Exploring the Family Factors in Influencing Problems of Runaway Children

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ABSTRACT

This study serves to explore the implication of family as a main contributor to runaway children. The respondents encompass a total of 53 children, aged between 7-12 years, listed and subsequently reported as missing in the Malaysian Royal Police. The data collection uses the qualitative method of interviews. Apart from narrative data, research findings show that dysfunctional family and parenting style are the main contributors to this particular issue. The findings also demonstrate that family economic status is also influential in contributing to this problem.

Keywords: Runaway children, families, parenting style, family dysfunction

INTRODUCTION

Malaysia, a rapidly developing country, can be considered steadfast in preserving civility and harmony amongst its citizens. Nonetheless, in its effort of transforming from a developing country to a developed nation, Malaysia has its fair share of social problems. One of issues is runaway children.

It is estimated that more than one million children run away from home every year (Sedlak et al., 2002). A report by The Royal Malaysian Police (2011) reveals that cases of missing children, below 12 years of age, have escalated. A study by Nen et al. (2012) confirms that most of the missing children are runaways and only a few are victims of kidnapping.

Researchers who have studied the factors contributing to these runaways agree that across various cultures, family seems to be the prevailing reasons children choose to run away from home (Farrow et al., 1992). Family is an important entity in a child’s life. From birth onwards, family
plays a salient role in teaching children in all aspects of life. Growing up in a family allows a child to formulate his or her self worth and personality. If a child has a loving and nurturing family, tremendous positive implications can be expected throughout his or her growth.

A study conducted by Rees and Lees (2005) also reports that internal family factors contribute significantly to cases of runaway children. The families of runaway children are often marked by chaos, parental incompetence, financial problems, alcohol abuse, physical abuse, and marital instability (Riley et al., 2004). Female teenage runaways describe their lives at home lack of affection, love and experience strained relationship with parents (Peled & Cohavi, 2009) and lack of attention (Schaffner, 1998). Usually children always describe stressors affecting family members such as child-parent conflict as an important reason for running away (Kipke et al., 1997; Whitbeck & Hoyt, 1999).

A study by Khadijah et al. (2012) also demonstrates that family is the main cause of a child running away from home. The contributing factors to adolescents running away from homes also include parent losing control, families with weak structures and individual characteristics of friends or school systems (Institut Social Malaysia, 2010). A life plagued with tribulations and abuse also cause children to run away from home (Ferguson, 2009). Authoritarian parenting which characterizes 62.86% of parents is revealed as the major factor responsible for children running away from home (Matchinda, 1999). A study by Flowers (2001) finds that 85% of children missing from home suffer from depression and 21% of them endure serious mental health disorders. Family plays such a vital role that it is deemed as the closest system to an individual (Zastrow, 2010). Hence this study will explore the family factor as a main contributor to runaways of aged 12 years and below.

**METHODOLOGY**

A qualitative research method using exploratory insight through face-to-face interview is used in this research. This method allows the children to express that family is the main reason for them running away from home. This qualitative method allows a documentation that is more systematic. The qualitative method also provides a classification and interpretation of data that is more comprehensive and conclusive in terms of reflecting the child's experience and knowledge in this research context.

**Participants**

This research involves 53 children, aged between 7-12 years, reported missing as compiled by The Royal Malaysian Police between 2009-2010. Respective parents or care providers have accompanied the children. Purposive sampling is used. Out of the 53 children, 29 are boys and the other 24 are girls. This study has been conducted in few states in Malaysia, excluding Sarawak, Negeri Sembilan and Kelantan. The four states are excluded as there is no reported.
cases of runaways or missing children during those years.

Procedure
In the early stages, shortlisted parents are contacted to acquire their approval to interview their children. Semi-structured questions are selected to give the children the freedom to answer various provoking questions. At the same time, such question structure allows the researcher to stay focused on the research objectives. Interview protocol is divided into two sections. The first section comprises of questions related to childrens’ background and that of their parents or caregivers. While, the second section, focuses on questions related to the reasons as the family being the cause of these children running away from home.

Data analysis
Qualitative data analysis is based on verbatim interviews with the children and supported by verbatim interviews with their parents or caregivers. Thematic method is used to obtain main themes to answer research questions related to family as the contributing factor to runaway children.

