It's Called "Going Out to Play": A Video Diary Study of Hmong Girls' Perspectives on Running Away

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Abstract

How do Hmong immigrant adolescent girls' decide to run away, return home, leave again, or stay home? Video diaries by 11 sexually-exploited runaway Hmong girls, age 13–16, revealed four themes: "Fighting restrictions," resisting family cultural expectations and desires to be like other American teens; "Not Running Away, Going Out to Play," which captured impulsive decision-making; "Unrestrained Partying" described runaway experiences but minimized dangers they faced; and "Trying to Change," returning home because of family bonds and wanting to "be someone good." Given their limited ability to anticipate risks, interventions should focus on runaway prevention initiatives for Hmong families and teens.

Health care for adolescents in many countries includes the care of homeless and runaway teens, who are vulnerable to a number of health risks while away from home, including sexual exploitation or sexual assault. Over one million teens run away from home each year in the United States (U.S.) (Hammer, Finkelhor, & Sedlak, 2002); in 2007 in the Midwestern state of Minnesota, almost 15% of girls in grade 9 (around age 14) reported running away from home in the past year (Saewyc & Edinburgh, 2010). Very few studies of runaways include immigrant or refugee adolescents, yet in our clinical and community intervention for sexually exploited young runaway girls (Edinburgh & Saewyc, 2009) we found a disproportionate number of Hmong girls being referred to the service, and as we worked with them, we realized there seem to be distinct differences in their runaway patterns compared to other similar age adolescents. For example, a commonly reported characteristic of runaway teens is that they run to escape a history of severe intra-familial abuse or neglect (Chen, Tyler, Whitbeck & Hoyt, 2004; Yoder, Whitbeck, & Hoyt, 2004); however, unlike other adolescent ethnic groups in Minnesota, Hmong girls who run away are significantly less likely to report exposure to domestic violence or a history of prior intra-familial sexual

abuse (Edinburgh, Saewyc, Thao & Levitt, 2006). Other important yet unknown influences might be affecting these teens' decisions to run away from home, and the circumstances under which they return. What is learned from their shared decisions and experiences could be relevant for professionals working with second generation immigrant youth who are exhibiting similar short-term runaway patterns and risky behaviors.

Once young people have run away, their risks for sexual violence exposure are high, especially among very young runaways (Finkelhor, Ormrod, & Turner, 2007; Hammer et al., 2002). Given the prevalence of sexual exploitation and sexual assault among Hmong adolescent girls running away, yet a lack of the common antecedents to leaving home that are found among other groups, we need to explore the factors that could be contributing to their decisions to run away (Edinburgh, et al., 2006). Gaining insights regarding these influences might inform interventions to prevent adolescent girls' runaway behaviors and related risks, including sexual assaults.

BACKGROUND

Running Away and Sexual Assault among Hmong Adolescent Girls

The dangers to youth who have run away and are persistently street-involved are well documented internationally, and include a high risk of being exposed to illicit drugs, sexually transmitted infections, unintended pregnancy, depression, suicide attempts, and sexual exploitation (Cauce et al., 2000; Marshall et al., 2009; Milburn, Rotheram-Borus, Rice, Mallett & Rosenthal, 2006). However, the pattern of repeated short-term running away, defined as leaving home multiple times and staying with people the family does not know, in short periods of one to fourteen days, is less known. Youth who run away for one to three days but still return home might be considered at lower risk than long-term runaways, but for those who run repeatedly, the amount of time they are away from home can add up over the course of a year, and can increase health risks such as early sexual onset (Thrane & Chen, 2010). Auerswald and Eyre (2002) have described the life cycles of homeless youth, but this research has not focused specifically on the patterns of leaving and returning home for short-term runaways, which appears to be a common pattern among Hmong teens in particular (Edinburgh & Saewyc, 2009). Without understanding the motivations for repeated short-term runaway episodes, clinicians might miss an important opportunity to intervene before adolescents experience the significant negative health outcomes of street-entrenched youth (Saewyc & Edinburgh, 2010; Yoder, Whitbeck & Hoyt, 2004).

