

# ***My Home is Not My Castle: Follow-Up of Residents of Shelters for Homeless Youth***

**Einat Peled, Ph.D., Shimon Spiro, Ph.D.,  
and Rachel Dekel, Ph.D.**

**ABSTRACT:** The paper presents a follow-up evaluation of Israel's first two shelters for homeless youth. The main research questions were: (a) Did the youngsters achieve the shelters' main goal of reaching a normative and suitable post-shelter residence? (b) How do the youngsters evaluate their stay at the shelter and its impact on them? (c) Is there a relationship between youngsters' post-shelter residence and their evaluation of the shelter stay? Data on 345 youngsters were collected through follow-up telephone interviews with the youngsters, their parents, and community social workers. The findings indicate that the majority of these youngsters left the shelter to living arrangements that were normative but not necessarily fitting with their wishes and needs. Most of the youngsters were satisfied with the shelter, but no relationship was found between general satisfaction and achievement of the shelters' declared goal. The discussion focuses on the significance of the findings with regard to the declared and operative goals of shelters.

**KEY WORDS:** Runaway and Homeless Youths; Shelters; Follow-up; Family Reunification.

In recent decades, there has been a growing interest among professionals and scholars in runaway and homeless youth. There seems to be a broad consensus regarding the seriousness and complexity of the problem, as well as its primary causes—difficult experiences of exploitation, rejection, abuse, and oppression at home (Bradley, 1997; Gullotta, 1978; Janus, Archambault, Brown, & Welsh, 1995; Kufeldt & Nimmo, 1987; Robertson, 1992). Runaway and homeless

---

Einat Peled and Shimon Spiro both are affiliated with The Bob Shapell School of Social Work, Tel Aviv University, Israel. Rachel Dekel is affiliated with The School of Social Work, Bar-Ilan University, Ramat-Gan, Israel.

Address correspondence to Einat Peled, Ph.D., The Bob Shapell School of Social Work, Tel Aviv University, Ramat Aviv, Tel Aviv 69978, Israel; Phone: 972-3-6407371; Fax: 972-3-6409182; e-mail: einatp@post.tau.ac.il.

youth suffer severe distress including victimization to violence and sexual assault, drug abuse, involvement in prostitution, and lack of accommodation, food, clothing, and medical care (e.g., Cohavi-Samselik, 1999; McCarty & Hagan, 1992; Rees, 1993; Roloff, 1993; Simon & Whitbeck, 1991).

Despite the severe victimization and distress experienced by runaway youth before and after they leave home, it seems that only a minority of them are helped by formal support services (Bannister, Dell, Donnison, Fitzpatrick, & Taylor, 1993; McCarthy & Hagan, 1992; Newman, 1989; Rees, 1993). The reasons given for this limited use of services are the youngsters' distrust in them, their dislike of the services' intervention methods, and their fear of being forced to return home (De Rosa et al., 1999; Kurtz, Lindsey, Jarvis, & Neckerud, 2000; McCarthy & Hagan, 1992; Price, 1989; Wiggans, 1989). Of the different available formal support services shelters and drop-in centers seem to be the most commonly used by homeless and runaway youth (De Rosa et al., 1999; Greene, Ringwalt, & Iachan, 1997; Reid & Klee, 1999). An understanding of the outcomes of shelter stay and of youngsters' perceptions of the impact the shelter had on their lives is important for improving professional support given to this distressed population.

Only a few studies have been published that evaluated the immediate outcomes of staying at a shelter for homeless youth, and there is little follow-up data on youngsters' whereabouts after their stay at a shelter and on their subjective perception of how they were affected by their stay at a shelter. The follow-up evaluation presented in this paper aimed to add to this developing body of knowledge by examining objective and subjective aspects of staying at a shelter for runaway and homeless youth. Specifically, the research questions were: (a) Did the youngsters achieve the shelters' main goal of reaching a normative and suitable post-shelter residence? (b) How do the youngsters evaluate their stay at the shelter and its impact on them? and (c) Is there a relationship between youngsters' post-shelter residence and their evaluation of the shelter stay?

## **Literature Review**

A common goal for runaway and homeless shelters is helping their clients find a safe and stable residence post-discharge, often by reunifying them with their family (Thompson, Safyer, & Pollio, 2001). Several studies tried to assess youngsters' post-shelter locations.

Teare and his colleagues (Teare, Furst, Peterson, & Authier, 1992; Teare, Authier, & Peterson, 1994) found that about two-thirds of the youngsters that stayed in a shelter in Midwest United States reunited with their caretakers, 15% were placed out of home, and the rest were referred to hospitals, detention facilities or an intensive care center. The rate of those returning home was very high among teenagers that came to the shelter from their homes. A relatively low rate of returning home was found among those that stayed for a long time in the shelter, reported on multiple family problems, or expressed despair and suicidal tendencies. Similar rates of youth living at home three months post discharge (72%) were found by Thompson, Pollio, & Bitner (2000) in a study of three Midwestern agencies. Youths who returned home had broad range of positive outcomes relative to youths discharged to other locations. Such outcomes included less trouble with police, use of fewer legal services, greater likelihood of attending school or graduate and lesser likelihood of running away. The same research group found similar rates of family reunification following shelter discharge also in a 1997 nationwide US sample of 17,790 youths (Thompson et al., 2001). In another shelter in the United States, Kurtz, Jarvis, and Kurtz (1991) found that only 30% of the homeless youngsters returned to their parents' homes, 24% were sent to boarding schools and foster families, 21% went back to living on the street.