RESULTS
Research findings indicate 6 themes that may be related to family as the contributing factor to runaway children. Themes include conflict and divorce of parents, banished or driven away from home by parents, physical and emotional abuse, unreciprocated requests and lack of attention from parents.

Parents in Conflict
Frustrations is the main theme related to the family factor for most interviewed respondents. It is due to prolonged conflict in the household that they are involved in either directly or indirectly. Conflicts between parents cause emotional distress and anxieties. Excerpt below shows how Siti, a pseudonym, feels distressed when she witnesses a verbal engagement between her parents at home.

“Emmm...problem...distressed... like usual, when I see my parents, to look at them...mother is always fighting with father...then I feel sad...”

Arguments between parents affect the respondent emotionally. Angry and frustrated, respondent decides to run away from home.

“...then what should I do...what... my mother is always crying...I am quite sensitive...I can’t scold my mother...so I decided to run away from home...”

Respondent endures an extremely stressful situation. Pursuant to the stress, she feels that running away from home will appease her emotional state. This frustration is a high prevalence among children who run away from home due to their inability to resolve personal problems and lack of courage to consult adults or family members to help them sorting out their feelings.
Divorce

Divorce gravely affects children and it plays the main contributing factor for runaways. It causes children to be vengeful. Demographic data supports this narrative data that indicates 21% of respondents live with single parents or stepparents. Many respondents equivocally attribute their running away from home due to parental divorce. To exemplify, Rina feels very vengeful towards her father and faults him for the tribulations she faces in her life.

"From then onwards...starting from there...if possible I don’t want to be vengeful towards anyone..but I feel like this towards one particular person...for my dad..because if it wasn’t for him, all these would not have happened...”

Many children with divorced parents admit that they lack parental love from either parent. Children are unable to rationalize the reasons for their parents’ divorce. They often translate that as being underloved. As an example, the divorce of Ida’s parents causes her to live apart from her father. Hence she lacks the love of a father.

"I am definitely lacking fatherly love, as my parents are divorced, especially when I live far away in Klebang, my father and mother are separated...”

Lack of Quality Time

Parents who are pre-occupied with work to maintain their families are often seen as failing to provide desired attention and love. Many parents admit such inadequacies but also claim that it is inevitable. There are also single parents who strive to support their family in order to increase their income.

“I work at a restaurant; if I start at 6 am, and go home at 5pm, I am ok. But at night I would take OT. It depends on the tauke. He’d say, Ana (pseudonym), would you like to come back for OT at 10 tonight?”

Nevertheless, parents who are pre-occupied with work have limited time to be with their children and are prone to neglecting them. The time apportioned for work diminishes the quality time with respondent. This factor greatly influences runaways or missing children. A single parent has admitted of below scenario and reported that his child was missing when he was working.

“Hmm...the child ran away when nobody was at home. Sometimes at 7 or 8 pm I’ll be stuck in traffic jam and don’t arrive home until 9:15 or 10 pm...When I come home, the child is asleep...sometimes I don’t see her at all, as I usually leave for work at 5am.”
Driven Away from Home

Children who run away from home admit that they have been driven away from the house either consciously or unconsciously when their parents are angry at them. In this situation, it is very difficult for children to express their inner-feelings due to apprehension of their parents’ reaction. In fact, a majority of respondents have nodded and said a few words acknowledging that they have been kicked out of their homes. Research findings also show conflicting information about the frequency of children being kicked out of their homes. Most respondents admit to having thrown out of their homes more often as opposed to information divulged by parents. It shows that, at times, angry parents are not conscious of the words they use and insinuate that their child should leave home. Nevertheless, the inappropriate words and improper insinuation extremely affect children that it may cause them considering leaving homes.

Physical and Emotional Abuse

Research findings from the interviews unearth facts that some runaway children have been frequently scolded and physically abused by their parents. There are cases where parents chastise and severely scold their children. Below excerpt shows how a mother shares her sadness when she reveals that her husband always humiliates her child.

“sometimes I stay at home, I tell her no matter how much he scolds you, he loves you, he does not hate you. You try to soften his heart, she says yes, I asked papa: where are you going? He replied I am going to kill myself. Do you want to follow me? How? If I ask him if he has taken a bath, or if I tell him that your child wants to accompany you, wants to be with you, wants your affection but once you tell her that, how would you feel? I hate it when my child asks her father where he is going and he says that he wants to kill himself and asks the child to follow him. Would you follow? How is that? Once a parent says that, you just stop asking. Why would you ask further? Die...die...” (Mother).

