question, in-depth qualitative case information for a sub-set of officially reported missing children whose case had a review by the FCRO ($n = 53$; 46.49 %) was used. However, it is important to note that children's cases are reviewed approximately every 6 months, not at random. Thus, missing children whose case had been reviewed by FCRO and missing children whose case had not been reviewed by FCRO first were compared to assess any identifiable differences (see Table 3 below). There were no statistically significant differences between the reviewed and not reviewed samples on sex, age, or race/ethnicity. However, the groups varied significantly regarding the number of times a child was in care during their lifetime: the reviewed sample had been in care an average of 1.98 times compared to 3.11 times for the non-reviewed sample, $t(100.187) = -3.996, p < .001$. Similarly, the reviewed sample had been in an average of 12.72 different placements during their lifetime compared to 5.57 placements for the non-reviewed sample, $t(93.771) = 5.484, p < .001$. Children in the reviewed sample also had significantly fewer days in their placement on January 20, 2020, than children in the non-reviewed sample, a median of 36 days compared to a median of 76 days, $t(88.278) = -2.438, p = .017$.

Analyses also revealed significant differences between the two groups regarding the placement types from which they had gone missing, $\chi^2(7) = 39.222, p < .001$. For example, in the reviewed sample, children were most likely to go missing from either relative or non-relative foster homes, while in the non-reviewed sample children were most likely to have gone missing after being returned home or from a group home or institution. Among the 53 children who were officially reported missing and listed as "missing from care" in the FCRO records, 60.38 % were among the review sample, $\chi^2(1) = 1.048, p = .360$. Finally, significant differences were found between the two groups regarding which agency or combination of agencies had supervision of the child when they went missing from care, $\chi^2(4) = 81.388, p < .001$. Children in the reviewed sample were most likely to be under the supervision of Nebraska Department of Health and Human Services/Child and Family Services only or in combination with Probation while children in the non-reviewed sample were most likely to be under the supervision of Probation only.

To examine the context of missingness among children in OOH care, case summaries for children who had a FCRO case file review were analyzed ($n = 53$). Children were anonymized with pseudonyms. This analysis was informed by the body of previous research suggesting that children in foster care often "run" to something/someone or from something/someone as well as important situational factors (i.e., experiences with violence, substance use) (e.g., Courtney et al., 2005; Crosland et al., 2018; Crosland & Dunlap, 2015). The range of case contexts identified in case file reviews are presented in Table 4. Case contexts were not mutually exclusive such that each factor related to the missingness episode identified in a child's case file was coded and included in the frequencies.

To begin, case summaries revealed that 2 children (3.77 %) ran to a trusted adult, while no children in the present sample ran to a boyfriend/girlfriend. Six (11.32 %) case summaries suggested the child ran from placement as a coping strategy: repeatedly leaving a placement had become an established pattern of behavior for these children. For example, one summary notes that "Matt has shown in the past that he does not have good coping skills when he is upset or feels out of control. He has not taken any steps to learn any new coping ... [he] has expressed a desire to stop running, but he has repeatedly not been able to control his impulses and has run anyway".

Beyond the "running to, running from" dichotomy several other key factors related to missingness were identified. The most prevalent factor was the role mental health challenges seemed to play in the lives of missing children who were in an OOH placement. Analyses revealed that in 45 of the 53 (84.91 %) case files reviewed the child was either in need of or participating in mental health services. Often, missingness was the reason that a child's mental health care was not being properly managed. When a child went missing their services were terminated and if they returned to care, the continuity of care across service providers was challenging: a child may not be able to return to the same counselor, therapist, and/or physician. Thus, any progress made, or trust built prior to their missingness may be lost and the process of assisting the child must start from the beginning.

Further, 16 case summaries (30.19 %) revealed that the child was mental health treatment resistant. For example, a case summary may indicate treatment resistance with a note such as "Morgan is not participating in therapy services and is resistant to participating in services," or "Michael is unwilling to participate in therapy services". Treatment resistance included resistance or refusal to

Table 4
Case contexts related to missingness among children in out-of-home placements ($n = 53$).