Hmong girls in the U.S. who have run away appear to be more likely to experience sexual exploitation and severe sexual assaults, such as gang rape, than their peers in other ethnic groups (Edinburgh, et al., 2006). Over three out of four (77%) runaway Hmong girls treated in an urban child abuse clinical setting reported being sexually assaulted by gang members, either via gang rape or prostitution; the majority of these girls reported five or more sexual assault episodes. The number of Hmong gangs in Minnesota and their level of criminal activity has increased in severity (Straka, 2003), with rape being incorporated into Hmong gang culture and its operational structure. Since 1997, authorities have documented that gang initiations can involve bringing a girl, who believes she is attending a party, to be raped by one person or "lined up" and raped by a group of men (Scott, 2002; Straka, 2003). The

results of such trauma include high rates of sexually transmitted infections; in our earlier study of runaways referred to the child abuse clinic, more than one in three Hmong runaway girls tested positive for Chlamydia (Edinburgh, et al., 2006).

Cultural Background of the Hmong

The Hmong are an Asian ethnic, tribal group from the mountainous regions of Southeast Asia. Like most clan-based or tribal communities, the number of Hmong in the world has been difficult to estimate until recently (Lemoine, 2005). China has been identified by Hmong people as having the largest population in a single country (Kundstater, 1996); the 1990 Chinese census had a category identifying ethnic or aboriginal Chinese, and 2.56 million people identified as Miao speaking (Hmong speaking). In 1995, the number of Hmong people in Laos was estimated at 320,000, a Vietnam census in 1999 estimated there were 787,600 Hmong people in that country, and the official Hmong population in Thailand is between 118,000 to 150,000 (Quang, 2004). However, there has been a significant migration of Hmong people out of Asia since the end of the Vietnam Conflict, because they collaborated with the U.S. CIA, and experienced persecution in Cambodia and Laos, fleeing to refugee camps in countries like Thailand (Grigoleit, 2006). In the mid-1980s, the U.S. agreed to accept Hmong refugees, and the 2000 Census in the U.S. recorded 186,310 Hmong, with an increase of 97% in the 1990–2000 decade. Some Hmong consider the Hmong population to be undercounted in the U.S. (Pfeifer & Lee, 2003).

Although the first Hmong were granted asylum in the U.S. in the mid-1980's, new waves of Hmong have arrived to the U.S. from Thai refugee camps as recently as 2004 and 2005. The Hmong have also migrated to Canada, Australia, French Guyana, France, and Argentina (Lemoine, 2005). In the U.S., the majority of the Hmong have settled in California, Minnesota, North Carolina and Wisconsin. St. Paul, the capitol of Minnesota, has the largest urban population of Hmong in the U.S. (Carlson, 2002).

In Hmong communities in Asia, women and men had defined cultural roles that were important for survival (Scott, 2002). Hmong women did not traditionally have the same opportunities as men. The family structures gave men the responsibility of attending clan meetings, learning religious rituals, and obtaining an education. Hmong women were expected to marry as young adolescents, moving directly from childhood to the responsibilities of adulthood. They were expected to raise and care for children, and to attend to the needs of their husband and home. Their value to the community was based on their ability to fulfill these roles (Tapp, Michaud, Culas, & Lee, 2004).

The Hmong in the U.S. are disproportionately young, with an estimated 60% of their population in St. Paul being under sixteen years of age. Various degrees of acculturation exist in the Hmong adult population in the U.S., but the majority of their children have been born in the U.S. Although American society has influenced immigrant Hmong culture, perspectives regarding gender roles have not changed in many families, in part because the Hmong are a strongly clan-based cultural system, emphasizing clan over country, and valuing a level of cultural separatism in all the countries where they reside (Tapp et al., 2004). Hmong adolescents often find the traditional values and parenting practices of their families to be highly restrictive (Xiong, Detzner, & Cleveland, 2005). This can contribute to

cultural conflict as Hmong teens navigate adolescence between two distinct cultural systems, potentially compounding parent-adolescent conflicts experienced during this developmental period.

Hmong adolescent females who have aspirations for college and careers may struggle with their family's traditional Hmong expectations of early marriage and childbearing (Yang, 2001; Xiong, Detzner & Cleveland, 2005). Arguments between parents and adolescents are not expected in Hmong traditional families. Parents are sensitive to the development of these behaviors, and believe any conflicts between them and their child reflect poorly on them; such conflicts are not viewed as an expected developmental behavior as an adolescent becomes independent from their family (McInnis, Petracchi, & Morgenbesser, 1990).