In a more dire situation, children are abused physically. It provides an impetus for them to leave home. Below excerpt demonstrates an experience of a child who has been abused by family members.

“I fight with my family...when he (father) comes, he would slap me. What is that? I don’t know how to control my emotions. I hardly acknowledge him anymore...I am so vengeful now...I cannot think about it anymore...I don’t want to see his face anymore.”

A father of a respondent relate that his child runs away from home due to constant beating from his second wife or the step mother of the respondent.
“I divorced with the first mother...the second wife, the step-mother is always physically abusing him...that is the only thing he can remember...being beaten, being beaten...he cannot remember anything else...” (Father).

Unfulfilled Wishes

Economic hardship requires both parents to sacrifice their time in order to provide for their children. Ironically, children are not sensitive to their parents’ feelings and are often inconsiderate of the hardship that their parents have to endure. All they care about is to have their own needs fulfilled.

Researcher : You mean if you are given a computer, you wouldn’t run away?

Respondent : If I have one.

Researcher : Any other reasons?

Respondent : No, that is it. Em.. bicycle, because it is too expensive. Because the Picci or nada jaguar, 300, is quite expensive. The computer is also expensive. About 2000. But my father cannot afford to buy.

Lack of Parental Attention

Based on the interviews conducted with parents, researchers find that most parents are busy with their work that they are unaware of the type of friends their children mix with and ignorant of activities they do. When parents are asked about the whereabouts of their children and the identity of their friends, most parents are either unaware or uncertain. In light of overwhelming work, children of busy parents are left undersupervised. At the same time, parents lack control over their children. The children do not feel the necessity to return home on time as their parents do not question of their whereabouts or unaware of their routine considering they are busy working. Most children in this situation may not want to run away from home directly. However, they refuse to go home as they have more fun with their friends and assume that their parents have no objections with such behavior.

DISCUSSION

Dysfunctional Family (Divorce and Conflict)

Research findings conclude that the main reason children run away from home is dysfunctional family. Broken homes are caused by either conflict or divorce which dismantles the family unit. Weaknesses in the family structure impact a child’s decision to run away from home. In addition, previous research also shows that children who live with single parents have higher probability to run away from home compared to those...
who live with biological parents (Sanchez et al., 2006).

Findings from this research prove that conflicts in a household distress a child to the point that he or she runs away from home. Children need adults who understand what they are going through and able to take care of their welfare. Children who witness fights between parents are often traumatised and choose to avoid it. Some children even think that running away from home will stop their parents from continue fighting. In general, runaway children act irrationally and fail to manage their emotions or do not find someone to talk to. Such highly pressurized situation causes children to run away without thinking about the consequences of their actions. Children who are constantly exposed to conflicts and often witness fights are hurt emotionally. Usually they will end up with low self-esteem and susceptible to antisocial behavior, according to Siegel et al. (2006).

Parenting Styles

This research also concludes that parental style is another factor which influences a child to run away from home, as stated by McGarvey et al. (2010). Parenting styles cause many disruptions that are found in terms of familial relationship such as interruptions in affection, distrust between parents, children and other family members.

Parenting styles can be defined as efforts by parents to demonstrate their way as good and positive parents. This style is greatly influenced by family history, culture and communal values. Parental style is manifested through body language, intonation, emotions and the quality of attention (Benson & Haith, 2009). It combines emotional environment, including parents’ communication towards attitude and action of their children in their daily activities. Unsuitable parenting style will distress children. Children, subsequently will form a negative perception towards their parents and will in all probability carry this resentment into adulthood.

Parents focusing on discipline without affection, authoritarian parents, are more susceptible to having runaway children. Prolonged and continuous punishment, inappropriate strictness on the child's behavior at home and lack of parental supervision are major determinants of child runaways (Achakzai, 2011). Children who have authoritarian parents are more prone to run away from home compared to other types of parenting style (Matchinda, 1999; McGarvey et al., 2010). Physically abused children are found to have high anxiety, feel unloved, have negative thoughts and discomfort (Burnett, 1993). Authoritarian parenting style cause children to assume that parents do not care about their feelings or their needs. Hence, they seek attention from others rather than those of their family.