	<i>n</i>	%
Running To...		
A trusted adult	2	3.77 %
Running from...		
As a coping mechanism	6	11.32 %
Children mental health challenges	45	84.91 %
Children treatment resistance	16	30.19 %
Placement not prepared for mental health challenge	5	9.43 %
Sex trafficking victimization	3	5.66 %
Children substance use	26	49.05 %
Children school problems		
Truancy/attendance issues	28	52.83 %
Behavioral issues	19	35.85 %
Permanency objective issues		
Children objects to placement	3	5.66 %
Violence in any placement	12	22.64 %
Victimization in any placement	6	11.32 %
Family of origin inappropriate contact	5	9.43 %
An adult knew where child was while missing	9	15.09 %

participate in therapy or other psychiatric counseling, refusal to consider taking recommended medications, or failure to remain medication compliant. Additionally, case summaries for 26 children (49.06 %) discussed substance use problems; however, only 7 children (13.21 %) were receiving services for substance abuse issues. Finally, 5 (9.43 %) summaries indicated that in at least one placement in the child's history the reason the placement was terminated was related to the child's mental health and that the child's behavior (e.g., running behaviors, acting out in school, etc.) was more than the foster caregivers felt they could handle.

Five children were suspected or documented victims of sex trafficking victimization, and 1 child was a suspected victim of labor trafficking (11.32 %). The implications of this victimization were discussed in three of the case summaries, and in one of the cases, the child's missingness from placement was linked to trafficking victimization directly. The summary indicated, "...it was reported to Probation that during Jenny's last event running, she was found in a hotel with adult males. There is a concern that she could have been abused or exploited by these men". At the same time, narratives suggested that children often did not recognize their experience as victimization. For example, one case summary read, "Sarah does not view herself as a victim and has not been agreeable to any interventions, despite law enforcement involvement". Additionally, one of the summaries revealed that a child had likely been a victim of labor trafficking; however, no further details were available for analysis.

Problems in school were another recurring theme in these case summaries. Irregular attendance in school was discussed in the case summaries for 28 children (52.83 %). Guardians reported that the children felt that they did not need to attend school, and it was common for the guardian to indicate that they had trouble getting the child to attend school. For example, one summary noted that, "Jeremy has changed schools a number of times due to his placement changes and he has a history of truancy. Even when he was in school, he usually refused to do his work, so he has failed most classes. He is so far behind in credits; he knows he won't be able to graduate so he is not motivated and doesn't see the point in trying." Another theme identified in relation to school was children's behavioral issues when they did attend school. Behavioral issues in school were indicated in 19 (35.85 %) case summaries. For example, one summary revealed that "Darius has been suspended on numerous occasions and has over 55 instances this school year which have resulted in disciplinary actions."

In addition to mental health and school problems, the third major area of concern identified in the qualitative analysis was children's permanency objective. In 3 cases (5.66 %) the summary indicated that the child did not agree with their stated permanency objective. In some instances, the child indicated that they had another preference for where or with whom they should live. For example, one summary indicated that "When asked what would make him successful, Allan responded with "living with mom". He indicates that things are going well in the current placement, but there is nothing better "than living with mom." However, in many cases the child simply objected to their current permanency objective.

In addition, some children objected to their permanency objective due to inappropriate contact from the family of origin. In 5 cases (9.43 %), a parent from the child's family of origin was contacting the child despite not being allowed visitation or contact by the courts. For example, one summary read, "All four children contact one another telephonically. It was discovered, the children's group chat included their mother, which was not being allowed due to lack of supervision". In these cases, this "false hope" of reunification became a significant issue for the child who might otherwise do well in their placement and/or resulted in negative behaviors from the child.

Violence and victimization in placement were also identified as a barrier to permanency for children. Six children (11.32 %) had committed violence in their placements, and each time there was violence, the child was moved to another placement. Primarily, this violence comprised of physical fights with other children in the placement or with the adult guardian. One example of violence in the placement in a summary read "She recently assaulted Mr. Smith twice. She broke his glasses but did not cause any injury to him. Anna broke a window". Additionally, 12 children (22.64 %) were victims of violence in a placement. In these instances, it is usually a family member of the child or a friend/relative of the adult(s) in the placement who is responsible for perpetrating the victimization. For example, one child's summary indicated that they had been sexually assaulted by a cousin while in a placement.

