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In search of America's missing children

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In search of America's missing children

Abstract

It has been called a "National Tragedy". It can happen in the park, at the beach, near the church, at the supermarket, at the playground, on the street in front of the house. One moment the child is there: the next moment gone. Short of death itself what could be more shocking to a family than having to report a child missing? Yet it happens to tens of thousands of parents each year. Because children can not look out for themselves, it is our responsibility to look out for them.

IN SEARCH OF AMERICA'S MISSING CHILDREN

A Research Paper

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by

Karen Saunders Hanson

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It has been called a "National Tragedy". It can happen in the park, at the beach, near the church, at the supermarket, at the playground, on the street in front of the house. One moment the child is there: the next moment gone. Short of death itself what could be more shocking to a family than having to report a child missing? Yet it happens to tens of thousands of parents each year. Because children can not look out for themselves, it is our responsibility to look out for them.

Abductions may occur at any time. In St. Paul, Minnesota a 6-year-old disappeared after asking to go to the bathroom at church. Sarah Avon, also 6, vanished in 1981 from in front of her house where she was playing with friends. Ryan Burton was 3 when she was removed from her crib in Brechenridge, Texas in 1981. Ann Botlib 12, vanished without a trace from a shopping center in Louisville, Kentucky. These are but a small list of the frightening but true stories of missing children. There seems to be no rhyme or reason why one child is abducted and others are not. For this reason parents, teachers, counselors, principals and children themselves must be taught prevention strategies, so as a country we can put an end to this epidemic.

Thurmond (1982) defined the term missing children by stating: a missing child "is any individual under 18 whose

whereabouts is unknown to the legal custodian, if either the circumstances indicate that the child may possibly have been abducted, or the circumstances indicate that the child is likely to be abducted or sexually exploited" (p. 3). The National Center for Missing and Exploited Children has a slightly different definition. Hoover (1985) explains that "any child whose whereabouts is unknown to his parent, guardian or legal custodian is a missing child" (p. 2). All available evidence indicates that any child who has lost his or her home for any reason is indeed at risk.

Abducted children are usually under 12 years of age. They are considered to be in the portable age group. This is when physical descriptions change rapidly and photographs quickly become outdated. However, victims can be up to 17 years; especially when strangers kidnap them (Thorton, 1983). Victims range from the very poor to the upper class, come from every race and are just as likely to be taken in big cities as they are in small communities and rural areas.

No one is certain of the exact number of missing children in the United States. Hyde (1985), Klages (1982) and Hoover (1983), cite numbers of 6,000 to 1.8 million children missing for varying periods of time each year. Statistics however, are hard to come by. Boundaries between runaways, parental kidnap victims and by strangers tend to blur, and are often

inaccurate. In addition, traditional law enforcement record keeping systems do not accurately reflect or identify these populations. Turbak (1982) explains the best estimates report that 10% of the reported missing children are returned home in two weeks, 10% are found dead, and the rest are never seen or heard from again.

Until recently, no national statistics on missing children have been kept, and the task of searching for the children has been complicated by the lack of cooperation among law enforcement agencies. In response to these issues, Congress recently passed an important piece of legislation: The Missing Childrens Act (McConnell, 1982). This act provides that descriptions of missing and runaway children be entered into the Federal Bureau of Investigation National Crime Information Center Computer. This is often vitally important in recovering lost children, as all police departments have access to the computer files. Besides coordinating specific local data, the computer can furnish vital information, "patterns" of typical abductors, typical victims or places and circumstances in which abductions happen.

Even with this Act there are sometimes problems. The first 24 hours of any investigation are crucial, but unless the child is very young or the disappearance occurs under

suspicious circumstances, some Police Departments will not act on a missing child bulletin for 24 hours. Many departments have this waiting period to ensure they are not becoming involved in a family disturbance. An amendment to the Missing Childrens Act tries to get around this problem. Parents may get assistance from their local Federal Bureau of Investigation office after proving that the police have refused to help them.

Even with new and better legislation, experts make suggestions to parents that may prevent child snatching, or help authorities to find kidnapped youngsters. Dandes (1983), Greenburg (1984), Lewis (1978), Hyde (1985) and Hoover (1983) offer the following suggestions:

1. Have your child fingerprinted. If your local Police Department won't help, simply buy a stamp pad and record the fingerprints on an index card.
2. Frequently update dental charts and carry them with you if your family moves.
3. Always keep recent photographs, particularly of preschoolers. On the back of the photographs write the weight, age, hair and eye color, blood type and note any specific identifying marks.

4. The family should establish a password. Teach your child not to go anywhere with anyone who does not know the password.

5. Parents should be sure the child's day-care center or school will not allow the child to leave with an unauthorized person.

6. Parents should keep a current record of any chronic health conditions, prescribed medications and any noticeable reactions to medications.