Further, Hmong parents desire their children to be obedient and do well in school. Conflict related to adolescents' school difficulties is a serious concern (Xiong, Tuicomepee, & Rettig, 2008), and Hmong parents are also concerned when their teens develop friendships with "delinquent" peers. Xiong and colleagues found that the problem behaviors of delinquent peer affiliation, gang involvement, truancy, and poor school performance explained some of the variance in the frequency and intensity of parent-adolescent conflicts. However, in a focus group study among adolescents (Xiong, Detzner, & Cleveland, 2005), they also noted that adolescent perceptions of how their parents treat them were important in understanding reported difficulties with intergenerational relationships. These conflicts with parents might be a reason for the patterns of short-term running away among Hmong girls. Theoretically, it is possible the compounded intra-familial conflict experienced between first and subsequent immigrant generations is contributing to Hmong girls' runaway trends; however, we have not observed these patterns among Latino or Ethiopian immigrant youth in our clinical practice, where runaways are more likely to have experienced actual physical and sexual abuse from families, rather than merely verbal conflict. Familial sexual and physical abuse has been shown to be a common reason for running away and street involvement in other studies, including among Latino youth (Rew, Taylor-Seehafer & Fitzgerald, 2001), but Hmong runaway girls have been less likely than runaway girls in the general population to report incest or family violence (Edinburgh, et al., 2006; Saewyc & Edinburgh, 2010).

Given running away increases the risk of sexual assault, especially for younger runaways, cultural responses to sexual violence are also an important consideration in health care for young runaways. Sexual assault in the Hmong culture is not well described, but forced sex with an unmarried girl is perceived as rape (Scott, 2002). However, if the assailant denies that rape occurred, he is likely to be believed by the Hmong elders and the broader community (Tapp, et al., 2004). If the girl maintains her stance that she has been sexually assaulted, money may pass to the girl's family from the assailant (Goldstein, 1986; Tapp, et al., 2004), because the assault is an offense against the family and clan, and because she has been devalued for marriage. These cultural patterns may make it difficult for a sexually assaulted adolescent Hmong runaway girl to return home and disclose the abuse.

Effects of Sexual Assault on Hmong Adolescent Girls

It is well documented that sexual assault is an antecedent to a variety of health challenges in adolescence and adulthood (DeBellis, 2001; Chartier, Walker & Naimark, 2009; Kendall-

Tackett, 2002). The known mental health effects of sexual abuse for adolescent girls include physiological changes to the brain, as well as depression, somatic complaints, post-traumatic stress disorder, poor self-esteem, eating disorders, anxiety, self-harm, and suicidality (DeBellis, 2001). Other effects of sexual abuse history include poor school performance, substance abuse problems, violence, and running away (Kendall-Tackett, 2002; Wells, Hillemeier, Bai, & Belue, 2009). Adolescents who have been sexually abused are also two to four times more likely than non-sexually abused students to be involved in risky sexual behaviors, including substance use with sex, multiple partners, lack of condom use or contraceptives, and teen pregnancy (Saewyc, Magee, & Pettingell, 2004).

Most studies about the effects of sexual abuse have been focused primarily on Caucasian samples in Western societies. There has been only one study in which the sequelae of sexual assault and abuse among Hmong teens has been identified (Edinburgh, et al., 2006), and only one other study focused more broadly on Asian American teens (Rao, DiClemente, & Ponton, 1992). In their study, Rao and colleagues found Asian Americans reported similar patterns of the most frequent post-abuse symptoms as other ethnic groups, but they were more likely to experience suicidal ideation and attempts, and less likely to report externalizing risk behaviors such as running away and substance abuse. This finding is inconsistent with observed externalizing risk behaviors among Hmong adolescent girls (Edinburgh, et al., 2006), including running away, although more than a decade of time between the two studies may help explain the differences in findings.

As a Southeast Asian refugee group now living within a Western society, the Hmong adolescents' experiences of running away and sexual assault in Minnesota might have similarities with experiences of young Asian refugees in other countries, or experiences of second and third generation adolescents. However, an important missing perspective to help guide health care of vulnerable young runaways is that of the runaway girls themselves. To date, studies have not included the perspectives of Hmong adolescent girls about what influences their decisions to run away and to return home. Findings may help clarify Hmong girls' short-term runaway patterns and provide potential insights and explanations relevant to other girls engaged in short-term runaway risk behaviors.

PURPOSE

These influences were explored qualitatively with Hmong adolescent girls who had run away from home, been sexually assaulted, and were treated at an urban children's hospital in the Midwestern U.S. Our aims were to:

1. Identify the self-perceived influences on the Hmong adolescent girl's decision to run away, return home, or stay home, and
2. Describe the activities and risks engaged in while a Hmong adolescent girl is on the run.

