

The Runaway Squad

By Paul R. Paradise

The runaway squad, a youth services unit, was formed in 1976 in New York City. It was instituted by the Port Authority of New York and New Jersey to serve two functions: to address the overwhelming problem of runaway youths, and to aid in the overall cleanup of the 42nd Street bus terminal adjoining the seamy Times Square area.

The statistics on runaways are alarming. About one million youngsters run away from home each year, and although 90 percent eventually return home, about 100,000 do not. In New York City alone, there are an estimated 20,000 kids under the age of 16 on the streets. The existence of the runaway squad certainly seems warranted.

The squad is a pilot program consisting of a director, secretary, and three plainclothes teams of a police officer and a social worker. The teams patrol the restaurants and bus lanes in the two-block by two-block bus terminal, the largest in the world.

Team Spirit

In its initial years, the runaway squad was monitored by a multitude of agencies on the federal, state and city levels. The factor that interested members of these agencies was the concept of linking police officers and social workers to form plainclothes teams. This had never been done before. The creation of these teams, which are usually composed of one man and one woman, was necessary to effectively confront the special problems encountered by juveniles who leave home.

"Many kids don't want to talk to us," Sgt. Bernard Poggioli, director of the youth services unit, explained. "They're scared and on the run. The two-person team concept works to our advantage. Sometimes it's the police officer who handles things, other times the social worker."

Poggioli handles as many as 25 juvenile situations a day, and to each he brings a special kind of sincerity that wins the kids over. He really worries about them, which is one of the reasons kids trust him. Another reason for such trust may be that he looks so unlike a cop, even though he is a member of the Port Authority Police. His hair is a little on the long side, he has a mustache and wears a small earring in one ear.

"Yes, I worry about these kids," Poggioli said. "All of the squad members do. I have two girls myself, and sometimes when I'm listening to a runaway and trying to visualize the kind of family life he's running away from..." His voice trails off.

Poggioli was not always so concerned. By his own admission, he went from one extreme to the other. Before assuming command of the runaway squad, he was a nighttime supervisor of an anti-crime unit, and found that when dealing with juveniles it seemed to be the same story all the time. "The kids lied about their ages and gave their address as Covenant House. Honestly, I grew very down on the operation of Covenant House," he said, in reference to a facility for runaways located a block from the bus terminal. Founded in 1968 by Father Bruce Ritter, Covenant House was the first real program for such youths.

After he started as director of the youth services unit, Poggioli began to see for himself that many of the kids he had been arresting before really didn't have a home. Many of them were throwaways, kids whose parents had told them not to return. Not surprisingly, Poggioli became very involved with the problem of runaways and missing children. He now serves on the advisory board for Covenant House.

Few of the thousands of commuters who pass through the 42nd Street bus terminal have ever recognized the plainclothes teams in action, although in its first seven years of operation, the runaway squad contacted 27,000 youngsters. About 9,000 were reunited with responsive adults; 7,000 were aided through a social agency or psychological counseling; another 8,500 were interviewed and released. About 2,000 were juveniles requiring some form of incarceration or detention. In 1980, the first of several unit citations and awards went to the youth services unit.

Changing Legislation

Several changes in the law designed to assist runaways have added to the squad's effectiveness. A federal mandate passed in 1978 changed the classification of the runaway to a status offense. This change gives police departments options in dealing with runaways. Prior to this change, being a runaway was

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Runaway

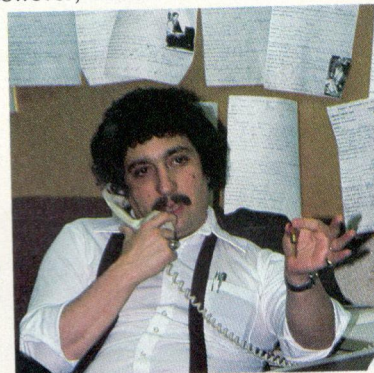
something like being a non-person. If the parents did not want the youngster back, the usual procedure was to place him in a juvenile detention center, where the youth was treated as if he had committed a crime. For many years, runaways in New York City were sent to Spofford Detention Center, which houses the toughest of the city's juvenile offenders.

Another change, the passage of the Family Court Act, allows a police officer to stop, question and detain a minor under appropriate circumstances. This gave the runaway squad greater latitude in dealing with suspected runaways.

Tracking the Children

Since missing children are a top priority matter, the youth services unit has rarely failed to identify someone brought into the office. Some kids, however, do not want to talk, or even

After spending 40 minutes on the telephone, Sgt. Poggioli is able to convince a mother in Florida to allow her son to return home.



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worse, they lie about their identity. Poggioli and the other team members are very adept at discerning whether or not a youngster is lying. If someone refuses to tell who he or she is, Poggioli has a simple solution. The person sits in the office until a positive identification is made. Sooner or later the kid breaks down, although the procedure sometimes takes all night.

The youth services office has a bulletin board filled with pictures and descriptions of missing children from all over the United States and Canada. After interviewing a suspected runaway, his pedigree—name, date of birth, and last known address—are entered into the National Crime Information Center located in Washington, D.C. Roughly 90 percent of police departments are hooked into the NCIC computer system.

NCIC is used primarily for tracking stolen property and determining whether or not a suspect is wanted in another jurisdiction. Only recently were missing children added to the NCIC computer banks as a matter of policy.

"Most police departments view dealing with runaways as grudge work," Poggioli said. "Departments vary, but usually don't take any action on a reported runaway for 24 to 48 hours, hoping that the kid will return. If he hasn't by this time, the kid is classified as missing."

Unfortunately, by the time most police departments begin a search, it is too late. Last year, New Jersey became the first state to require that a runaway be classified as missing as soon as reported, and that an immediate search be conducted.

Poggioli credits the tremendous increase in public awareness of missing children to the efforts of John Walsh and the television special "Adam" that dramatized Mr. Walsh's effort to find his missing son. Adam Walsh was abducted from a department store and was later found—decapitated. The child's torso was never found, and the killer was never identified. ★