Newman (1989) followed up the place of residence of 532 adolescent boys and girls about one month after they left a shelter for homeless youth in central London. Approximately 70% of the youngsters were found at home or in an out-of-home placement at the time of follow-up. About 70% of these (50% of the total population) had stayed at their initial post-shelter destination for the entire period until the follow-up. Stability of initial destination was higher among youngsters that had come from their homes, especially girls, than among those that came to the shelter from other places.

In a previous phase of the research reported in this paper, examination of the exit destinations of about 400 youngsters who stayed at a runaway shelter in Tel Aviv revealed similar trends to those found in the US and England (Peled, Spiro, & Dekel, 2002). Half of the youngsters returned to their parents' home after leaving the shelter; about one-fourth were placed out-of-home (in foster homes, boarding schools, etc.); about one-fifth went back to the street, moved to a different shelter, or reached an unknown destination; and a small

minority moved to live independently or joined the army. Social workers at the shelter evaluated 76% of the out-of-home placements, 41% of the returns home, and 14% of the other exit destinations as potentially stable. Returning home after staying at the shelter was more prevalent among youngsters who arrived to the shelter from home, ran away from home because of physical abuse, came to the shelter in search of temporary respite, stayed at the shelter for a relatively short time, kept contact with their family, and exhibited generally good adjustment to the shelter (Peled et al., 2002).

In summary, with regard to our first research question, the existing literature on exit destinations of runaway shelter residents shows that the majority reach normative residences, that is, their parents' home or an out-of-home placement. However, it is not clear to what extent these apparently normative living arrangements respond to the needs of the youngsters who reach them. While Thompson and her colleagues (Thompson et al., 2000) found better outcomes for youths who returned home relative to youths discharged to other locations, this and other studies show that a significant number continues to runaway after returning home. Further, not much is known about the actual quality and fitness of these "normative" housing solutions, and, with the exception of Newman's (1989) research, there are no data about the actual stability of the various exit destinations. Another shortcoming of most of the studies reviewed is their exclusive reliance on the reports of social workers at the time of shelter exit. Even if information provided by the social workers is reliable, it is inevitably partial. Moreover, changes in residence are likely to take place in the first few weeks after leaving the shelter. The only study that relied on follow-up interviews with the youngsters themselves (Thompson et al., 2000) used shelter staff to conduct the evaluation, thus risking a social desirability bias (Pollio, Thompson, & North, 2000).

Despite a growing recognition of the need to include clients' subjective perspective in evaluating services (e.g., Godley, Fiedler, & Funk, 1998; Harris & Poertner, 1999), almost no research has been conducted on youngsters' evaluations of the runaway shelters in which they stayed. Tear and his colleagues (Tear et al., 1994) studied client satisfaction of 100 out of 200 youngsters who resided in an emergency shelter for runaway and homeless youth focused on the development of social skills. Here too the data were collected by an administrative staff member during a pre-departure interview. High

scores were obtained for the different dimensions of satisfaction (on a seven-point scale): 5.98 on communication, 6.21 on fairness, 6.36 on helpfulness, 6.48 on concern, and 6.50 on pleasantness.

Newman (1989), mentioned above, conducted follow-up qualitative interviews with a sub-sample of 52 youngsters that were at home or in some out-of-home placement, about three months after leaving the shelter. The youngsters' descriptions of life in the shelter depict high general satisfaction with the service. Specifically, they emphasized the accepting and supportive attitude of the staff, the sense of security provided by the shelter, and the reasonability and flexibility of the rules and regulations. Most of the interviewees assessed their stay in the shelter as productive and were able to cite different personal benefits they derived as a result of the stay. Finally, a study on service utilization among homeless youth in Los Angeles, California found high level of satisfaction for youth shelters (DeRosa et al., 1999).

Overall, the literature available on our second research question indicates a high level of satisfaction among residents of shelters for runaway and homeless youth. This may be interpreted as a reflection of reality or as an expression of the positive bias typical of client satisfaction surveys (Harris & Poertner, 1999). We found no literature on our third research question, regarding the relationship between youngsters' evaluation of the shelter and the degree to which it achieved its goals.

The follow-up study presented in this paper is the first quantitative examination of both objective results and subjective evaluations of shelter stay for runaway and homeless youth, 2–3 months after leaving the shelter. Data were collected on the youngsters' whereabouts and doings at time of follow-up, as well as the stability of their first post-shelter destination and the degree to which this destination met their needs. The objective aspects were evaluated by several sources—the youngsters, their parents, and community social workers; the evaluation of youngsters' satisfaction with the shelters and its impact on them was based on interviews with the youngsters alone.

## **Method**

### *The Organizational Context*

The study evaluated Israel's two largest shelters for runaway and homeless youth. Makom Acher ("Another Place"), located in Tel Aviv

and "Atnachta" ("Respite") in Jerusalem. The goals of the shelters are to provide 13–18 year-old youngsters, that are unable or do not want to live at home, with safe space, "time-out" and an opportunity to reorganize, mediate between them and their parents or services in the community, and help them find a normative living arrangement that fits their needs (Peled, Spiro, & Frumer, 1995). Additional operative goals expressed through the ongoing work of the shelters were turning the shelter into a "warm home" for the residing youngsters, providing required therapy, and re-socializing the youngsters to normative living habits in terms of daily functioning, schooling, and work (Peled et al., 1995; Peled & Spiro, 1998).

