

PARADE MAGAZINE

Nobody's Children

September 19, 1954

By Sid Ross and Ed Kiester

PARADE-Investigators criss-crossed the U.S. to assemble an authoritative, up-to-date study of our mushrooming runaway problem. Here, in the first of four articles, they present a shocking story of misery and neglect that indicts every American. How America's 300,000 runaway teen-agers get the run-around. (Reprinted)

The boy looked like a bum. His clothes were tattered and seedy. His face was grimy and wind burned. He clutched a battered canvas satchel with just a few possessions in it. There wasn't a dime in his pockets and he hadn't had a meal in a day and a half. His name was Louis Morton, he said, and he had hitchhiked from New Jersey to California. He was just 15 years old.

And how did a ragged, penniless 15-year-old travel 3000 miles without attracting someone's attention? "Oh the cops stopped me," said Louis. "Four times I think. In one town in Oklahoma, this cop looks me over and says, "I wouldn't hang around here if I was you, kid. A couple of miles farther on, a nice policeman -- I think he was a deputy -- he bought me some supper. I told him I was going to California and he said he hoped I made it all right."

"Then in a town in Texas, some cops picked me up in a police car. They said they didn't want any hitchhikers in their town, so they gave me a ride to the county line and dumped me. In Arizona, a cop gave me a ride to an all night truck stop where he said I could get a ride. The last thing he said was, "I don't want to turn you in, so don't let the next shift find you." But I couldn't get a ride that night, so I walked a mile or two down the road and slept in a ditch."

There it is, the story of a 15-year-old human baton in a relay race run by the police across the country. Always the rule is "Get rid of him, let somebody else worry about him." Nor is Louis (that is not his right name; all the names in these stories have been changed to protect the children) an unusual case. The same story could have been told by 13-year-old Carlos Gonzales of Texas, 14-year-old Nancy Warren of Colorado or 14 year old James Pennock of Louisiana. Only the places and names would have differed.

The shocking truth is that Louis, Carlos, Nancy and James are members of a vast army of wandering kids being shuttled from place to place like so many freight cars in a yard. No one knows how many there are. Many estimates run as high as 300,000 and the number is increasing annually.

It's not your problem you say? It doesn't happen to nice kids from your own town? And kids passing through -- they get a sane humane treatment and are handled in an up-to-date way? You're wrong. It happens everywhere, right under the noses of the most sympathetic citizens. PARADE found kids from every stratum of life getting the fast shuffle in every conceivable kind of community. It's happening in your town today - - but like just about everyone else, you've closed your eyes to it.

The alarming increase in runaway children is a blight on the social conscience of the United States. The Senate Juvenile Delinquency Subcommittee has been probing this matter for months. The investigation is continuing.

Every child on the loose is a potential delinquent. Penniless and friendless, they may eventually steal or rob to obtain food and the all-important ticket home. We find that when parents cannot (or will not) supply funds for the return of runaways, the children are often dumped at the city or county line and told to continue hitchhiking. Thus they are virtually driven into acts of delinquency.

The plight of these children is a challenge to parents, to enforcement and social agencies, and to lawmakers who must cope with what has been termed a social nightmare.

For the children of the road are nobody's children. To lump them all together as "runaways" is not quite accurate. Some have indeed run away from home. Others are fugitives from detention homes and reform schools. But many are on the road with parental consent. Some never really had "homes" in the first place, like the Ohio boy whose parents informed he was being held by Miami Florida police, wired back.

"Feed Billy to the sharks. Nobody wants him here!" They may be as young as 7 or as old as 18 or 19. (In most states, a youth over 16 is considered an adult, free to come and go as he pleases.) But they remain "drifters," kids without roots, looking for something -- love, adventure, a job. All too often they are finding cold, hunger, depravity and the business end of a billy club.

The methods of buck passing, ("floating," the kids call it) are many. A softhearted cop may dig into his pocket to help out with 50 cents. Some pack kids into the patrol car and whisk them off to the next county; one boy even told PARADE a policeman had instructed him in how to reach the railroad yards and hop a ride on the rails.

In some towns, the trend is toward "scare" psychology instead of floating. A drifter is picked up on a vagrancy charge and thrown into jail. Next day he is fingerprinted, photographed and released with the warning, "Now we've got a record on you. Don't ever come back this way again."