METHODS

Design

Descriptive video diaries were collected from Hmong adolescent girls who had run away and also disclosed extra-familial sexual abuse, among girls referred to a nurse-led intervention program for sexually assaulted young runaways (Edinburgh & Saewyc, 2009). This study occurred in a hospital-based Child Advocacy Center (CAC) in a Mid-western U.S. city with a large Hmong population; the CAC assesses teens who may have been sexually assaulted.

Participants

Eligible participants were adolescent Hmong females between 13 and 16 years of age who were enrolled in the Runaway Intervention Program (RIP), specifically those who had run away more than once, and reported experiencing sexual assault or sexual exploitation. Patients were excluded from the study protocol if they were incarcerated, were placed in foster-care, or did not speak English. All interested teens provided assent and secured parental consent to participate. The study protocol was evaluated and approved by the hospital's Institutional Review Board.

Data Collection

Data collected included demographic and health-related information from their clinical charts, such as age, living situation, exposure to domestic violence, history of child protection involvement, and type of sexual abuse. Health assessments included whether there was a history of self-mutilation, suicidal ideation, suicide attempts, previous psychiatric hospitalization, and substance use (see Table 1). We also assessed their patterns of running away, including number of times away from home, and longest intervals (see Table 2).

Video diaries were completed by each adolescent during the first three months of their enrollment in the Runaway Intervention Program using digital video recorders loaned to them by the study team. The diaries were recorded in their home in a space chosen by the teen, or in a private room in the clinic. The teens were provided with open-ended questions to respond to and were asked to reflect on what was going on in their life, or what was important to them that day. Example questions include: "Tell me about your mood today," "What keeps you from leaving home?" and "What are you feeling before you leave home?" (See Table 3). Participants recorded diaries on multiple days, with video lengths each day lasting from three to ten minutes.

Data Analysis

All video data were reviewed multiple times in their entirety by at least one member of the research team. Spoken words in the video diaries were transcribed verbatim. The data were imported into Atlas.ti, a software program that facilitates coding and analyzing qualitative data. The analysis followed a coding process outlined by Sandelowski, Docherty, and Emden (1997), which systematically labels data descriptively, and then organizes the codes into groups, or categories, that reflect commonalities. Because the participants were provided a set of questions, the responses typically fell into descriptive categories that coincided with

the question being answered (quasi-deductive process). The participants did not always answer every question, so care was taken to ensure that the descriptive categories reflected what participants shared in response to the questions they addressed. The research team corroborated the coding structure, assignment of codes to verbatim text, and the selection of the descriptive categories.

RESULTS

Of the 13 eligible Hmong teens invited to participate, 11 completed video diaries (85%). Two were willing to participate in the study but did not complete the diaries because one ran away for an extended period of time, and one moved out of the community before she could start the diaries. Seven participants created three or more video diary entries and four created one or two entries.

The majority of the girls had run frequently for shorter periods of time and had returned home on their own. Only one participant did not return home independently. She had a runaway episode that lasted 6 months before she was found by law enforcement and returned home.

Analysis of the video diaries resulted in the creation of four broad themes addressing the Hmong adolescent girls' perspectives about influences on running away, returning home, and staying home, as well as their experiences while on the run. The first theme, related to home environments before running away, was "Fighting Restriction." The second theme, "Not Running Away, It's Going Out to Play," focused on how the teens made the decision to run away. The third theme focused on what happened away from home: "Unrestrained Partying." The fourth theme, "Trying to Change," focused on the experiences of returning home. These are presented in detail below.

Theme 1: Fighting Restriction

The girls described two primary factors that influenced their decisions to run away---difficulties at home and restrictions from parents and older siblings about time with friends. Additionally, cultural expectations put on or perceived by Hmong girls triggered decisions to run away for some of the participants.

Conflict with the family—Many of the girls talked about being irritated with parents or older siblings who restricted their time to be with friends. As one participant said, "I feel like before [I run I have] no freedom, no free time, no hanging out with friends who are my age." Other girls talked about the tensions in their home, which resulted from conflicts between themselves and their parents or siblings. The disputes, from the teens' perspectives, centered on parents being controlling, not letting their teen go out, and feeling as if they can't be good enough to be allowed to be away from home. One teen reported, "I don't want to stay home because they are always looking at my bad side, never at the good side. They don't look at the good things that I do. Even if I cook, clean, or anything like that, they still think that I'm lazy."