Each of the shelters holds about 20 beds. Annual occupancy rates at the time of the research was about 200 at Makom Acher and 100 at Atnachta, with daily occupancy ranging from 6 to 18 residents. Slightly over one-half of those staying at the shelters were girls. Contrary to the situation in Britain and North America, the majority of residents in shelters were referred by welfare agencies, and only a minority came at their own initiative. The shelters' populations did not vary significantly in terms of gender, age, country of birth, and time spent at the shelter.

### *Population and Sample*

Between October 1995 and June 1998, telephone interviews were conducted with shelter residents, their parents and the community social workers that intervened with them or with their families, about 2 months after exiting the shelter.<sup>1</sup> Addresses and phone numbers of the youngsters, their parents, and the social workers were obtained from the shelters' hand-recorded exit log. Where an updated phone number for a youngster was unavailable, we tried to obtain it from her parents or the community social worker.

According to the computerized files in the shelters, during the period of the follow-up research, 726 youngsters terminated their stays. Only 495 of them (68%) were listed in the exit log and, thus, known to the research team. We were unable to identify the cause of this gap, to which we became aware only at the end of the data collection, but we ruled out the possibility that it was due to personnel turnover in the shelters or in the research team during the research period, or to seasonal fluctuations.

Of the 495 exists reported to us, we managed to interview 169 (34%) youngsters, 191 (39%) parents, and 192 (39%) social workers

(most of them in local welfare departments or probation offices). At least one source of information was available for 345 (70%) of the cases and only in 8% of the cases did we interview all three. In total we collected data on 48% of the 726 youngsters in the research population.

Of our sample of 345 youngsters, 49% were boys and 51% were girls and most of them were born in Israel (77.4%). Their ages ranged from 13 to 21, with the average age being 16.63 ( $SD = 1.56$ ). Approximately 45% of the youngsters came from families in which the parents live together, about 30% of the parents lived separately, and for 25% information on this variable was missing. Time spent at the shelter ranged from 1 to 97 days; close to one-third of the youngsters stayed in the shelter for a short time—up to 5 days, and the average length of stay was 24.81 days ( $SD = 27.79$ ).

To test for possible bias in the sample, we compared the characteristics of the 345 researched youngsters with those of the 381 youngsters who had computerized records but for whom no follow-up information was obtained. No differences were found between the two groups with regard to gender, length of stay, manner of departure (with or without staff concurrence), destination upon exit, and evaluated stability of destination. Significant though slight differences were found with regard to age: those studied ( $N = 110$ ,  $M = 16.9$ ,  $SD = 1.8$ ) were older than those that were not studied ( $N = 170$ ,  $M = 16.79$ ,  $SD = 1.43$ ) ( $F = 4.88$ ,  $p < .05$ ). A higher percentage of those researched were born in Israel (77% compared with 67%) and less of them were born in the Russian Federation (11% vs. 19%) and Ethiopia (6% vs. 9%) ( $N = 698$ ,  $X^2 = 12.33$ ,  $df = 4$ ,  $p < .05$ ). In addition, a higher percentage of those studied than those that were not studied came from families in which the parents lived together (61% compared 48%) and fewer came from single-parent families ( $N = 528$ ,  $X^2 = .86$ ,  $df = 1$ ,  $p < .01$ ).

### *Data Collection Instruments and Procedure*

We constructed three parallel telephone interview questionnaires for youngsters, parents, and social workers, based on our intensive acquaintance with the shelters and their population, and lessons drawn from our previous research in this area. The questionnaires were mostly structured. Interviewees' open answers, comments and clarifications were recorded verbatim and used mainly to illustrate

the findings. The three main topics covered in the questionnaires were the location and situation of the youngster at the time of the interview, his or her satisfaction with the shelter, and the impact of the shelter stay on the young person. Parents and social workers were asked to provide also their own evaluations of the shelter and its influence on the youngster in question.

The interviewers were social workers, unfamiliar to the shelters' staff or residents. Efforts to locate the interviewees began about one and a half months after exiting the shelter and continued up to three months after departure, or until it was unequivocally clear that an interview was impossible after numerous attempts at different hours and on different days of the week. Each interview lasted between 15 and 30 minutes.

### *Results of the Interview Attempts*

Runaway and homeless youth are a difficult-to-follow population (Pollio et al., 2000). As seen in Table 1, the reasons for lack of success in finding interviewees were somewhat different in each of the three groups. The main reason for not interviewing youngsters was difficulty in finding them but we encountered almost no outright refusal to be interviewed. The rate of refusal among the parents and social workers was higher.

It is reasonable to assume that we were more successful at finding youngsters that returned to and stayed in their parents' homes, and less successful in interviewing those that went back to the streets. In addition, we sometimes had difficulty interviewing youngsters that had been placed in residential and group homes, because they are less accessible by phone. Among the parents, we had more success interviewing Hebrew speakers and those with an "established" lifestyle. It was harder to find parents that had no phone or no permanent address, that were mentally ill, or that were not capable of holding a phone conversation in Hebrew. It can be assumed, then, that there is a positive bias in the youngsters' interviews and, to a lesser extent, in the other interviews.