Finally, the analysis of the case summaries revealed that in 9 cases (15.09 %) there was evidence that someone, usually the case worker or a family member of the child, knew where the child was while they were missing from their placement. In 4 cases, a family member was aiding the child in staying missing. For example, one summary indicated "The relatives had harbored the children while they were on run and did not notify" and in another instance the summary indicated "Ms. Jones indicates she has consistent contact with Jason but is unwilling to disclose his whereabouts".

6. Discussion and implications

A significant body of prior research has examined the prevalence and context of children who run away from foster care (Branscum & Richards, 2022; Courtney et al., 2005; Lin, 2012; Witherup et al., 2008), however little is known about children who go missing from OOH care placements. The present exploratory study used unique data from a point-in-time count of missing persons in Nebraska and administrative data from the Nebraska Foster Care Review Office to address this gap in the literature. First, findings showed that nearly 30 % of children who had been reported missing in Nebraska were in OOH care placements. Missing children who were in OOH care placements had more complete data (e.g., a known race/ethnicity) and had been missing for shorter periods of time than children who were missing from their families of origin. These differences may be due to the available data and multiple people – case workers, foster caregivers, probation officers – who have responsibility for the safety and security of children in OOH care as well as the policies and procedures for reporting missing children. However, these policies and practices are largely unknown, and for example, among probation, not always publicly available. As such, additional research is needed to understand if policies and/or processes for communication between system actors regarding reporting children who are missing from OOH placements could be improved.

Further examination of the population of children who were in OOH care placements showed that 2.77 % were missing from care;

this finding is consistent with other research using point-in-time count data such as Lin's (2012) study showing that 2 % of children in the Adoption and Foster Care Analysis and Reporting System data were not present in their foster care placements (i.e., listed as a runaway). Regarding children's demographics, consistent with prior studies on children identified as runaways from foster placements, White children were underrepresented as missing from care while children of color were overrepresented as missing from care (Branscum & Richards, 2022; Lin, 2012; Nesmith, 2006; Wulczyn, 2020); American Indian/Alaska Native children were missing at more than 1.5 times their rate of representation in Nebraska's OOH care population, while Black children were missing at 1.62 times their representation. Similarly, children who were missing from OOH were older than children who were not missing (see Branscum & Richards, 2022; Courtney et al., 2005; Courtney & Zinn, 2009; Dworsky et al., 2018). However, diverging from the literature on running away from foster care showing that girls are more likely to run (e.g., Branscum & Richards, 2022; Dworsky, Wulczyn, & Huang, 2018; Kim et al., 2015; Sunseri, 2003), the present research found no gender differences regarding children who were missing from an OOH placement.

Regarding placement stability, consistent with prior research regarding children who are identified as runaways from foster care, children who had more times in care (Branscum & Richards, 2022; Clark et al., 2008; Courtney et al., 2005) or more placements (Branscum & Richards, 2022; Children's Bureau U.S., 2018) were more likely to be missing from care than children who had less episodes in care or had fewer placements. In addition, less time in a child's current placement was associated with missingness. Like prior literature, children who were missing from care were disproportionately missing from a group home or institution (Courtney et al., 2005; Witherup et al., 2008). Children in a relative or kinship foster home were underrepresented among missing children. Departing from the literature on children who run away from foster care (see Courtney et al., 2005; Witherup et al., 2008), children who had been returned home to their family of origin were also disproportionately missing. Indeed, while only 5.12 % of all children who were in OOH placements in Nebraska were in *any type* of near permanency placement at the point-in-time of study, 17.54 % of children who were missing from placements were missing from their family of origin after being returned home. These findings prompt questions regarding the decision-making process for reunification: Were these children returned too soon, were underlying factors related to prior episodes of missingness from care left unaddressed? Additional research is needed to better understand whether families have the necessary supports in place both before and after reunification to keep children safe and the family secure.

