

# THE RUNAWAYS

## Life on the Street

By Brian D

*There was a dip in the 2002 numbers, but the number of runaways has been growing since 1994. The mass majority of missing children are runaways--in 2002, of the 66,532 children reported missing, 52,390 were runaways.*



Two police cruisers drive slowly past a spikehaired punk-rocker named Harley, eyeing the diminutive teen as he camps out on the steps of a store on St. Catherine Street in Montreal. The cops keep on driving, but not before Harley shoots them an icy glare. A street kid for three years, the 18-year-old Harley has had his share of problems with the law and wants to make sure he doesn't end up in the back of another police cruiser. Community workers say that every year as the weather gets warmer across Canada, the streets swell with teen runaways and wanderers.

RCMP statistics show that 52,390 police reports were filed on Canadian runaways under the age of 18 in 2002. The data didn't include young people whose parents or guardians did not file a missing children's report.

Harley, who wouldn't give his real name, fled Vancouver after dropping out of Grade 9, leaving behind abusive parents and a youth criminal record.

"I don't really talk to my parents," said the blondhaired teen, who sports the dark clothes and army boots that are trademarks of punk culture. His plans are to keep moving.

"I'll just travel around, head out east, find out what everything else is like."

A hitchhiking tour through Western Canada and Ontario ended recently when Harley settled temporarily in Montreal because he "heard it was the party city."

He has enjoyed a few punk concerts, but he has spent just as much time dodging the police and simply trying to survive. Harley complains the cops are trying to "clean up" downtown Montreal by pushing homeless people onto side streets. "Cops are really hell in Montreal," he said, frowning. Police "bug you every chance they get—they've got to meet their quota or whatever."

The police aren't his only problem—he has been jumped by attackers twice in the last few weeks. But Harley has decided not to pack a weapon to protect himself. "I don't carry weapons," he said. "Just another reason for the cops to arrest you."

Young Canadians flee from home for a variety of reasons, including abusive, turbulent home lives. Some, like Harley, have been abused, while others simply don't fit in at school or in their small, conservative hometowns. Susan Miner, executive director of Street Outreach Services in Toronto, says runaways are hit with a double whammy: they must deal with all of the problems of being homeless as well as the normal stresses of being a teenager.

"They are going through adolescence and they're going through a number of issues," said Miner, whose agency finds jobs and housing for displaced youths.

"They come downtown, they get mixed in with a crowd that starts doing drugs. A lot of kids already have histories of difficulty in their own communities and sometimes in running to the streets, they're running right to the same situations they left."

Miner said city officials in Toronto and the Ontario government aren't putting enough money into social services to help runaways and other street kids. Some city officials, she said, would rather lock them up than help them. Toronto has created a 12-member police squad to deal with young street people. "They are arresting youth, they are charging them, they are moving them to other areas, which doesn't eliminate the problem," said Miner. She said many of the teens have mental health issues or borderline IQs.

Many street kids also find themselves drawn into the sex trade, working as prostitutes or strippers to earn money for food, shelter and drugs. Sandy Cooke, executive director of the Covenant House youth shelter in Vancouver, said the teenage sex trade is rampant across Canada. "Every major community has children being bought and sold for sex, either on the street or behind closed doors," said Cooke, adding that Quebec is the only province that's cracking down on teenage prostitution. "To me, that's a national shame."

Cooke said the federal government is partly to blame, because it broke a commitment to adopt a national strategy on sexually exploited children by 2000. He would like to see a national youth advocate named to ensure young people have a voice in Ottawa's corridors of power. But politics are far from Harley's mind, as are the thoughts of cars, careers and college that are filling the minds of others his age. His education has moved to the road; he has visited more Canadian cities in three years than most people do in a lifetime. He's already seen a hitchhiker's view of British Columbia, Alberta, Saskatchewan and Manitoba and he plans to eventually visit New Brunswick and Nova Scotia.

Asked if he ever thinks about leaving the streets, Harley said there's no light at the end of his tunnel. "I'm pretty much stuck in my situation because I can't go back to school, can't work," said Harley, blaming his criminal record. "I don't think I'm ever going to be able to get that far in life."

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- Most missing children are runaways, and most runaways do it repeatedly.
  - Many teens who live on the street have never even been reported to police as missing.
  - Most teens run away to escape intolerable conditions at home. Drug and alcohol abuse is often present.

- Research suggests runaways feel neglected and unwanted, have emotional and psychological problems and have difficulty with school and relationships.
- Teens do not usually run away for the fun of it. They will return home to see if it has changed and usually it has not so they leave again. This happens repeatedly and they become entrenched in street life, which exposes them to drugs, prostitution, crime and other dangers
- Teen runaways are more likely to get arrested than other teens.

**Kids Help Line: 1-800-668-6868, <http://kidshelp.sympatico.ca/en/> /**

**Kids In Trouble: <http://www.geocities.com/EnchantedForest/2910/main.html> /**

**Teen Mental and Physical Abuse: <http://www.maxpages.com/angelteen/>**

**Health Canada's 'Information on Emotional and Physical Abuse' Page:**  
<http://www.hcsc.gc.ca/hppb/familyviolence/html/emotioneng.html>