Over all, we succeeded in interviewing one or more of our intended interviewees in 70% of the 495 cases we aimed at, but only in about one-third of the cases did we succeed in reaching the youngster. This result has dual significance. On the one hand, it should be taken into account in considering possible bias and the

**TABLE 1**  
**Reasons for Failure to Interview**

	Prospective interviewees					
	Young- sters		Parents		Social workers	
	<i>N</i>	%	<i>N</i>	%	<i>N</i>	%
Interview held	169	34	191	39	192	39
<i>Reasons for lack of interview</i>						
No contact information in shelter	17	4	16	3	47	10
Parents/social workers did not allow contact	31	6	28	6		
Parents/social workers had no information on youngster			18	4	29	6
Interviewee not located	207	42	115	22	124	25
Interviewee refused	6	1	32	7	15	3
Other reasons	6	1	27	5		
Missing data	59	12	68	14	88	17
Total	495	100	495	100	495	100

generalizability of the findings. On the other hand, it may serve as a factor in evaluating the outcome of staying in a shelter: If many of the youngsters can not be found because they don't live in a "normative" setting, it is possible that the main goal of the shelter—to help place them in a normative place of residence responding to their needs—was not attained.

#### *Ethical Considerations*

Several steps were taken to ensure proper ethical conduct. First, the shelter workers were asked to get contact information from the youngsters before they left and let them know that a researcher might contact them to inquire about their present situation and their evaluation of the shelter. We did not contact anyone that

objected to being contacted. Second, the shelter workers were asked to inform the researchers of situations in which it was preferable to refrain from a follow-up interview and their recommendation was followed. Third, when addresses and phone numbers of youngsters and their parents were provided by community workers, these social workers were responsible for following ethical procedures, i.e., secure informed consent, or refuse to provide the information requested. Fourth, an oral informed consent was obtained prior to each of the follow-up phone interviews, emphasizing the aims of the research, voluntary participation and confidentiality. Finally, interviewers refrained from conducting the interviews in few occasions in which they sensed that the request to participate caused the prospective interviewee discomfort or distress.

### *Analysis and Presentation of the Findings*

For the analysis we created a composite variable according to the following order of priorities: If we succeeded in interviewing the youngster, we used his or her answers; if not, a parent's response, and, as a third preference, the social workers' answer. This variable is based on assumed resemblance among the three information sources. In a test of this assumption for the variable of "exit destination" we found full agreement in 74% of the responses of youngsters and their parents, in 72% of the responses of parents and social workers, and in 68% of the answers of youngsters and social workers. In total, the degree of agreement among the different sources seems to be sufficient to justify the use of the composite variable. It is presented only with regard to "objective" questions (where the youngster is, what he or she is doing, and the like) and not with regard to personal assessment of shelter experience and its impact, which is based on the responses of the youngsters alone. Data on background variables is based on information recorded by the social workers at the shelters on the shelter entry and exit forms (Peled et al., 2002).

## **Findings**

### *Where Did the Youngsters Go When They Left the Shelter?*

Our first research question was whether the youngsters reached a normative and suitable post-shelter residence. Table 2 indicates that

**TABLE 2**  
**Destination after Leaving the Shelter and Present Place of Residence<sup>a</sup>**

	Destination after Leaving the Shelter							
	Parents' home		Out of Home Placement		Other (on the street, with friends etc.)		Total	
	<i>N</i>	%	<i>N</i>	%	<i>N</i>	%	<i>N</i>	%
<i>Present residence</i>								
Parents' home	135	87	14	22	21	22	170	54
Out of Home Placement	8	5	36	57	14	14	58	18
Other (on the street, with friends etc.)	12	8	13	21	62	64	87	28
<b>Total</b>	<b>155</b>	<b>49</b>	<b>63</b>	<b>20</b>	<b>97</b>	<b>31</b>	<b>315</b>	<b>100</b>

<sup>a</sup>The table shows general categories of places. In addition, youngsters moved, to an unknown extent, within categories, especially in the category of 'other.'

at the time of follow-up, the majority of youngsters were living in a normative residence—about half in their parents' homes and about one-fifth in an out-of-home placement. Most of the remaining one-third were in places that are not considered normative for youngsters, such as homes of friends or acquaintances or on the street. Slightly less than one-third of the youngsters were living at the time of the follow-up in a location different than the one they had gone to from the shelter, indicating that their initial housing solution was unstable.

Parents' home was clearly the most stable post-shelter destination. Eighty-seven percent of the youngsters that left the shelter for their parents' home were found there at the time of follow-up, compared to 54% and 62% stability for the other destinations ( $n = 315$ ,  $X^2 = 19.856$ ,  $df = 4$ ,  $p < .000$ ). The apparent high rate of stability in the "other" category is probably misleading due to the nature of the places included in it.

The youngsters that were found in their homes at time of follow-up had different characteristics to those in other places. The majority (56%) were 16–17 years old, and a minority were younger (25%) or older (19%), compared to an equal division among young and middle age groups among those placed outside of the home (43% and 45%, respectively), and a relatively high fate (58%) of 18+-year-olds among those in other places ( $n = 234$ ,  $X^2 = 43.89$ ,  $df = 4$ ,  $p < .001$ ). The parents of most at-home youngsters (71%) lived together, compared to 57% of the parents of those in out-of-home placements, and 47% of the parents of those found elsewhere ( $n = 329$ ,  $X^2 = 11.20$ ,  $df = 2$ ,  $p < .01$ ).

