Family Factors and Runaway Missing Children:
A Review of Theories and Research

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Abstract— This paper reviews the research that has investigated the relationship between family factors and runaway incidence of Children. It also examines the prominent theories to understand runaway phenomena. It aims to assist practitioners and policy makers who work with children and families to make evidence informed decisions.

Children runaway incidence is a worldwide multidimensional issue which necessitates an immediate response primarily from family system for the best interest of children. Most of the research confirmed children those who runaway from homes are at risk of some form of harm or maltreatment. According to the U.S. Department of Justice, runaway incidence occurs when a child younger than 18 years leaves home without permission of their parents or guardian and who stays away at least overnight. It is estimated that in a total number of 16, 82,900 children fall under runaway episode in unites states. The International Centre for Missing & Exploited Children estimated that worldwide at least 8 million children go missing each year. The longer a child or adolescent is missing, the greater the risk they face. Data on missing children put out by the home ministry at Parliament in July 2014 show that over 3.25 lakh children went missing between 2011 and 2014 at an average of nearly 1 lakh children going missing every year. Conversely, this is a miserable condition today for India especially where people traditionally believed children as they are equal to god and internationally which is a well-known country for having very good family system to deliver care and protection obligation to children. This review identified multiple family factors that influence a child to run away from home. This review concludes poor parenting practices of primary caregivers appear to play a major role in the influence of family environment on runaway behaviour of the child.

Keywords— Runaway Children; Missing Children; Family Factors;

1. Introduction

This paper reviewed the research that has investigated the relationship between family factors and runaway incidence of Children. It also examined the prominent theories to understand runaway phenomena. It was aimed to assist practitioners and policy makers who work with children and families to make evidence informed decisions.

Most of the research confirmed that children those who runaway from homes are at risk of some form of harm or maltreatment. Children runaway incidences are a worldwide multidimensional and complex issue which necessitates an immediate response primarily from family system for the best interest of children. Because generally family is the most important primary group in every society which delivers basic needs, mental or emotional needs, parental care, protection, maintenance and security for developing children. In other words family is the first and most immediate social environment where a child gets exposure to socialization process and develops its basic personality and attitude. There are very few studies attempted to understand the children's runaway phenomena based on theoretical perspectives.

2. Statistics on Missing/ Runaway Children Incidences and consequences

Runaway episode is a subtype of missing incidence. NISMART-2 studies (spanned years 1997 to 1999)has estimated that the total number of 16, 82,900 children fall under runaway episode in unites states(U.S. Department of Justice, 2002).ICMEC estimated that worldwide at least 8 million children go missing each year. In the United Kingdom, over 25% of children who left their home experience some form of abuse during their period on the street. In the United States, the National Center for Missing & Exploited Children estimates that 1 in 7 reported endangered runaways are likely victims of child sex trafficking. The longer a child or adolescent is missing, the greater the risk they face (The International Centre for Missing & Exploited Children (ICMEC), 2015).

Evidently even today a large number of children go missing from family homes in India .Data on missing children put out by the home ministry at Parliament in July 2014 show that over 3.25 lakh children went missing between 2011 and 2014 (till June) at an average of nearly 1 lakh children going missing every year. National Crime Records Bureau (NCRB) of India in fact interprets; *a child*

goes missing every eight minutes. More worryingly, 55% per cent of those missing are girls and 45% of all missing children have remained untraceable as yet raising fears of them having been either killed or pushed into begging or prostitution rackets (Times of India, 2014). In Karnataka state a total number of 3,602 children (Both boys and Girls) reported missing to police authorities in the year 2014 alone (State Crime Record Bureau (SCRB), 2015). Conversely, this is a miserable condition for India today. Because traditionally people in India believe children as they are equal to god and internationally which is a well-known country for having very good family system to deliver care and protection obligation to children.

