

Opinion: Why Texas must change its policy on runaway youth

Sanders, Byron. Austin American-Statesman, April 16, 2021

According to a report by The National Runaway Switchboard, more than 1.5 million youth experience a [runaway episode each year](#). In Texas, that decision can have a long and lasting impact on youths' lives, in large part because of how the state treats the act of running away.

What many Texans may not know is that it is against the law for a child to run away from home in our state. Texas is one of less than 10 states in the country where this is still the case.

Running away is classified in Texas as a 'status offense' – an act that is a violation of law only because of a youth's status as a minor. Running away from home risks a potentially detrimental contact with the justice system including detention in juvenile facilities.

In addition, if a status offender violates a court order related to the status offense — running away again, for example — a court can punish the youth with a term of secure confinement. These instances of secure confinement do nothing to help youth and can, in fact, make it more likely that youth continue to engage in delinquent behavior.

Rather than address root issues, Texas' current recourse for runaway youth leads to further isolation. The factors that may lead youth to run away from home are often outside of their control — they may be leaving behind an unsafe or abusive environment, difficulties at school or dealing with unmet mental health needs. According to the [National Runaway Safeline](#), "58% of youth who reached out to NRS indicated family dynamics as a reason for seeking crisis intervention."

We must change the way that Texas considers runaway youth and create policy that would provide the help and resources they need and deserve. One way forward is through a recent bill introduced by State Sen. Nathan Johnson (D-Dallas).

[SB 404 \(HB 1709\)](#) would decriminalize running away as a status offense and prohibit juvenile detention for youth who have run away. Instead, the bill would help redirect youth to emergency shelters and crisis intervention services through the Texas Department of Family and Protective Services . SB 404 also prevents status offenders of the remaining offenses from being held in a secure facility, either pre- or post-adjudication. Instead of secure facilities, youth could be detained in juvenile process offices and places of non-secure custody for up to 6 hours, or in non-secure correction

facilities for up to 24 hours. Finally, Sen. Johnson's bill eliminates the use of a violation of a court order to sentence status offenders to post-adjudication secure confinement.

At [Big Thought](#), we know that we must address the root causes of an issue, not simply respond to its consequences. Big Thought's work with juvenile justice intervention and [Creative Solutions](#), our nationally recognized arts-as-workforce intervention program for adjudicated youth, has shown us that punitive measures are not the way forward. And by continuing to consider running away as a status offense, we prohibit youth from tapping into their inherent greatness.

All youth are born with greatness and we have the responsibility to create the conditions for that greatness to shine. Reimagining how we treat those who've run away from home explicitly empowers the lives of youth who've been most marginalized. That's the kind of future they deserve.

Passing SB 404 is a step toward this future. If you'd like to support SB 404, [reach out to your state representatives](#).

Sanders is the CEO of Big Thought, an education-focused nonprofit based in Dallas.