"Normative" residences did not necessarily respond to youngsters' desires or needs. Information on this issue was obtained through two questions. We asked the youngsters where they wanted to go when they left the shelter (Table 3), and we asked the community workers to what extent, in their opinion, the present place of residence responded to each youngsters' needs (Table 4).

There are notable differences between the places where the youngsters were living at time of follow-up and the places they had wanted to go to after leaving the shelter. More than half of the boys and girls (58%) that lived in a normative place at follow-up (their parents' home or a placement) told us that this had not been their initial choice. It is possible, of course, that some of these youngsters had changed their mind since leaving the shelter and liked their

**TABLE 3**  
**Youngsters' Desired Post-Shelter Residence and Present Place of Residence**

	Desired Post Shelter Residence								Total					
	Parents' home	With relatives, friends	Out-of-home Placement	Independent living, army	On the street, Other	Unknown	N	%						
	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%				
<i>Present residence</i>														
Parent's home	49	44	3	3	20	18	14	12	11	10	15	13	112	100
Out-of-home placement	3	14	-	-	8	36	1	4	7	32	3	14	22	100
With relatives, friends	-	-	3	25	1	8	5	42	1	8	2	19	12	100
Independent living, army	-	-	-	-	-	-	6	60	2	20	2	20	10	100
On the street, other	1	14	-	-	-	-	2	29	4	57	-	-	7	100
Total	53	32	6	4	29	18	28	17	25	15	22	14	163	100

**TABLE 4**  
**The Extent to which Present Place of Residence Responds to Youngster's Needs, According to Social Workers**

The extent to which the place responds to the youngster's needs												
	Not at all		To a slight extent		To a great extent		To a very great extent		Don't know		Total	
	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%
<i>Present residence</i>												
Parents' home	32	40	21	27	15	19	8	10	3	4	79	100
Out-of-home-placement	3	8	3	8	11	29	18	47	3	8	38	100
With relatives, friends	3	27	4	36	3	27	1	9	-	-	11	100
Independent living, on street, shelter, other	13	33	4	10	6	16	7	18	9	23	39	100
Unknown	4	2	5	1	-	-	1	5	13	69	19	100
Total	55	29	33	18	35	19	35	19	28	15	186	100

place of residence at the time of the interviews. However, we believe that this was not often the case, in light of the likelihood that youngsters' retrospective reports largely reflect their present assessment of their place of residence.

The reports of the social workers (Table 4) also indicate that reaching a "normative" place does not necessarily mean that the youngster has found a suitable solution for his or her problem. This is particularly true regarding youngsters that returned to their parents' homes. The social workers estimated that in more than two-thirds of these cases, living in the parents' home did not respond adequately to the youngsters' needs. In contrast, about three-fourths of the placements outside of the home were assessed by the social workers as satisfactory responses. It is also noteworthy that a considerable portion of the social workers favorably evaluated places that are not considered normative for youngsters.

### *The Youngsters' Evaluation of Their Stay in the Shelter*

Another aim of this evaluation was to examine the degree to which the youngsters were satisfied with the shelter and their assessment of its impact on them. For this purpose, we looked at youngsters' general satisfaction with the shelter, their evaluation of personal change due to their shelter experience, and their assessment of the impact of their stay on communication with their families. These variables show similar trends. About 75% of the youngsters said they felt good or very good in the shelter, 16% estimated their general satisfaction as moderate, and only 9% reported that they didn't feel good.

Approximately 60% of the respondents thought that the stay at the shelter changed them for the better, over one-third estimated that they did not change, and a few reported that they had changed for the worse. Examples given of changes for the better included: "I was always under pressure, and now I am more confident"; "I know how to control myself better, but I also have more worries"; "I started working; I got my act together"; "I don't do silly things, I don't smoke, I work normally".

With regard to the impact of staying at the shelter on family relations, only 7% reported a negative impact. About half (48%) reported positive changes, and about half (45%) did not notice any change at all. Here a difference was found between the girls and the boys;

more girls reported favorable change, while more boys reported that there was no change in their family relations ( $n = 156$ ,  $X^2 = 8.77$ ,  $df = 2$ ,  $p < .05$ ). In addition, youngsters whose parents lived together reported more changes for the better in the relationship with their families than did youngsters of single-parent families ( $n = 125$ ,  $X^2 = 11.57$ ,  $df = 2$ ,  $p < 0.01$ ). The degree of general satisfaction with the shelter was related positively to youngsters' evaluation of personal change as a result of the shelter stay ( $n = 155$ ,  $X^2 = 14.52$ ,  $df = 6$ ,  $p < .05$ ). No significant relationship was found between satisfaction with the shelter and evaluation of the change in family relations.

### *Is There a Relationship Between Shelters Outcomes and Experience?*

Our third research question referred to the relationship between youngsters' evaluation of shelter stay and the achievement of the declared goals of the service. Here no significant findings were obtained with regard to the estimates of general satisfaction or the occurrence of personal change. However, significant relationships were found between the youngsters' evaluation of the change in their relationships with their families due to their stay at the shelter and the variables of exit destination, place of residence at follow-up, and stability of the place of residence after leaving the shelter.

Of those who went home from the shelter, about 60% noted a positive change in their family relations and about 40% saw no change, while the trend among those in placement was opposite: about 40% reported a change for the better and about 55% reported no change. About 80% of those in other places noted that no change occurred in their relationship with their families ( $n = 162$ ,  $X^2 = 21.19$ ,  $df = 4$ ,  $p < .001$ ). A similar pattern was indicated with regard to the youngsters' place of residence at the time of the follow-up.