3. Terminology

For consistency and clarity the current paper defines key concepts as follows:

- "A Child"- United nation convention on the rights of the child defines 'a child' means every human being below the age of eighteen years.
- "Runaways"-A runaway incident occurs when a child younger than 18 years leaves home without knowledge and permission of their parents or guardian and who stays away at least overnight (U.S. Department of Justice, 2002).
- "Parents":the term 'parents' refers to mother, father, guardian or other caregiver who look after children in a family unit.
- "Family" – Allen, Fine, & Demo's study (David R. Shaffer, 2010) defines a family is "two or more persons related by birth, marriage, adoption, or choice" who have emotional ties and responsibilities to each other.
- "Family factors" – In this paper the term family factors is used as an umbrella term to capture sub-factors within family environment that influences child's behavior as mentioned below:
  - ➢ Family Pattern– For example, joint families, Nuclear families, Reconstituted families, Adoptive families, and young parent families.
  - ➢ Family Structure- For example, families with Dual Parent, Single parent, Step parent, and Cohabiting families.
  - ➢ Family relationships – For example, Relationships between Husband and wife, parent and children, Individual and siblings, Individual and other relatives.
  - ➢ Changes in Family relationships – For example, Death of a spouse or sibling, parent's separation, divorce, remarriage, and temporary absence.
  - ➢ Roles of family members: For example role of Grandparent, mother, father, sibling, relatives and head of the family.

- ➢ Parental attitude: For example, over protectiveness, permissiveness, rejection, acceptance, domination, and parental ambitions.
- ➢ Parenting practices: For example, Involvement, authoritarian, permissive or democratic, Poor Monitoring or Supervision, and Discipline Practices.
- ➢ Family social status: For example: Social class, economic condition, Education level of Parents, Occupation of family members and family Income.

The current paper is divided into two main sections as mentioned below:

- An outline of what prominent theories can explain about underlying factors within family environment that influences the child to run away from home.
- An overview of the recent research works from India and internationally, that has explored the relationship between family factors and runaway incidence of Children.

4. Review of Prominent Theories

There are multiple broad theories which explain the relationships between family environment and children behaviour. This section summarizes most relevant theories which clarify or hints underlying factors within family environment that influence a child to run away from home.

A. The psychoanalytic perspectives

Freud's Stages of Psychosexual Development: Since many years psychoanalysts stressed the importance of early family experiences on children's attitudes and behavior. According to Sigmund Freud, the ways in which parents manage the sexual and aggressive urges in the first few years of their child's life play a major role in shaping their children's personalities. In other words Freud's Stages of Psychosexual Development describe specifically during '*anal stage of a child*' (1-3 years) toilet training produces major conflicts between child and parents. Children who are punished for toilet accident may become inhibited, messy or wasteful. The emotional climate that parents create can have lasting effects on child (David R. Shaffer, 2010).

Erikson's Theory of Psychosocial Development: Erikson's work (As cited in David R. Shaffer, 2010) stressed that children are active, curious explorers who seek to adapt to their environments, rather than passive reactors to biological urges who are molded by their parents. Erikson's psychosocial stages of Development emphasize during '*Trust versus mistrust*' phase infant (birth to 1 year) must learn to trust other to care for their basic needs, if care givers seems rejecting and inconsistent

the infant may view the world as dangerous place filled with un-trust worthy and unreliable people. During '*Autonomy versus shame' and doubt* phase the children (1-3 years) must learn to be independent to feed, dress and be hygiene themselves. Failure to achieve these things may force the child to doubt his or her own abilities and feel ashamed. During '*Initiative versus guiltphase'* children attempt to activities that are beyond their capacities to handle, these lead to conflict with parents and other family members. This may make child feel guilty. Therefore in family setup parents are the key social agents to influence the development of child.

B. The Learning Perspectives

Watson's Behaviourism: John B. Watson (As cited in David R. Shaffer, 2010) believed that children have no inborn tendencies; how they turn out depends entirely on their rearing environments and the ways in which their parents and other significant people in their lives treat them. Development is viewed as a continuous process of behavioural change that is shaped by a person's unique environment and may differ dramatically from person to person. Watson's belief was that children are shaped by their environments carried a stern message for parents, means they were largely responsible for what their children would become.

Skinner's Operant Learning Theory: B.F. Skinner (As cited in David R. Shaffer, 2010) argued that both animals and humans repeat acts that lead to favourable outcomes and suppresses those that lead to unfavourable outcomes. Skinner's claims that development of human or animal depends on '*external stimuli'* (reinforcers and punishers) rather than internal forces such as instincts, drives, or biological maturation. Skinner believed any action that increases the likelihood of a response is called '*reinforcers' (Stimulus or event)*. For instance, praise to child from parents serve as '*Positive reinforcer'* (pleasant) and shouting at child by parents serve as '*negative reinforcer'* (painful).'*Punishers' (Stimulus or event)* are consequences that suppress a response and decrease the likelihood that it will recur, and again, they can be positive, as when something unpleasant is given to the individual, or negative, as when something pleasant is taken away from the individual. Responses followed by punishers tend not to be repeated. '*Omission of reinforcement or omission training '*is meant to decrease the likelihood of the response that leads to the removal of positive reinforcement. For example, parents turning of the television set (positive reinforcer) and sending a child to his/ her room following some behaviour.