In some cases of this research, children are determined to run away due to constant physical or emotional abuse from their parents or caregivers. Research from Springer (2001) and Kingree et al. (2001) discover that children run away from home to escape physical abuse. Physical abuse that stems from breaking household rules
causes children to feel that their parents do not understand them. Severe and prolonged physical punishment leaves an emotional scar. Apart from that, children question their parents’ love and prefer acquiring love elsewhere by running away from home.

Children feel unsafe, assume that their parents do not support or understand their feelings when they are physically abused (Milburn et al., 2006). They feel that situations will be exacerbated if they continue to live at home, in spite of what the future holds outside of their home. Traumatised children despise abusive parents and run away from home to avoid them.

Permissive parents also have the risk of having their children running away from home. There are two types of permissive style of parenting. One is permissive indulgence and the other is permissive neglectful. Permissive indulgent parents have very little control of their children and allow them to indulge in unsupervised activities. Children are spoiled and rarely reprimanded. Parents assume that children are still young and do not need to be disciplined. Such assumptions convey wrong message to children. The children perceive that their actions are correct and acceptable. Apart from that, children also misunderstand the rationale of parents spending so much time working. Children of working parents lack supervision and control. This type of parenting style is permissive-neglectful. Due to work commitment, parents rarely have time to learn their children’s routine. As a result, children do not feel responsible or concerned enough to be home on time. At the same time, children feel underloved and neglected and choose to be close to their friends rather than their families.

Family’s Economic Standing

In addition, this research findings also show that a family’s financial standing also influences a child to run away from home. Sigelman and Rider (2012) find that poverty and dismal financial standing in a household brings negative impact on mental health to those who do not approve of parenting style; hence, affects child development and relationship quality. Parents with low economic status always limit and restrict material things (Sigelman & Rider, 2012). Hence, parents are more prone to be helpless in granting a child’s request or demand and rarely capable of materially rewarding the his or her positive behavior. According to Tyler and Bersani (2008), children from low income group are prone to running away in order to fulfill their material needs. Similar to other children, these children from low income group also have their own material needs. They feel that staying at home does not help them in fulfilling their needs. Thus, they resort to running away to have these needs fulfilled by their friends or others.

Children and teenagers of today are internet savvy. Many of their wants are technologically inclined as exemplified by the cases researched. Khadijah et al. (2012) points out that the trend among male runaway children in Malaysia are due to their interest in cyber cafes. Considering that their homes lack internet or computers, these
children look for other avenues to fulfill their needs. Children are quite egocentric that they are quite selfish about their own needs and are not considerate of the needs of others. (Windschitl et al., 2008). A child fails to consider the opinion of others or other relevant facts when he or she pays more attention to his or her own needs and desires. He or she only wants his or her needs to be fulfilled (Windschitl et al., 2008).

Efforts to fulfill children’s various demands possibly will have a psychological impact on parents. It might cause parents to become stricter and apply inconsistent disciplinary measures. The situation is exacerbated when parents have to work overtime or take additional jobs to make ends meet. Children feel that they are not given attention and underloved. These situations empower children and allows them to follow their instincts. Thus, making them extremely vulnerable and easily influenced by friends. For some reasons, running away from home empowers them and gives them unbridled freedom. They have the freedom to do whatever they desire with their friends. No more being restricted as compared to staying at home.

**Policy Implication**

A policy related to family development such as National Social Policy must be fully utilized. It shall ensure the availability of a support system to assist families to function at optimal level in a socially controlled system. The family must strive and be prepared to provide support to these children. Therefore, programs propagating appropriate parenting styles to suit the children’s characters must be introduced and implemented. Apart from that, households must be immersed with values and religion must be allowed to take a central role in the family. In addition, households must inculcate moral values and religion as the basic foundation in the family. Activities related to technologies must be established in the outskirts of cities and in lower-economic residence to allow those under-privileged children to enjoy the same internet-related facilities.

**CONCLUSION**

All factors related to family must be discussed and addressed as a family is one of the causes of children to run away. A family unit is crucial to the cognitive, moral and emotional development of a child. It is imperative that a child receives familial love and care from birth to ensure that he or she is well taken care of and provided with positive social education. It shall minimize the influence effect of external factors to the child. Realistic intervention must be provided to children and parents involved

**REFERENCES**