Conflict in the family—Some of the tension was due to conflict not with the runaway girl but instead, between two adults in the home or between an older sibling and parent. A girl described this when she stared into the camera and created her monologue with these words, “When I’m at home then there are like so many things, there’s always yelling, and I don’t want yelling. I hate yelling.” Another girl shared, “I gotta get away from my problems, the arguments at home, and later come home and see what’s up then”.

Cultural expectations—Some girls spoke less about tensions or conflicts and focused more on cultural and developmental stressors. One girl shared, “It’s just that it’s hard being a girl, especially an Asian girl. It’s really hard.”

Theme 2: Not Running Away, It’s Going Out to Play

Defining runaway—Six of the eleven girls responded to the question about what it feels like when they run away by saying that they were not “running away”. The girls were quick to explain that for them, they do not define the experience as running away in the same manner as researchers, parents, or the police. For example, a girl adamantly stated in her video monologue, “If you guys call it running away, I call it going out to play. It depends on how I feel that day.” Another teen reported that “running away means like never coming back” and her behavior was, therefore, in her perception not running away.

Boredom—Nearly all the girls (9 of the 11) referred to boredom as a critical precursor to running away. One girl simply said, “I’m really bored when I leave [home].” This was echoed by other teens who reported that they leave because “nothing is happening” or “it is always [the] same old, same old stuff.” For these Hmong girls, they did not perceive their actions as running away but rather, as leaving a boring or uninteresting situation and doing what they perceive typical “American” adolescents do--hanging out with friends and playing. The girls frequently described simply wanting to be out with friends, to hang out at the mall, or to be somewhere other than home.

Impulsive—The video diaries consistently demonstrated that for these young Hmong teens, the decision to run away from home was almost always impulsive. Most of the teens were not planning to be away from home for long periods of time. Two girls gave an example that running away was “like spending the night away, real running away is never coming home.”

Interestingly, two girls described running away as being “like an addiction.” The girls frequently used the phrase “it depends” as a way to try to explain their decision-making/ thinking around running away and returning home. One girl said the decision of whether or not to run away depended simply on whether or not she had transportation to leave on that particular day.

Considering the risks—The phrase “it depends” was also used when the girls were explaining the risks associated with running away. For example, a girl said “you might get raped, anything can go wrong. It just depends.” Another girl referred to a drive-by shooting and said that “anything can happen, it just depends on where you are.” Despite describing

and identifying serious risks associated with running away, these possibilities of witnessing or being a victim of violence were never voiced as a reason not to run away.

Theme 3: Unrestrained Partying

Participants responded to questions about what happens when they are away from home, or on the run, by describing where they went, how they were feeling, who they were with, what they thought about, and what they did.

Where I go and how I feel—The teens described the runaway episode most often simply as leaving home to hang out. Many of the girls shared that when they leave home they go to “my close friend’s house” or “go to my girl or guy friends place.” Some admitted to going to parties, saying, “I go to places---to my friend’s house, go to drinking parties, go to all kinds of parties.” Girls described running away as “something good” and that they feel relaxed away from home. A girl shared, “I’m having too much fun [on the run]” and “I get carried away.”

Who I am with—The girl’s spoke about their relationships with others when they were away from home. Their relationships to their “home girls” were viewed as positive and protective. One girl said, “my friends keep on telling me that [my boyfriend] is not the right one for me and he just wants a girl’s virginity....then I ask him ‘are you just like trying to get the girl’s virginity and run.’” Another girl described being with her friends, and their help with the after effects of partying, and a worried boyfriend:

You know, I don’t remember the whole thing until the drunkenness wears off, so he [boyfriend] is really worried about me. How I know that is because my girls told me. My girls knew me before they knew him and they’re closer to me because we tell each other everything, so I feel really safe around him.

What I am doing—In addition to simply hanging out with friends, the participants described in much detail the parties they attended and their extensive substance use. Alcohol was the most frequent substance that girls spoke about. A girl shared,

Usually I drink a lot, I like to drink liquor, and I’m not sure, I don’t think I have a drinking problem, just because I like drinking I don’t think that is a drinking problem, because you know there are times I want to drink and times I don’t.