Finally, children who were missing from care were disproportionately under the supervision of Probation, either alone or concurrently with Nebraska Department of Health and Human Services/Child and Family Services. Prior research demonstrates that children who are under the supervision of probation, as well as "cross-over" youth (i.e., those children who are under supervision by both child welfare and youth justice agencies), often have significant needs including mental health, substance use, and trauma histories (Herz & Ryan, 2008; Young et al., 2015), factors that have also been associated with running away from care in previous literature (e.g., Branscum & Richards, 2022; Lin, 2012). However, the prevalence of these children among officially reported missing children may also be due to a heightened level of supervision compared to children in OOH care placements that are not supervised by probation. In practice, if a child who is in an out-of-home placement due to delinquency status is not present at their placement, they would be considered to have absconded from care which may obscure risks and needs that led to the child going missing from placement. Additional research must attempt to unpack (1) whether possible system-level policies yield at least some responsibility for these disparities as well as (2) focus on the underlying factors associated with missingness among children in OOH placements who are under the supervision of probation agencies.

Examination of children's FCRO file reviews shed some light on the underlying factors associated with missingness among the OOH care population. Specifically, among the reviewed sample, there was evidence that few children had bonds to school (i.e., through attendance or passing grades). In addition, there were high rates of mental health and substance use challenges coupled with low rates of reported receipt of mental health and/or substance use treatment services. These qualitative data suggested that for many children who were missing from care, the relationships between these risk factors and missingness was complex and likely moderated by significant levels of placement instability.

Children had experienced multiple placement changes, potentially because of behavioral issues including leaving their OOH care placements, which in turn, impacted opportunities to achieve in school and disrupted relationships with mental and behavioral health specialists. Changes in mental and behavioral health specialists also require youth to repeatedly (re)disclose trauma and victimization histories to these new care providers. Minimizing the number of times child victims of abuse must (re)tell their story to different system actors has been identified as a best practice in child abuse forensic interviewing (Jones et al., 2005). The present findings highlight the need to consider ways to minimize repeated disclosures for system involved children as they move care placements.

In addition, several children, all teenagers, reported leaving their placements to live with another caregiver whom they preferred. In these types of cases – cases where youth have repeatedly left an OOH placement for a preferred adult caregiver – system-level decision makers might consider whether optimal outcomes could be achieved by listening to the youth's placement preference and providing supportive services to this caregiver. Similarly, these findings suggest in some cases children's otherwise successful placements are disrupted by non-custodial parents, who for example, aid children in leaving their placements or provide children with misinformation regarding family reunification. Taken together these findings are in line with prior research on running away that suggests that children may run to preferred or trusted adults or caregivers (Courtney et al., 2005; Crosland et al., 2018; Crosland & Dunlap, 2015).

Findings further showed evidence consistent with prior research suggesting that children might run from a placement due to violence or victimization (Courtney et al., 2005; Crosland et al., 2018; Crosland & Dunlap, 2015). In some cases, there was evidence of abuse in the OOH care placement or suspicion or documentation of trafficking victimization. Prior research shows that children in OOH care experience higher rates of physical and sexual abuse (Euser et al., 2014) and exposures to violence (Turney & Wildeman, 2017) when compared to children living in biological families. Further, evidence suggests that children "on the run" from foster

placements may be particularly vulnerable to trafficking victimization (Latzman et al., 2019). The present findings highlight the need to consider victimization experiences as a risk factor for missingness among children who were in OOH placements and that a higher level of training for foster caregivers is likely needed to keep children who have experienced victimizations in a previous placement present in their next placement. Likewise, ways to improve children's connections with foster care providers should be considered. Finally, results prompt questions about whether the term "runaway" should be used to describe children who are missing from their care placements and how and when the distinction between "runaway" and "missing child" are made.

6.1. Limitations and future research

While the present study provided novel evaluation of missingness among children who were in an OOH placement, several limitations must be noted. To begin, these data stemmed from a point-in-time count of missing persons, and thus, did not capture children who went missing and were found before January 20, 2020, or went missing after January 20, 2020. In addition, the most detailed data (i.e., case file reviews) from FCRO were only available for children who had a recent file review, and reviewed children only included about half of the children who had been officially reported missing from their care placement. There are many reasons that children might not have a review, such as 1) reviews typically are not conducted for children in care less than 6 months, 2) processes for probation reviews make it difficult to add alternative cases if a child returns home prior to review, 3) priority is given to cases with upcoming court dates, and 4) many probation cases do not have court reviews, among others. As such, the qualitative data from the review sample was not representative of the total population of children who were missing from care placements.