Escape learning and Skinner's Theory: '*Escape learning'* is another best example of instrumental conditioning based on negative reinforcement. In this laboratory experiment when the shock comes on, the rat will move around and eventually find its way into the 'safe' compartment. In other words rat learns to make the response that terminates the noxious (painful) shock stimulus. '*Avoidance Learning'* also another demonstration conducted with a rat using buzzer and electric shock in a chamber, here rat learns to avoid a noxious stimulus (the shock) by the response.

Bandura's Social Cognitive Theory: Albert Bandura (As cited in David R. Shaffer, 2010)argues those human beings are cognitive beings means active information processors—who, unlike animals, think about the relationships between their behaviour and its consequences. They are often more affected by what they believe will happen than by what they actually experience. Bandura emphasizes '*observational learning'* as a central developmental process. Such learning results from observing the behaviour of other people (Called models). Bandura claimed children and adolescents are active, thinking beings who contribute in many ways to their own development and continually learn both desirable and undesirable behaviours by observation. Bandura's concept of '*reciprocal determinism'* suggests that children are actively involved in shaping the very environments that will influence their growth and development.

C. The Cognitive-Developmental Perspective

Piaget's View of Intelligence: Piaget defined (As cited in David R. Shaffer, 2010) intelligence as a basic life process that helps an organism adapt to its environment. By adapting, means that the organism (human being) is able to cope with the demands of its immediate situation. Piaget claim as children mature, they acquire ever more complex "cognitive structures" that aid them in adapting to their environments. Means it is an organized pattern of thought or action that is used by human beings to cope with or explain some aspect of experience. Piaget believes children actively construct new understandings of the world based on their own experiences. Piaget's Stages of Cognitive Development describes during '*concrete operation stage'* children (age of 7-12 years) acquire and use cognitive operations, they understand basic properties of and relations among objects and events in everyday world. During '*formal operations stage'* (age11 and beyond) adolescents' cognitive operations are reorganized in the way that permits them to consider many possible solutions to a problem and to pick the correct answer.

D. The Ecological System Perspective

Bronfenbrenner's Contexts for Development: UrieBronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory (As cited in David R. Shaffer, 2010) provides a detailed analysis of environmental influences. He explains the developing person is said to be at the center of and embedded in several environmental systems, ranging from immediate settings such as the family to more remote contexts such as

the broader culture. Each of these systems is thought to interact with the others and with the individual to influence development in important ways. Bronfenbrenner's theory considers many different levels and types of environmental effects that might influence a child's development. These levels are 5 levels are called as '*Micro system*', '*Meso-system*', '*exo-system*', '*macro-system*' and '*Chronosystem*'

Family and ecological system perspective:"Systems" approach—one that is similar to Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory(As cited in David R. Shaffer, 2010). The systems approach recognizes that parents influence their children. But it also stresses that (1) children influence the behaviour and childrearing practices of their parents, and (2) that families are complex social systems—that is, networks of reciprocal relationships and alliances (the micro system) that are constantly evolving (the chronosystem) and are greatly affected by community (the exosystem) and cultural influences (the macro system). Families are not only complex social systems, but they are dynamic, or changing, systems as well. Klein and White's study (As cited in David R. Shaffer, 2010) consider that every family member is a developing individual and that relationships between husband and wife, parent and child, and sibling and sibling will also change in ways that can influence the development of each family member. Many such changes are normal developmental changes, as when parents allow toddlers to do more things on their own as a means of encouraging autonomy and the development of individual initiative. Yet, a host of unplanned or unforeseen changes (such as the death of a sibling or the souring of the husband–wife relationship) can greatly affect family interactions and children's development. So the family is not only a system in which developmental change takes place; its dynamics also change with development of its members.

5. Review of Research on Children Run away from Home

This section presents overview on empirical research that has explored the relationship between family factors and runaway incidence of children.