Another described her behavior,

I drink and I go crazy and out of control and when I get drunk I can never remember anything, you know, like there [was] never a party. When I am drunk, there are parts that I never remember.

In addition to alcohol, drug use was described, including crystal methamphetamine and marijuana. One girl said, “I just do it [crystal meth] because it helps me a lot when I have problems and I am trying to get away from it. It helps me feel like I have better things to do than just arguing with my family.” Another girl acknowledged that often somebody has “weed so we get high and when we’re high we smoke cigarettes.”

What I worry about—Girls described worrying about consequences associated with contacting family and returning home. One girl considered the dilemma of calling home and getting yelled at or going home knowing she would also be yelled at, “If I don’t call home, I am going to get yelled at so that makes me want to not go home.” Another girl said, “I don’t pick up the phone and call my house [because then] they try to find a way to come and get me or else get the police involved, which I don’t like the police.”

Although all the girls in this study had been sexually assaulted while on the run, very few spoke about this or similar risks in the context of what they worry or think about when they are on the run. Two girls did share that a potential danger to running away was getting raped: “You never know what is going to happen, you might get raped.” Sexual violence, in reality or potential, was minimized in their video diaries. When it was discussed the girls focused more on prevention, or the need for protection, and offered beliefs that their friends or a boyfriend would keep them safe. Physical dangers while on the run were mentioned, and included being beaten up or witnessing violence such as a drive-by shooting.

Theme 4: Trying to Change

Family members, most importantly younger siblings, were the primary factors driving a girl’s decision to return home, according to the girls. Returning home was not linked to being scared while away from home, needing money, or shelter. School was discussed in the context of risk behaviors (e.g. truancy) and trying to change those behaviors. However, desire to change, for these girls, was triggered primarily by external factors (e.g. boyfriend, affirmation) rather than internal factors.

Home to my siblings—When girls spoke about a reason to return home it was often because of missing their siblings. A girl shared,

What keeps me from running away from home is my little brothers and sisters, I love them a lot and so I try never to leave them. They are my only hope. They’re the ones who make me feel like I am wanted in the house.

Changing because school matters—Girls spoke about their budding connections to school. One girl shared, “I just want to be someone good. I am going to school, trying to get all my work done so I can pass eighth grade and go on to high school.” The girls were candid about their history of truancy and their dislike of and disengagement from school. But the girls acknowledged the need to attend school and spoke about how their attachment to school could change over time. One girl shared, “school is boring, but still I do need my education in order to get a good job cause I want to make a lot of money to help my mom pay the bills and help my dad pay his bills. I used to not like school but now I’m enjoying school ‘cause I got friends there.”

Changing because others want me to—External forces such as a boyfriend were identified in the context of changing runaway behaviors. As one girl shared, “If my boyfriend tells me that he doesn’t want me to go anywhere then I wouldn’t go because I listen to him, for some reason.” Girls spoke about desiring recognition for changing their behavior. They wanted credit from their parents, teachers, and probation officers. One girl

talked about how she had skipped a day of school after regularly attending school. She was disappointed in herself but felt that she was not being recognized for all the good things she was changing. She indicated that people only focused on the “bad stuff I do, never the good stuff.” Culturally, many Hmong families do not compliment their children (Xiong et al., 2005).

DISCUSSION

In this study we sought to identify influences on Hmong adolescent girl’s decision to run away, return home, or stay home, and to describe what occurs when a girl has run away. Generally, the Hmong participants lived in two-parent families without a history parental alcohol and drug abuse, had not been abused prior to running away, had not witnessed domestic violence, nor had their family been involved with child protection. The psychosocial risk factors described prior to the episode of running away are not those usually described in the literature about runaway youth. Most of the teens did not disclose in their diary or in their initial health assessment any prior history of intra-familial physical or sexual abuse. The commonly reported risk factors for running away do not appear to explain why Hmong girls in Minnesota run away from home.

Their candid descriptions of living at home offered different explanations for their runaway behavior. The girls spoke about their parents wanting them to be a good Asian girl and how difficult it was for them to meet this ideal. The image invokes a girl who stays home, cares for siblings, cooks, and will become a good wife (Tapp et al., 2002). The girls described verbal arguments with parents and siblings. The arguments centered on issues of wanting more freedom and less pressure to behave within certain parental defined norms. This suggests that the cultural conflict between the parents’ traditional Hmong culture and what the girls perceive as American teen culture might be an important trigger for runaway behaviors (Xiong, et al., 2008).