7. Parents should never prominently display the child's name on school bags, shirts, or jackets.

8. Never leave a small child alone in a grocery cart or a car.

9. As soon as children are able, they should be taught their full name, address and phone number, and how to use the phone.

10. Children should be taught to call out loudly or to flee from anyone who bothers them.

11. Parents and children should frequently role play to be sure the child knows the correct responses to various situations.

12. Report disappearances to local newspapers, radio and television stations. Parents should get as much publicity as possible.

Just as parents should follow prevention strategies against child-snatching, the child himself should also be acquainted with safety tips. Noted experts in the field Groller (1981), Mackey (1983), Bass (1981) and Greenburg (1984) have suggested these prevention strategies to children:

Children should always tell a parent, police officer, teacher or other supervising adult if:

1. A stranger tries to join in their game.
2. A stranger asks them to go with them.

Other things children should remember to never do are:

1. Go with a stranger when they are asking directions.
2. Take a ride with a person they don't know.
3. Let a stranger touch you.
4. Take money, candy or treats from a stranger.
5. Play alone in empty buildings or alleys.
6. Wait or play around restrooms.

Children should also be taught to always:

1. Write down the license number of a strange car, and a description of the stranger who is bothering them.
2. Try to remember what the stranger looked like and what he or she was wearing.
3. Try to take a friend along when going places like the playground, movie or a store.

4. Tell an older person if you see a stranger "hanging around."

5. Tell your parents or a teacher if someone wants to or does take your picture.

6. Stay away from the car if someone driving needs help. They should be asking older people for help, not children.

It may seem like there are too many safety rules for parents and children. Actually most rules are common sense items, and if used properly they minimize the fear of being abducted for children and parents.

In reality very few persons suspected of abducting a child are ever caught and fewer yet are ever prosecuted. However, even with the scarcity of convicted abductors, police departments are still able to put together a number of "traits" that are guidelines for parents, police, teachers and civic groups to look for in a possible abductor. Nielson (1984) explains most abductors/molesters are likely to be single males past the age of 25. They will be withdrawn from peer relationships and social interactions involving persons their own age. An abductor will most likely be passive and will not have been involved in competitive sports. An abductor may have a history of past or present mental illness and may also have a police record. It must be remembered that these guidelines are just that. Not all persons exhibiting

these traits are child abductors. If persons fit into these guidelines, one should at least be suspicious and watch carefully.

Even though the percentages of a missing child being found are low, there are reunions of parents with their children. Although the public would like to think this is where the story ends with everyone living happily ever after, it rarely does. For those children who were abducted the psychological wounds can take years to heal. Terr (1984) reports children show signs of profound shame of their vulnerability. The children show persistent fears of being kidnapped and more general fears of strangers, vehicles, and the dark. They also show a disruption in the ability to be able to time sequence events that happened before and after the abduction. Terr (1984) goes on to say that unlike adults children can re-enact the kidnapping in detail. It seems surprising but very few children showed a decline in their ability to do school assignments. Terr (1984) also says, with very few exceptions abducted children anticipate a short life and future disasters. They tend to boast that things such as nuclear disasters, floods, tornadoes, and other natural calamities don't worry them. They felt they could live through anything. However, these children are very concerned

about being alone, local disasters and others being kidnapped as they were.

It seems problems are worse when families are reunited after long periods of time -- over one year. When a child has been gone for over a year, usually some forced pornography, sexual and/or physical abuse has taken place. Gelman (1984) says when the child is returned to the parents, the parents expect to see the child who was taken from them. To their surprise and sometimes horror their child comes back a stranger. Steven Strayner is one such child who was abducted and away from his parents for seven years. "I returned almost a grown man, and yet my parents saw me as their seven-year-old," he says. "After they stopped trying to teach me the fundamentals all over again, it got better." Steven admits, "I built a stone wall around myself for seven years and it's very difficult to let down my guard and trust again" (p. 83). Parents need to prepare themselves for what to expect from their child. The child needs love, comfort, sympathy, patience, and time in just the right quantities. Parents can not smother their newlyfound child nor can they pretend it did not happen and the child is the same child who was taken from them.

Although the majority of children disappear from home, shopping centers, and parks, the school is another area from

where children are often abducted. Given the number of children abducted each year, the laws of probability predict that every school will at one time have a child who has been taken from its rightful home for a length of time. Because of this principals, teachers, counselors and other persons employed in schools need to be alerted and on the lookout for missing children. Greenleaf (1983) suggests that to prevent abductions schools should become stricter with rules allowing children to leave the building. It should become a common practice that schools require parents to complete a form indicating which adults are allowed to pick up their child. No child should be allowed to leave the building without one of these adults. Under no circumstances should this rule be broken. Another safety measure schools should include is to allow the student to leave only when the authorized adult picks them up in their classrooms or in the office. Greenleaf (1983) also suggests another policy that requires someone in the school to telephone the parents if their child is absent and to inquire about the reason for the absence. This should become a common practice, not only to prevent abductions, but to also keep children from skipping school for various reasons.