With respect to stability of residence, the youngsters found at follow-up in the same place they had gone to from the shelter (usually, their home) reported more change for the better (57% vs. 30%), less lack of change (36% vs. 50%), and less change for the worse (5% vs. 10%) in their family relations, compared with youngsters who had lived in two or more places since leaving the shelter ( $N = 163$ ,  $X^2 = 13.649$ ,  $df = 3$ ,  $p < .005$ ).

## Discussion

The shelters that were the focus of the present research try to help youth that have chosen or been forced to leave home find a normative, suitable and stable residence. Do they succeed in this task? It seems that, subject to sampling limitations, the shelters are successful in helping youth reach a normative residence. We found that two-thirds of the respondents had left the shelter for their home or an out-of-home placement, and a similar number were living in these types of residences at follow-up. Those findings are similar to those found in previous studies (Newman, 1989; Teare et al., 1992, 1994; Thompson et al., 2000). However, our findings raise concerns regarding the extent to which these places of residence fulfill the youngsters' needs; it may be that for many of them, the solution they reached is not the one they needed.

The stability of all post-shelter destinations, with the exception of home, was relatively low. About half of those who left the shelter to out-of-home placements and slightly more than half of those that left to other destinations moved again, at least once, in the period up to the research interview. While the decisive majority of those found in their homes at follow-up had gone there directly from the shelter (i.e., experiences stability), about half of them had declared that they had not wanted to go home from the shelter. The social workers interviewed estimated that the return home did not respond to the needs of about two-thirds of the youngsters that returned home. These findings raise questions regarding the declared goals of the evaluated programs.

The findings clearly indicate that a normative place of residence is not necessarily a suitable solution. This is not an earth-shattering conclusion—every professional that works with distressed youth is probably aware of it. However, it seems that the appeal of “normativeness” carried by solutions such as family reunification and out-of-home placements, and their seeming advantages over life in the street (Thompson et al., 2000) may sway our attention from their problematic aspects. The mere use of the sentimental term “family reunification” to describe the return of runaway and homeless youth to their family home after time spent in a shelter (e.g., Thompson et al., 2001) posits such a danger. While we wish that more families in our societies display unity and cohesiveness; we know too well

that many of the youth who return home end experiencing there the same chaos and pain from which they ran away.

The normative place of residence for minors in most western societies is under the physical and legal protection of their parents or surrogate parents. Accordingly, "homeless" youth are those who have left the realm of the protective adults responsible for their acts and their welfare and, therefore, they constitute a "social problem." They are seen as a problem and a threat to the social order enforced by society's control agents mandated to ensure adult supervision and guidance of minors (see also Staller, 2003). At the same time, these youngsters are victims of extremely difficult circumstances and their problems and needs can not always be handled in the available normative places of residence. Returning such youngsters to their homes or providing them with placements outside of the home resolves the problem of social supervision, but often fails to provide the youngsters with the feeling of competence, belonging, protection, and stability that they need (Fitzgerald, 1993; Kufeldt, 1991; Kurtz et al., 2000). Some are liable to be homeless and parentless in the functional and psychological sense, even if they live under the same roof with their parents (Cohavi-Samselik, 1999).

When the wording of the goals of runaway services, such as Makom Aher and Atnachta, emphasizes the normative nature of post-shelter residences and not their suitability to the needs of each specific youngster, priority is given to their role as social control agents. The development of alternative solutions that are more flexible, creative, and innovative, in an attempt to respond to the diverse needs of these youngster, becomes secondary (for example: Bucy & Nichols, 1991; Freeman, 1993; Low & Crashaw, 1985; Ray & Roloff, 1993).

We propose a change in the goals of the shelters, giving clear preference to the degree of fit between the housing solution and the needs of the youngster, over the conventionality of the housing solution. A more radical proposal stems from the perception of running away not as a problem that needs to be fixed in order to restore order, but as an indication of a serious flaw in the functioning of the social institutions—families and placements—that the youngsters flee. Accordingly, the shelters and the service system within which they operate may choose to set an additional central goal, namely, changing the potential residences (families and other arrangements) to better suit the needs of the youngsters they are intended for.

Another aim of this study was to examine youngsters' assessments of the shelter and its impact on their lives, and the relationship between these assessments and achievement of the shelters' goals. Similar to previous research in this domain, our respondents reported a high degree of general satisfaction with the shelter. As could have been expected, the youngsters that reported positive personal change due to their stay in the shelter also expressed higher general satisfaction than those that said they had undergone no change or a negative change. However, no correlation was found between satisfaction with the shelter and the variables related to finding a solution to the youngster's homelessness. As noted above, homeless youth tend to avoid shelters because of their fear that staying there might harm them, particularly by placing them in undesirable living arrangements. Our findings show that there are grounds for this fear but, at the same time, that staying in a shelter is likely to be a positive experience in itself, regardless of the solution offered the youngster at the end of his or her stay. Youngsters' satisfaction with the shelter may be regarded as a service goal in itself, as it testifies to the quality of the service provided (Peled & Spiro, 1998; Stallard, 1996).