Importantly, these intra-generational conflicts between immigrant parents and their U.S. born adolescents could be compounding upon normative developmental parent-adolescent conflict and yielding a perceived need of the adolescent to get away from the stressful situation. These conflicts are not unique to Hmong adolescent girls, however, and it remains unclear and speculative as to why the runaway patterns observed among Hmong girls are not as apparent for second or third generation immigrant youth of other ethnic backgrounds. A possible explanation could relate to the differences in cultural values and adaptations over time in the U.S.; for example, Latino culture traditionally values female attributes that are not inherently reflective of how American females, as a population, behave or interact. This cultural disconnect could result in parent-adolescent conflict similar to those described by the Hmong girls in this study, yet very few Latino adolescent females engage in short-term runaway behaviors. It is possible the Hmong population, because of their strong clan-based kinship system, is more tightly adhering to cultural traditions and values, resulting in stronger opposition and conflict with their adolescent daughters. These possibilities warrant further research, but hold potential promise for explaining the differences in runaway behaviors between Hmong and non-Hmong adolescent girls.

The actual act of running away was almost always impulsive for these Hmong girls, which is developmentally consistent with their young ages (Saewyc, 2011). From a developmental perspective, our study reinforces that this aspect of Hmong girls is similar to other adolescent girls their age. What is unique, perhaps, is not the impulsivity of the runaway behavior, but rather, the higher rates of running away observed among Hmong girls compared to non-Hmong girls (Edinburgh, et al., 2006), and lower levels of family conflict appearing to lead to running away, as opposed to more the severe family dysfunction of sexual or physical abuse identified in other groups. These higher rates could be due to Hmong girls sharing their runaway experiences with one another, so that the runaway behavior becomes more normalized among their Hmong peer group. The teens did not describe planning to run away and did not define their behavior in the way that professionals do, as running away. The most common term used by the girls to describe their run away behavior was “going out to play.” This phrase may reflect a belief that running away will be exciting and adventurous. The way some of the girls described running away implied a level or sense of powerlessness to change their runaway behavior, and that the running has a tantalizing pull that encourages the girls to leave home again.

The teens did not demonstrate an ability to foresee the potentially serious consequences of running away, such as being a victim of violence. This may be due to their early adolescent developmental level, which exhibits concrete cognitive thinking patterns and limited ability to employ abstract thinking or anticipate consequences (Saewyc, 2011). This too, is theoretically consistent with what is known about adolescent development.

Implications

The majority of Hmong youth in this study had run away repeatedly. Each episode of leaving home placed them at risk for being a victim of sexual violence, exposure to violence, and alcohol and drug use. Nurses and other health care providers in a variety of settings (e.g., schools, clinics, detention centers, public health settings) need to be aware that health risks might repeatedly occur with run away episodes and that one health care encounter might not be adequate in ascertaining the health needs of runaway girls. Youth and families should be encouraged to return for health care after each run away episode so that health care team members can assess and intervene on recurring or new health risk behaviors. This level of interaction with the health care system, and the need for attention soon after a run away incident necessitate actions by nurses to ensure that families and their youth are seen in a timely manner.

The Hmong teens in this study did not mention meeting street outreach workers or using shelters, although this was not a specific question posed in the data collection protocol. Nonetheless, outreach efforts need to be tailored to short-term runaway youth, so that they receive culturally relevant needed youth-centered services, such as substance abuse screening, sexually transmitted infection testing, or assistance reuniting with family.

Parents of Hmong runaway teens might need support around parenting, especially since it is a recent change in Hmong culture that adolescents are not married in their early teens, so parents must maintain a parenting role longer than has been their traditional practice. Further, the challenges associated with cultural conflicts within the family that arise when

youth and parents adjust to a new culture at different rates require careful attention and support. Parents and youth might benefit from health care interventions that provide strategies to encourage healthy acculturative processes, including maintaining cultural heritage and adopting aspects of a new culture. Acculturative stress is well documented among immigrant families with adolescents, and is particularly salient for youth who are achieving developmental tasks, including establishing peer identity and seeking greater independence from family (Kwak & Berry, 2001). These youth, and their parents, might benefit from supportive strategies that help the families recognize what is normative, so that familial conflict specific to acculturative processes is minimized.