Future research must continue to examine the linkages between going missing and OOH care placements. Recent research has identified the disparate impact of missingness in Black and Native American communities (Richards et al., 2021). Given the disproportionate involvement of Black and Native American children in the foster care system and among children identified as runaways from foster care (Branscum & Richards, 2022; Lin, 2012), these relationships must be further unpacked. Likewise, future research should examine the prevalence of children who identify as LGBTQ+ who are missing from an OOH placement as these children are disproportionately represented among foster children (Gambon et al., 2020). Finally, the present findings suggest that children with placement instability or who were in OOH care placements due to their delinquency status should be an explicit focus of additional inquiry as should the relationships between violence and victimization and missingness among children in OOH placements. Exploratory findings reported here should serve as a foundation for future, hypothesis-driven research using multivariate modeling.

7. Conclusion

While prior research has addressed predictors of running away from foster care, it is unclear how prior studies have made the distinction between children who are missing from care and children who have run away from care. The present study took a novel approach by examining the prevalence of children who had been officially reported missing within the population of children who were in OOH placements. Findings demonstrated that nearly one third of missing children were missing from state care and that these children were more likely to be children of color, to have spent more time in state care with less placement stability, and to be under probation supervision than children who were in OOH placements who were not missing from care. Future research and policy priorities must focus on ways to identify and intervene in the lives of children in out-home-placements before they go missing from care.

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Data availability

Data will be made available on request.

Appendix A

The following definitions for OOH placement types are used by FCRO. FCRO definitions align with definitions used by the Nebraska Department of Health and Human Services definitions, and some are defined in statute.

Relative placement/kinship foster home. Neb. Rev. Stat. §71-1901(9) defines relative placement [foster home] as one in which the foster caregiver has a blood, marriage, or adoption relationship to the child or a sibling of the child, and for Indian children they may also be an extended family member per the Indian Child Welfare Act. Per Neb. Rev. Stat. §71-1901(7) kinship home is defined as a home where a child or children receive out-of-home care and at least one of the primary caretakers has previously lived with or is a trusted adult that has a preexisting, significant relationship with the child or children or a sibling of such child or children as described in Neb. Rev. Stat. §43-1311.02(8).

Non-relative foster home. A non-relative foster home. is a home which provides foster care to a child or children pursuant to a foster care placement as defined in Neb. Rev. Stat. §43-1301 and which does not qualify as either a relative or kinship placement.

Group home. Group homes provide care for four or more children and are not a foster family home as defined in Neb. Rev. Stat. § 71-1901, and are not facilities that specialize in psychiatric, medical, or juvenile justice related issues, or group emergency placements.

Institutions. Institutions include medical hospitals, psychiatric hospitals, psychiatric residential treatment facilities, other specialized treatment facilities, or emergency shelters.

Supervised independent living. Supervised independent living is for wards nearing the age of majority but who have not yet been emancipated and that are primarily living independently, including in college dormitories or in an apartment.

Trial home visits. Neb. Rev. Stat. §71-1301(10) defines trial home visits as temporary placements with the parent from which the child was removed and during which the Court and NDHHS/CFS remains involved. This applies only to NDHHS wards, not to youth who are only under Probation supervision.

Detention facility. A detention facility placement is operated by a political subdivision that exists primarily for juveniles with delinquency or law violation issues or youth who are held while waiting disposition of charges against them.

Near permanency placement. Near permanency placements include placements that have formally agreed to adopt or finalize a guardianship.

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COLORADO
Department of Human Services

High Risk Victim Tool User Guide

Process

This Job Aid table describes the actions needed to add a High Risk Victim (HRV) tool into Trails.