We did find a salient relationship between youngsters' exit destination, its stability, and the place of residence at follow-up, and the youngsters' reports on change in their family relations due to the stay. Youngsters that went home from the shelter, whose destinations were more stable, and that stayed in their homes during the research period, tended more than others to report a positive change in the relationship with their families due to the stay in the shelter. It can be assumed that an improvement during the stay in relations with his or her family contributed to the youngster's return home, and to a longer stay at home. However, it is interesting that the change in relationships with the family was not related to general satisfaction with the shelter. Perhaps this indicates that the improvement in family relations during the stay at the shelter, at least as perceived by the youngsters, was not the result of deliberate therapeutic intervention by shelter staff. Rather, it may have been an outcome of the very act of running away, that is, of the message the youngsters conveyed to their families by leaving home, the break in relations, the exposure of the family problem to others, and so forth. This type of change in family relations, set in motion by leaving home, maybe short-lived, as suggested by the literature on

battered women that leave to shelters time and again (Dutton, 1992; Kurtz et al., 2000; Okun, 1988). Such caution is further supported by the fact that many of the youngsters that lived at home at the time of the research and very many of the youngsters' social workers expressed reservations about the home being a fitting housing solution. At any rate, there is no doubt that our findings about the centrality of the home as a housing solution for the youngsters in shelters for homeless youth warrant the concentration of professional efforts during and after the stay on relationships between the youngsters and their families (Thompson et al., 2000).

The findings of this follow-up evaluation indicate partial success in achieving the central goals of the evaluated shelters—to find a normative and suitable place of residence for youngsters that come there. Among other things, the results indicate that homelessness is often a chronic condition, especially for youth that are cut off from their families, and that under the existing system, it is difficult for the shelters to find a stable residence solution for this group. However, it seems that the shelters are more successful in areas that were not defined as service goals, namely, creating a positive temporary living environment, and advancing residents' personal and interpersonal changes.

As expected, it was difficult for us to locate respondents whose place of residence was instable. However, our access to data on background and shelter stay variables of the entire shelters' population enabled a comparison of research sample and population. The findings of this comparison allow for a cautious generalization of the findings to the entire research population with a few reservations, particularly with regard to youngsters that were not born in Israel and whose parents are separated. In addition, it should be recalled that our findings most likely suffer from a positive bias, in light of the difficulties in findings the youngsters whose place of residence is unstable or unconventional.

The combined analysis of post-shelter life circumstances and subjective evaluations of shelter experience constitutes a unique contribution of this follow-up research to the literature on services for homeless youth. Linking of the objective and subjective data enabled us to assess different dimensions of the declared purpose of the shelters separately, and to deepen the distinction between declared and operative goals. Our findings underscore the need for further investigation, possibly with the help of qualitative methodology, of the

relationship between runaway youth and their families, along the course of leaving home, entering a shelter, shelter stay, and post-shelter stay.

## Note

1. We decided to interview the parents and community workers in addition to the youngsters, because we assumed that we would not succeed in interviewing all the young people that stayed in the shelters and we wanted to ensure that we would have some information on each of them.

## Acknowledgements

We would like to thank the youngsters, parents and social workers that devoted their time and shared their often painful experiences with us; to the Authority for Youth Protection and the staff of the Makom Acher and Atnachta shelters, who opened their doors to us and allowed us access to data; to the Forum for Children and Youth Studies, affiliated with Elem, The Association for Youth in Distress, and the Bob Shapell School of Social work for their support; to Ravit Shimoni, Tali Yudelvit, Liat Bar-Oz, Anat David and Yafit Shiffenbaum who demonstrated resourcefulness, patience and sensitivity in locating and interviewing our research participants; and to Liat Lev-Shalem for her skill, creativity and persistence in the statistical analyses.

## References

- Bannister, J., Dell, M., Donnison, D., Fitzpatrick, S., & Taylor, R. (1993). *Homeless young people in Scotland: The role of social work services*. Glasgow, Scotland: HMSO.
- Bradley, J. (1997). *Runaway youth: Stress, social support and adjustment*. NY: Garland.
- Bucy, J., & Nichols, N. (1991). Homeless youth: Statement of problem and suggested policies. *Journal of Health and Social Policy*, 2(4), 65–71.
- De Rosa, C. J., Montgomery, S. B., Kipke, M. D., Iverson, E., Ma, J. L., & Unger, J. B. (1999). Service utilization among homeless and runaway youth in Los Angeles, California: Rates and reasons. *Journal of Adolescence Health*, 24, 190–200.
- Dutton, M. A. (1992). *Empowering and healing the battered woman: A model for Assessment and intervention*. NY: Springer.
- Fitzgerald, M. (1993). Residential care for homeless youth: Hopeful signs from an extensive service. *Journal of Child and Youth Care*, 8, 61–72.

