Runaway Hit

An HIV prevention program searches for runaway youth.

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Half of new HIV cases occur in people under 25, and runaway youth are at even greater risk. Now, for the first time, researchers are testing a counseling technique to help protect runaways from behaviors that can lead to HIV.

Developed at the Wake Forest University School of Medicine, in North Carolina, the positive-reinforcement strategy is called Strengths-Based Case Management. Previously used to help drug addicts and people with mental illness, it aims to help runaway youth avoid high-risk sex and substance abuse.

Dr. Liz Arnold, an assistant professor in the department of psychiatry and behavioral medicine, helmed the pilot study. “For those who may not have [positive] adult role models in their lives, it’s really important to provide those connections and support,” Arnold says.

The pilot study, unveiled this past December at the National HIV Prevention Conference in Atlanta, examined 21 youths between the ages of 13 and 15 from Forsyth County, North Carolina. Each teen—who had run away from home one to three times—was assigned to a trained adult peer counselor who met with them one-on-one in an out-of-office setting.

The initial results were promising. Now Arnold and her team will examine how the approach can be applied in real-world settings. For that, they will take to the streets.

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