Or a hitchhiker is handed a "sundown parole" "Better not be here tonight or you'll see the inside of our jail." All these methods boil down to the same old bum's rush.

Virtually every police force in the nation stands indicted by these kids' stories. But the police who shrug "What can we do?" are not alone to blame. America has played ostrich about the problem of drifting kids for a long time. But instead of going away, the problem has grown bigger and bigger everywhere. PARADE found *not one state*, which did not, as one policeman put it, pass these kids back and forth like hot potatoes.

It's a short trip to the end of the line

Listen as a few of them tell how they were "processed" along the nation's highways.

"I was hitching to Louisville when the cops picked me up in Bardstown, KY," says 17-year-old George Rader, a Michigan boy. "They rode me out of town and told me not to come back. On the way back I had to go through there -- that's the way my lifts went. They gave me nine days in jail for vagrancy. I didn't have any money so I guess I was guilty. They didn't even get in touch with my parents."

Nancy Foster was passed from truck driver to truck driver around the Midwest "romancing (sic) with those I felt like." No observant policeman would have estimated her age at more than 14. "The state highway patrols stopped us lots of times" she says. "But they were just interested in whether the truck was overweight."

Are these "bad kids?" Undoubtedly, some are -- but that doesn't apply to the majority. California, which bears the brunt of the drifter problem, published a survey -- *Transient Youth in California in 1947* -- which was the classic study in the field until PARADE began looking into the problem. And almost every one of its conclusions stands up today. Here is one of them: The . . . lasting impression is that these are essentially good kids who can be

swayed one way or the other depending on the 'breaks' and the availability of intelligent guidance.

Essentially good kids they may be when they start on the road, but a few weeks usually brings them to the end of the line -- geographically, financially, morally. This is particularly true of girls (estimated at one-eighth to one-third of the drifter population).

"Girls away from home are quite often persuaded to do things they'd otherwise never dream of," says Sgt. John A Hampton, supervisor of the Los Angeles Police Department's Juvenile Division.

Fortunately, some wanderers turn to police for aid before that last step. In many cases, it's just in the nick of time.

"I don't know what I'd have done if I'd been hungrier." Stephen Marks, 16, of Tennessee, told Miami police after wandering around penniless for three days. A boy picked up in El Paso Texas told police that he had leaped out of a car a few minutes before when the driver propositioned him.

For others, help comes too late. "We had a 13-year-old girl picked up," says Sgt. Hampton. "She had been given four shots of heroin and held for three days in a dingy hotel. The men who had latched on to her were ready to set her up in business as a prostitute." A boy tells of a hitchhiking trip from Florida to California. "Of course, we pulled a few stickups to keep going," he says casually.

Not only their morals but their health is impaired. "We find them digging through garbage dumps for food, sleeping in parked cars, vacant lots, ditches, boats and on the beach," said one Dade County Florida officer. A PARADE reporter picked up two who hadn't eaten in a day and a half. The older ones are easy pickings for dope peddlers.

And yet a police sergeant in Barstow California, (which sees hundreds of kids a year pass through on Route 66) told a PARADE investigator, "I have the personal theory that if a kid gets out for a little while and gets thirsty and hungry, the experience is good medicine for him!"

Nor can spending a few days in a tumbledown jail be regarded a psychologically uplifting. Worse is the matter of a juvenile record, which can brand a kid for life. "The law specifically states that a kid on whom the juvenile petition has been filed has not been convicted," says Ralph B. Wright of the California Youth Authority. "But let that kid try to get bonded for a job and he'll be stopped dead. Even the armed forces won't take him while he's on probation."

When the Senate Subcommittee on Juvenile Delinquency dipped briefly into the problem last spring, Counsel Herbert Hanoach asked Dr. Martha Eliot, head of the U.S. Children's Bureau, "Do you know that in some states, in order to get these children home, they have to convict them of a Federal crime, so that the Federal Government has an excuse to send them home?" And Dr. Eliot replied, "I am told that is true."

Although PARADE found no case in which a teenager had been convicted on trumped-up charges, variations were found with the same aim -- get rid of him.

But most drifters are never arrested. Those who are, wind up in custody because they have dabbled in crime, attracted attention in some way or because hunger made them turn themselves in. The Children's Bureau estimates that 30, 000 a year pass through courts, jails and agencies. No one pretends this is anywhere near the total number.