- Freeman, E. M. (1993). Developing alternative family structures for runaway, drug addicted adolescents. In E. M. Freeman (ed.), *Substance abuse treatment: A family system perspective* (pp. 48–70). Newbury Park, CA: Sage.
- Godley, S. H., Fiedler, E. M., & Funk, R. R. (1998). Consumer satisfaction of parents and their children with child/adolescent mental health services. *Evaluation and Program Planning, 21*, 31–45.
- Greene, J. M., Ringwalt, C. L., & Iachan, R. (1997). Shelters for runaway and homeless youth: Capacity and occupancy. *Child Welfare, 76*, 549–561.
- Gullotta, T. P. (1978). Runaway: Reality or myth? *Adolescence, 13*, 543–549.
- Harris, G. & Poertner, J. (1999). Measurement of client satisfaction: The-state-of-the-art. CFRC Publication, <http://cfrcwww.social.uiuc.edu/publications/clientsati.html>.
- Janus, M. D., Archambault, F. X., Brown, S. W., & Welsh, L. D. (1995). Physical abuse in Canadian runaway adolescents. *Child Abuse and Neglect, 19*(4), 433–447.
- Cohavi-Samselik, A. (1999). *Girls that run away from home. Unpublished master's thesis*. Israel: Tel Aviv University (Hebrew).
- Kufeldt, K. (1991). Social policy and runaway. *Journal of Health and Social Policy, 2*, 37–49.
- Kufeldt, K., & Nimmo, M. (1987). Youth on the street: Abuse and neglect in the Eighties. *Child Abuse and Neglect, 11*, 531–543.
- Kurtz, P. D., Jarvis, V. S., & Kurtz, L. G. (1991). Problems of homeless youths: Empirical findings and human services issues. *Social work, 36*, 309–314.
- Kurtz, P. D., Lindsey, E. W., Jarvis, S., & Neckerud, L. (2000). How runaway and homeless youth navigate troubled waters: The role of formal and informal helpers. *Child and Adolescent Social Work Journal, 17*(5), 390.
- Low, N., & Crashaw, B. (1985). Homeless youth: Patterns of beliefs. *Australian Journal of Social Issues, 20*, 23–34.
- McCarthy, B., & Hagan, J. (1992). Surviving on the street: The experience of homeless youth. *Journal of Adolescent Research, 7*(4), 412–430.
- Miller, A. T., Eggertson-Tacon, C., & Quigg, B. (1990). Patterns of runaway behavior within a larger system context: The road to empowerment. *Adolescence, 25*, 271–289.
- Newman, C. (1989). *Young runaways: Findings from Britain's first safe house*. London: The Children's Society.
- Okun, L. (1988). Termination and resumption of cohabitation in woman battering relationships: A statistical study. In G. T. Hotaling, O. Finkelhor, J. T. Kirpatrick & M. A. Straus (Eds.), *Coping with family violence: Research and policy perspectives* (pp. 107–119). Beverly Hills, CA: Sage.
- Peled, E., & Spiro, S. (1998). Goal-focused evaluation: Lessons from a study of a shelter for homeless youth. *Evaluation, 4*(4), 455–468.
- Peled, E., Spiro, S., & Dekel, R. (2002). Where do they go from here? Destinations of youth existing a shelter. *Children and Youth Service Review, 24*(4), 269–285.
- Peled, E., Spiro, S., & Frumer, D., (1995). *Evaluation report on Makon Aher: The first year*. Tel Aviv: The Joint Forum on Youth Issues, Elem and the Bob Shapell School of Social Work, Tel Aviv University (Hebrew).
- Pollio, D. E., Thompson, S. J., & North, C. S. (2000). Agency-based tracking of difficult-to-follow populations: Runaway and homeless youth program in St. Louis, Missouri. *Community Mental Health Journal, 36*(3), 247–258.
- Price, A. V. (1989). Characteristics and needs of Boston street youth: One agency's response. *Children and Youth Services Review, 11*, 75–90.
- Ray, J., & Roloff, M. K. (1993). Church suppers, pony-tails and mentors: Developing a program for street kids. *Child and Adolescent Social Work Journal, 10*(6), 497–508.
- Reid, P., & Klee, H. (1999). Young homeless people and service provision. *Health and Social Care in the Community, 7*(1), 17–24.
- Rees, G. (1993). *Hidden truths: Young people's experience of running away*. London: The Children Society.

- Robertson, M. J. (1992). Homeless and runaway youth. In M. J. Robertson & Greenblatt (Eds.), *Homelessness: A national perspective* (pp. 287–297). New York: Plenum.
- Simon, R. L., & Whitbeck, L. B. (1991). Running away during adolescence as a precursor to adult homelessness. *Journal of Social Service Review*, 65(2), 224–247.
- Staller, J. (2003). Constructing the runaway youth problem: Boy adventures to girl prostitute, 1960–1978. *Journal of Communication*, 53, 330–346.
- Stallard, P. (1996). The role and use of consumer satisfaction surveys in mental health services. *Journal of Mental Health*, 5(4), 333–348.
- Teare, J. F., Furst, D., Peterson, R. W., & Authier, K. (1992). Family reunification following shelter placement: Child, family and program correlates. *American Journal of Orthopsychiatry*, 61(1), 142–146.
- Teare, J. F., Authier, K., & Peterson, R. (1994). Differential patterns of post-shelter placement as a function of problem type and severity. *Journal of Child and Family Studies*, 3(1), 7–22.
- Teare, J. F., Peterson, R. W., Furst, D., Authier, K., Baker, G., & Daly, D. L. (1994). Treatment implementation in a short-term emergency shelter program. *Child Welfare*, 73, 271–281.
- Thompson, S. J., Pollio, D. E., & Bitner, L. (2000). Outcomes for adolescents using runaway and homeless youth services. *Journal of Human Behavior and the Social Environment*, 3(1), 79–97.
- Thompson, S. J., Safyer, A. W., & Pollio, D. E. (2001). Differences and predictors of family reunification among subgroups of runaway youth using shelter services. *Social Work Research*, 25(3), 163–172.
- Wiggans, A. (1989). Youth work and homelessness in England. *Children and Youth Services Review*, 11, 5–29.

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.