A Malaysian study examined 104 Running Away/ missing children aged 12 years and below whose cases have been reported to the Royal Malaysian Police in 2009 and 2010. This study considered family as one of the push factors. Findings shows most of the children were staying with both parents (23%) followed by staying with single mother (13%). Family factors such as due to family conflict (24 cases), and parents' divorce (17 cases) seemed to be the main reason for children go missing/ running away. Lack of compassion among family members (15 cases), Poverty within families -financial issues (11 cases), and Physical and emotional abuse from parents (10 cases) are the other family factors in rank (Alavi, Nen, Mohamad, Sarnon, Ibrahim, & Hoesni, 2014).

A socio-legal study was conducted in Gujarat on the issue of missing children with the sample of 188 children below the age of 18 years. In which 40% of children belong to runaway subtype. Study result shows that most of their parents are daily wagers (46.81%) followed by employed (34%), highest percentage of children were staying with two parents families (55%) and rest of them with single parents who had marital issue i.e. separation, divorce or death of spouse (45%). General level of adjustment in the family of children was under problem (more than 50%). Most of them went missing (86%) due to family conflict (Mao, 2012).

A research on causes and effects of runaway children was conducted in Baluchistan (Pakistan). The study sample size was total 28 children aged below 17 years. Findings show highest number runaway episode found in the family having 6-8 members, followed 10-20 members. With regard to the family pattern most of the children were from 'joint family' (89.3%) followed by 'nuclear family' (10.7%). More number of children run away from home due to the punishment both at home and school followed by educational compulsion. Strict behaviour towards the child, loose supervision over the child and continuous punishment to the child are other reasons (Achakzai, 2011).

A small scale research on the prevalence of running away from home among prostituted children in Malaysia revealed reasons for running away from home. Results shows the majority of these young women ran away from home because they felt depressed with their family situation (28.3%) and influenced by friends or boyfriends (28.3%). Rest of the children faced problems with their mothers/ stepmothers (22.6%), fathers/ stepfathers (9.4%) and fights with brothers or sisters (11.3%) (Lukman, 2009) .

A study conducted in United States comprising national sample of runaway/ homeless female adolescence (N = 951 sample) averaged nearly 17 years of age reported a substantial proportion of parental abuse. To specify 33.2% reported being physically abused by their fathers or mothers, and 11% reported being sexually abused by their fathers (Thompson, Bender, Lewis, & Watkins, 2008)

A National Longitudinal Survey research of United States examined predictors of running away among a diverse sample of housed adolescents ages 12 through 13. This research began with a sample size of 1,690 youth. The study result revealed nearly 11% of the youth indicated experiencing moderately harsh punishment such as parental threats, and 3% reported experiencing harsh physical punishment (Tyler & Bersani, 2008).

University of New Mexico Center on Alcoholism, Substance Abuse and Addictions has conducted a study on Perceptions of the Family Environment and Youth Behaviours among Alcohol-Abusing Runaway Adolescents and Their Primary Caretakers. Of 119 adolescents, 49 of their parents completed measures at intake. Results shows adolescents perceived a more negative family environment

than did their parents, and parents rated their youth as having more externalizing problems than did the youth themselves (Slesnick & Prestopnik, 2008).

A research was conducted to investigate reasons for children run away from home in a Child Observation Home to which street children from all over Delhi are brought. A total number of 400 boys were studied, in which 89.2% children were run away from home and 9.8 % children are not runaways. Results on family aspects revealed that both groups of children were from poor families with lack of basic amenities. A higher number of children had no parent earnings. Many of them are from joint families. Boys with step parents and/or those residing with guardian are more likely to runaway. A history of physical abuse within the family was higher in the 'Runaway' group. Other reasons are desire for economic independence, probably a reflection of the deprived families they belonged to (Tiwari, Gulati, Sethi, & Mehra, 2002).

6. Conclusion

This paper has reviewed both prominent theories on children's behaviour and empirical research on runaway children. It has confirmed that here are multiple family factors that influence a child to run away from home such as, *Family Pattern, Family Structure, Family relationships, Changes in Family relationships, Roles of family members, Parental attitude, Parenting practices and Family social status*. Importantly most of the research finding agrees with the explanations of aforesaid theories. In terms of focus of the current paper '*poor parenting practices'* appears to play a major role in influence of family environment on runaway behaviour of the child. This review suggests practitioners and policy makers need to focus more on family factors while addressing the issues of runaway incidence of children. Further research effort is needed to explore the factors that may risk and mediate the relationship between family environment and runaway behaviour of children.

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