Specific outreach efforts and education about runaway youth might also need to be at the community level, to identify and prevent repeated runaway episodes. Interventions at the community level might offer education and support services at Hmong community centers and other places where Hmong gather, such as farmers markets, soccer tournaments, and community celebrations like the Hmong New Year. School-based screening, collaboratively undertaken by nurses, social workers, and counselors, might help identify at-risk youth by asking truant students whether or not they also left home without permission. This approach might reach teens who could benefit from early interventions before they have established more problematic, high-risk runaway patterns.

For the Hmong girls in this study, it appears they do not view their actions as running away but rather, as leaving a stressful situation or doing what typical adolescents do (e.g. hanging out with friends and playing). Regardless of whether or not their view of 'typical' adolescents reflects reality for other adolescents, it is a view that informs their subsequent behaviors and may be a critical point of intervention. For example, nurses in schools or clinics might use health promotion programming to emphasize the normative behaviors of adolescents and their parents, so that Hmong youth become more aware of general teen behaviors rather than media-inspired perceptions of non-Hmong youth behaviors.

Limitations

The results of this study should be interpreted within some limitations. Because this is a qualitative study of Hmong girls in a single U.S. city, these results might not reflect the experiences of other immigrant or Asian runaways in the U.S., or Hmong girls in other countries. However, given the documented persistence of clan relationships, even across the diaspora of the Hmong people (Lee, 2010), it is possible that Hmong girls in other western countries, such as Australia, Canada, or France, may exhibit similar responses to family acculturative stress. The present study centered on the perspectives of Hmong adolescents who ran away from home, and therefore did not include parent or nurse perspectives.

CONCLUSION

The Hmong girls in this study talked about their episodes of running away: the events prior to, during, and after the run episode. They spoke about wanting freedom, to get away from parents, and from conflict-laden family relationships. Interestingly, the girls talked about feeling disconnected from parents, in a manner that implied they would like a better relationship with their parents. Certainly, professionals who interact with Hmong

adolescents have an important role in bridging the cultural expectations between adolescents and their parents. For most of the girls, running away was not viewed as a risk factor for violence, rape, or substance use, despite many of these things occurring in their runaway experiences. It is possible Hmong teens are minimizing their risk behaviors and experiences of sexual abuse; this could be a coping strategy or, of greater concern, it could represent a normalization of these harmful behaviors and traumatic experiences. These questions require further inquiry. It is imperative that professionals recognize running away as a significant risk factor for deleterious health and social outcomes experienced by Hmong adolescent girls.

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Table 1

Demographic and risk characteristics of participants (N=11)

	N
Age	13–16 years
Living with two parents	8/11
Exposure to domestic violence	2/11 *
Intra-familial sexual abuse	2/11 *
Intra-familial physical abuse	2/11 *
Previous Child Protection Services involvement	1/11
Type of Sexual Assault (may have experienced more than one type)	
Gang rape	2/11
Prostitution	2/11
Multiple different perpetrators	9/11
Single perpetrator	2/11
Previous history of extra-familial sexual assault	
Prior to running away	0
History of self-harm	8/11
Suicidal ideation	10/11
Previous suicide attempt	3/11
Substance use	
Alcohol	10/11
Marijuana	3/11
Other drugs	9/11

* The same two girls reported domestic violence, plus intrafamilial sexual and physical abuse.

Table 2

Experiences of Running Away from Home

Case	Age	Typical length of runaway experience	Number of times away from home	Longest interval away from home
1	14	2 – 3 days	> 10 times	16 days
2	13	2 – 3 days	> 10 times	3 days
3	14	2 – 3 days	> 10 times	3 days
4	15	1 – 2 days	> 10 times	2 days
5	16	180 days	1 time	180 days
6	13	1 day	1 time	1 day
7	15	2 – 3 days	> 10 times	7 days
8	13	1 – 2 days	> 10 times	2 days
9	14	1 – 2 days	> 10 times	21 days
10	15	1 day	< 5 times	1 day
11	13	2 – 3 days	> 10 times	17 days

Table 3

Questions for reflecting about Runaway Experiences

Where do you go when you leave home?
What are you feeling before you leave home?
What keeps you from calling home or returning home once you leave?
How do you think about your family when you are away from home?
Tell us today about what keeps you from leaving home again? *
Tell us today how it feels to be a member of your family? *
Tell us what is going on your life today *
Tell us about your mood today *
How does running away affect your health?
Do you access health care while away from home/running away?
How do using alcohol and/or drugs affect your health?

* denotes a question asked daily