Related Job Aids:

<https://www.coloradocwts.com/trails-resource/trails-modernization>

- Manage Human Trafficking Screen (tutorial)
- Human Trafficking- Manage Self-Reports (tutorial)
- Human Trafficking- Manage Credible Reports (tutorial)
- Human Trafficking - Generate Reports (tutorial)

Introduction

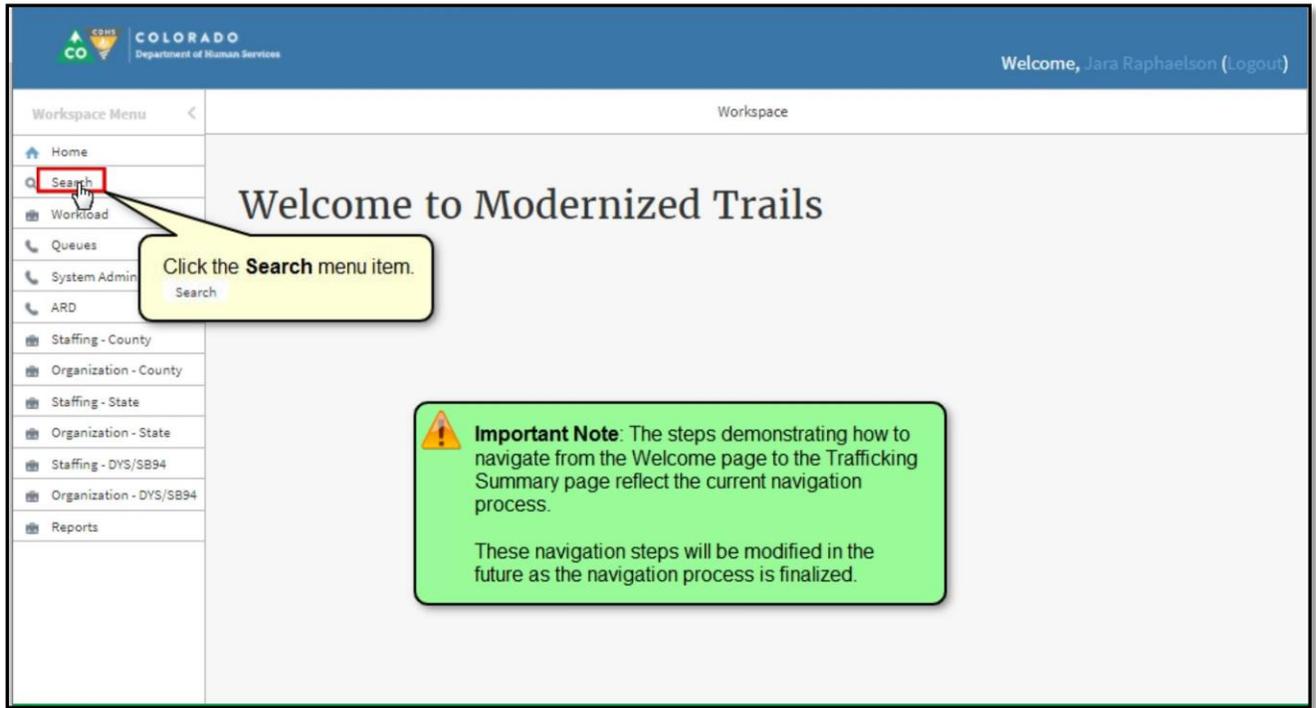
- The *DCW Worker* will be able to add an HRV tool/screen when there is concern that a youth on their caseload has experienced trafficking or is at risk of being trafficked.
- The HRV tool assists in informing treatment, and/ or systems response to at-risk youth.
- The HRV tool will not confirm if a youth is being trafficked
- The HRV tool may be used by local human trafficking Multi- Disciplinary Teams to help guide interventions

The Colorado High Risk Tool (HRV) must be completed:

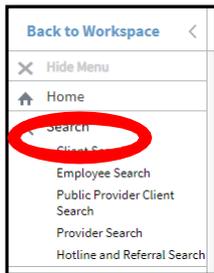
- 1) In any open assessment or case, regardless of the program area, when the county department of human or social services has reason to believe a child/youth is, or is at risk of being, a victim of human trafficking
- 2) Any time a child/youth who is in the legal custody of the county department returns from a run

Access the HRV Tool through Trails Modernization platform using **CHROME** web browser. <http://trails.state.co.us>

1. Select "Search" from the main page



2. Select "Client Search"



3. Search for client using Name, Client ID, etc.

Enter information in the **Client Search** fields to locate the required client. At a minimum, use Last Name OR Client ID.

