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Youth housing crises: Running away, health and gender

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Background: This study examined the relation between running away from home and health, as a function of gender, among youth in British Columbia, Canada. It also compared the health-related experiences of runaway male, female, and transgender youth, including self-rated health; missing out on needed services; barriers to accessing health care; and whom youth turned to for support and found helpful.

Method: This study involved secondary data analysis of the 2013 BC Adolescent Health Survey, a population-based survey for youth in grades 7-12 in mainstream schools across the province (n=29,832). The statistical effect of running away from home on health was analyzed using logistic regression.

Findings: Runaway youth of all genders faced health inequities compared to youth who had not run away, and this relation was exacerbated among female and trans youth. For example, self reported general health and mental health as well as access to medical and mental health services were significantly poorer among runaway youth, and especially so among trans and female youth. While trans youth were more likely to approach people for help they were less likely to find the support helpful.

Conclusion: Results highlight the severity of health outcomes among runaway youth. They also underscore the importance of health services being gender sensitive and fostering a sense of safety, to increase the likelihood that youth of all genders access needed services and benefit from them. This study sheds light on who runaway youth turn to for help and can guide policy makers on engaging key stakeholders in runaway youth health.