The counselor or principal have a very important role in the prevention process. They need to help the staff spot youngsters who have already been abducted and how to report

any suspicions or findings. "Red flags" go up when a child is enrolled without a birth certificate or records from previous schools, or if previous records report frequent absences from school and changes of residence. Also any child who indicates that a parent is "gone away" or unknown warrants a "red flag". Common behaviors of abducted children are withdrawal, shyness, incapability of making new friends, low school performance and habits like thumb-sucking or pants-wetting. Although these behaviors in themselves may be normal for some children, putting two or more of them together should warrant discreet checking with a Child Find Organization (Greenleaf, 1983). Counselors should also subscribe to the Directory of Missing Children which is an annual periodical which contains about 325 pictures of missing children and a short description of the child and the circumstances relating to their abduction. Counselors should also receive posters printed by Child Find. These posters and the pages from the directories should be placed in school libraries, lunchrooms, or wherever youngsters are most apt to see them. Children are often aware of their peers and have been helpful in spotting a missing child because of seeing the child's picture on a poster, grocery bag, post office, bulletin board, or milk carton. Along with the posters Greenleaf (1983) suggests counselors use the accompanying lesson plans to go into the classrooms and alert

children to the abduction problem and to teach them what to do if they are ever in that situation.

Not only parents, but children, police departments, and schools are taking precautions to prevent abductions, yet, it is inevitable that some children will still be abducted. Authorities say publicity is a key factor in both locating lost children and in making the public aware of the seriousness of the problem. There have been both movies and commercials on national television, news programs whose subject has been missing children's pictures, and large companies have agreed to print pictures and descriptions of missing children on milk cartons, brown bags and cereal boxes. All this has been helpful in reuniting children with their parents, yet something more needs to be done.

To satisfy this need, various groups have been formed, usually consisting of parents or relatives of missing children. Klages (1982), Greenleaf (1983), McCormick (1984) and Lewis (1978) believe that non-profit organizations are a big help in locating missing children. Child Find, Inc. is one such organization (Lawrence, 1982). It publishes a directory of missing children and maintains two telephone lines for parents wishing to list their child as missing. It also provides an 800 number for missing children that are hoping to be reunited with their parents.

Children's Rights of Florida, was founded by Senator Paula Hawkins (McCormick, 1984). This agency maintains and provides communication and information on missing children to other states.

Another non-profit agency is the Adam Walsh Child Resource Center (Lawrence, 1982). This group works on legislation and monitors court proceedings on child abduction and molestation cases. It also has a fingerprinting program and trains parent volunteers to present a film and slide presentation as a part of a program called "Safety with Strangers".

Find-Me is an organization to help guard against missing children (Turbak, 1982). Find-Me publishes an action booklet, listing other child search organizations across the United States. It also provides information on ways to prevent child abductions as well as steps that should widely promote fingerprinting children.

The National Center for Missing and Exploited Children is in Washington, D. C. (Greenleaf, 1983). It is run by the Federal Bureau of Investigation and maintains a computerized system which can be used by local law enforcement agencies to report missing persons.

The National Child Identification Center is another group (McCormick, 1984). This agency has developed a child identification kit for five dollars that provides instructions

and materials for taking fingerprints, appropriate photographs, and dental charts.

These are by no means the only parent organizations that deal with finding missing children. They are however, the most commonly used. Along with providing help and information these groups provide telephone numbers that parents and children may use when help is needed. They are also used as support groups for parents who are going through the trauma of having lost a child.

Although it is understood that these non-profit parent organizations are helpful and have their place, McConnell (1982) believes while non-profit organizations such as Child Find are important, they can also be counterproductive by raising false hopes and expectations in the minds of parents of missing children. Law enforcement agencies have the responsibility to handle the investigation. After the initial reporting, parents should let the police take over, at least for the first 72 hours of the investigation. Only after this time period should Child Find organization become involved. At times these organizations tend to make parents frantic, when actually the parent should try to remain calm, and supportive towards law enforcers.

As a society our efforts to prevent crimes against children have not kept pace with the number of crimes being

committed against them. There are thousands of tragic stories of abducted or exploited children. Most Americans though are surprised to learn that crimes against children can be prevented. The most important key to child safety is effective communication between parents and children. The first step is to establish an atmosphere in the home and school in which children feel comfortable in expressing matters which are "scary" to them. Unfortunately the rising awareness of missing children has left many people with an all too real sense of fear. Both parents and children need to be alert, but they do not need to be afraid. Parents need to talk to their child and explain what they should do if they are ever taken by a stranger to a place they don't want to go. Every school should establish a program that effectively teaches children about safety and protective measures. Children should be taught that they can be assertive in order to protect themselves against abduction. The American public has listened long enough to these tragic stories. It is time we accept the responsibility of our children and put forth full effort towards putting an end to this national tragedy.

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