For this example, **Doeirax** has been entered in the Last Name field.

First Name	Middle Name	Last Name	Phonetic Matching
Jane	Jane	Doeirax	On Off
Date of Birth	Phone Number	Client ID	
MM/DD/YYYY	555-555-5555	0000000	
Address	City	ZIP	
123 Elm St	Denver	80132	
State ID	Household Number	Social Security Number	
A555555	00000000	000-00-0000 or 0000	

Clear Search

4. Select your client and select “Actions” from upper right hand menu

Search Queries

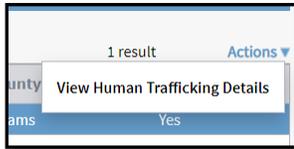
Last Name: Doeirax, Phonetic Search: false

7 results

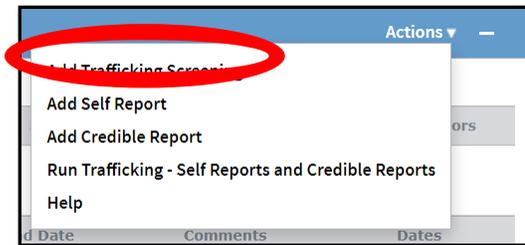
Full Name	CII	Client ID	Gender	DOB	Age	State ID	SSN	County	DOYC
Johnaeui Doeirax	---	2149368	Female	04/03/1992	25				No
Johnerao Alansmrb Doeirax	---	2741754	Male	01/03/1959	58				No
Johngzei Alanykic Doeirax	---	2199317	Female	08/04/1998	19				No
Johnkrrs Alanokoe Doeirax	---	16045	Female	03/07/1982	35	W765811	248-00-7878		No
Johnvlsi Alaneuce Doeirax	---	1558762	Female	01/04/1998	19	Y104901	273-00-1237		No
Johnxqft Doeirax	---	40869	Female	04/12/1966	51				No
Johnxsmg Alanhjuq Doeirax	---	2554495	Female	02/17/1961	56	L643979	554-00-9319		No

Click the **Actions** drop-down link.

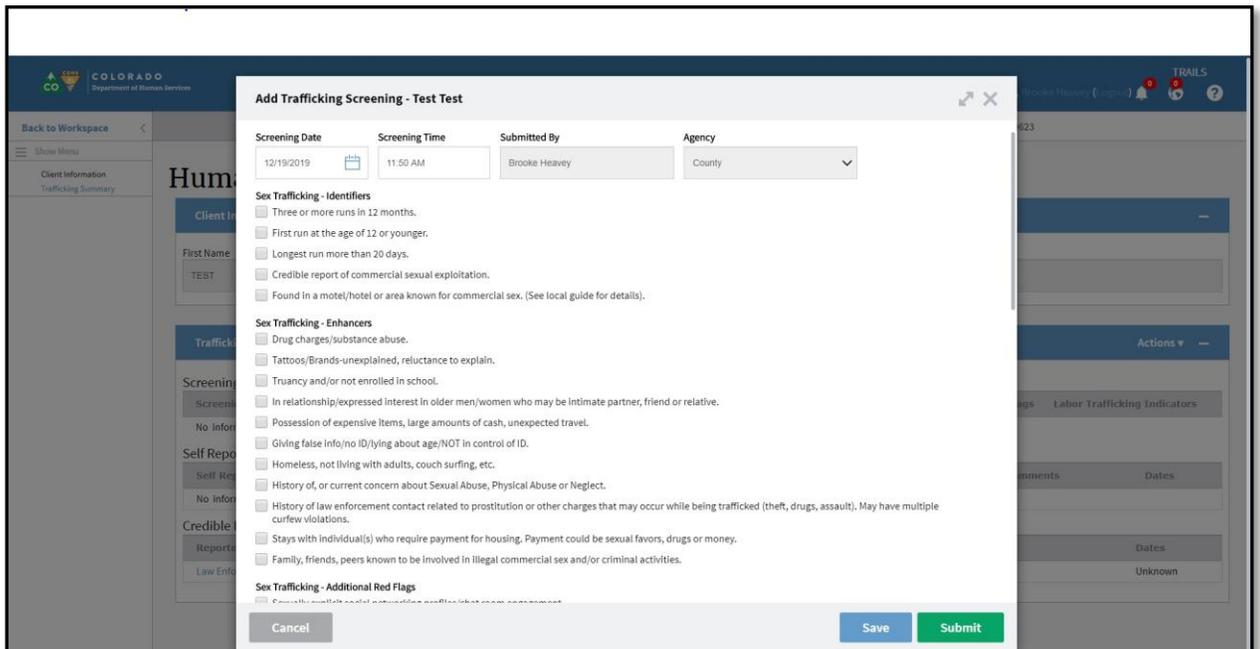
5. Select “View Human Trafficking Details”