"We patrol pretty well, but I don't think we get more than 15 per cent," said one Miami officer. No estimates are as high as 50 per cent. And Herman Stark, director of the California Youth Authority, figures that 2,000 youngsters drift into his state *every month*.

The California study found that the average wanderer was about 18, came from a city, had a high school education. Most came from broken homes -- and Stark suspects that even those seeking adventure had home troubles. More than 25 per cent hadn't funds to last a week. Surprisingly, 50 per cent came by train or bus, even a few by plane. But today most hitchhike or ride freights.

For the runaway, all roads lead to California or Florida. The lures are the much-publicized glamour, the ballyhooed climate, and the possibilities of jobs. In addition, these states are literally the end of the line for "floating." "What would we do?" asks one Los Angeles officer, "Drop them in the Pacific Ocean?"

Because of the magnetism of California and Florida, states forming natural highways to those goals get a staggering number of drifters and are often most guilty of "floating." Along Route 66 to California or Route 1 to Florida, you might count 50 young hitchhikers a day.

So vast has this army of wanderers become that it has developed its own communications system. The hitchhikers grapevine offers tips on towns to avoid, places where a bed can be had cheap, agencies that are good for a sympathetic handout.

Another tip it passes along, locations of gathering places for homosexuals, where a runaway can pick up a quick \$5 or \$10. And runaways have become such big business that Los Angeles recently had to crack down on racketeers who specialized in printing phony identification cards with faked ages for teenagers.

Is there any chance for these youngsters to grow up into worthwhile citizens? Social workers, welfare agencies and police in California think there is -- provided they get competent adult guidance, and get it soon enough.

Spelled out, this means a full investigation of the home to determine whether a child's best interests are served by returning him or placing him in a foster home (or if he is older, finding him a job) in the state where he is finally stopped. But no such far-sighted program has been put in operation largely because home states just won't cooperate.

Many Are Repeaters

To be sure, most of these teenagers want nothing more than to be left alone. "Floating" is fine with them. But their subjective wishes are only half the story. Many would gladly go back home if it did not mean returning to the same situation that drove them away.

"I'll run away from that place 100 times," one New Orleans boy told Los Angeles police and his comment is typical. Police all over the nation say a high percentage of runaways are "repeaters."

But running away is no criminal act. Rather, in the judgment of experienced social workers, it is a warning signal; something is wrong at home. It is a signal for everyone, police included, to see but too many people are blind to it.

Because of the present jungle of medieval court procedure, red tape and buck-passing, only yawning jail doors lie ahead of these youngsters.

Wright recalls a 15-year-old New York runaway whose "travelogue" included "floating" in one Pennsylvania town, an overnight jail stay in another and similar treatment in Tennessee, Oklahoma, Texas and Arizona. "Every time this happened," he says, "this boy was learning how to get by with the law. He was learning to lie, to avoid police, to look on them as enemies. He learned how to take care of himself, which included stealing autos and committing other petty crimes. By the time he wound up here, he was an expert in rolling drunks and breaking in. "If, when he was first picked up in Pennsylvania, he had been taken care of by a method that would get him home safely, we could have avoided all this."

Of course, the runaway problem has been around since the dawn of the world. It has always been every boy's inalienable right to dream of running away, and this has been a healthy sign. Many of America's pioneers were runaways.

The Problem Is Here to Stay

But the problem of a shifting mass of rootless juveniles did not become a major one until this generation. First it was written off as purely a depression problem; then it was attributed to the uncertainty of wartime and postwar society. But now state and social agencies are beginning to realize that it is still here and growing.

Several are starting to stir. The Senate Committee headed by Robert C. Hendrickson of New Jersey, alarmed by the disquieting facts it dug out last spring, has scheduled a series of full-dress hearings this fall. These may dramatize the problem and bring it to the attention of less alert states.

California has been struggling for some time to organize a modern, humane system of handling drifters. Now Pennsylvania has taken the first steps to deal with the problem. So has Iowa and The Joint Council of State Governments has become interested.

Assistant Police Chief Bob Mabry of Yuma, Arizona, probably sums it up best. "If I ignore these kids, I'm not only delinquent in my duty to them, I'm delinquent to Yuma County -- and to myself too."

NEXT WEEK

Why does a boy run away? To find out, PARADE went back to Wisconsin with Allan after he had been halted in El Paso. PARADE learned a lot -- and so did his family. Their story is an education for everyone.