6. Select “Actions” from upper right hand menu (for a second time) and select “Add Trafficking Screening”



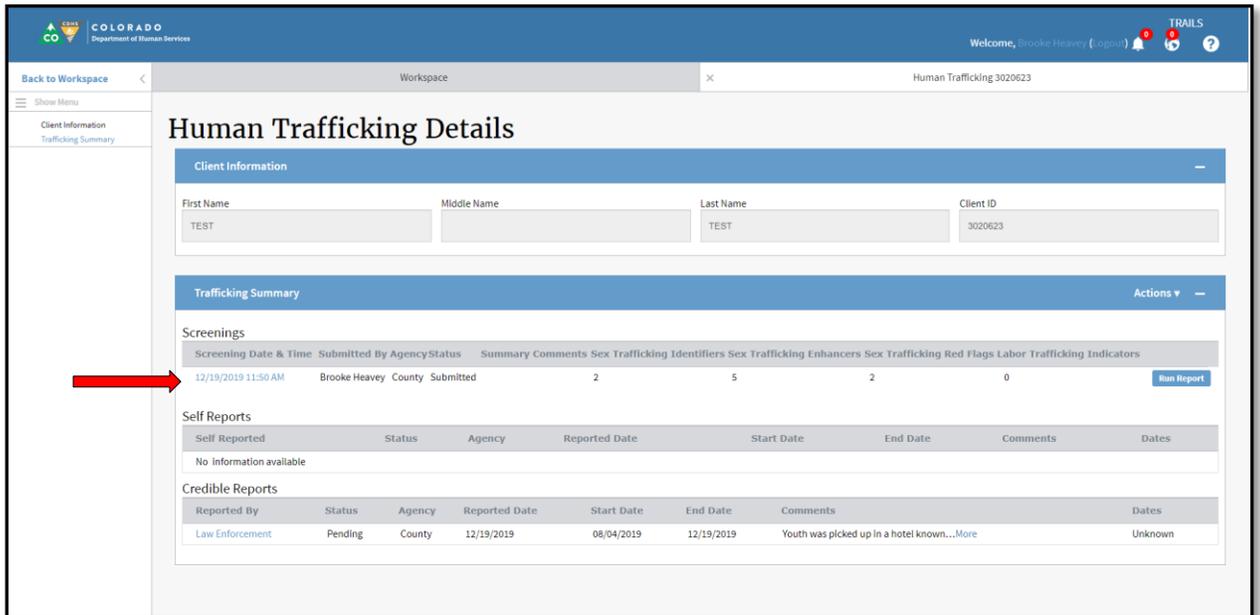
7. Select applicable trafficking indicators. A drop down box will open to populate additional information. Do not add “Self-report” or “In File”. Add details about youth’s experience.



- Hit "Save" or "Submit". "Submitting" will lock your entry, "saving" will allow for you to come back later and make edits. Your HRV tools is not considered complete until it is submitted!



- All done! - You may review your trafficking screen and past trafficking screens here!



Questions:

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