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## OJJDP Update on Research

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ACQUISITIONS

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# The Police and Missing Children: Findings From a National Survey

In recent years, several dramatic cases of missing children and homeless youth have captured the attention of the public and public officials. In 1984, President Reagan signed legislation committing federal resources to this problem. However, little precise information exists on the scope of the problem and, until now, there has been no comprehensive attempt to examine the law enforcement response.

This research brief summarizes the findings of a national survey that examined how police respond to missing children cases—and, in particular, the effect of departmental characteristics on the handling of such cases. The survey is part of the National Study of Law Enforcement Policies and Practices Regarding Missing and Homeless Youth project funded in 1986 by the Department of Justice's Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention (OJJDP).

### Missing children: the background

Estimates of the number of missing children vary widely. Some have no scientific basis; others are based on studies that differ substantially in scope and methodology. Even defining a "missing" child or youth can be difficult: How long must a youth be gone to be classified as a runaway?

While data and studies are sparse, some generalizations can be made. The most common missing child or youth case is the runaway. Several attempts to estimate the national prevalence of runaways show rough

agreement that there may be approximately 700,000 to 1 million runaways in the United States at any given time. Runaway children and youth tend to have family conflicts or to come in disproportionately high numbers from foster care, group homes, or other forms of institutional care.

Many of them become prostitutes when they run away. One study found that two-thirds of all teenage prostitutes were runaways.<sup>1</sup> Along with prostitution, common problems for runaways include poor nutrition, depression, venereal disease, drug use, physical violence and rape, and suicidal tendencies.

But not all missing children are runaways. A smaller, but still significant, percentage are abducted—sometimes by their own parents. The rapidly rising divorce rate has increased the potential for child theft. One study estimated about one child theft for every 22 divorces.<sup>2</sup> Parental abductions have gained attention only recently, and estimates of their number vary widely: One review of the current literature found estimates ranging from 25,000 to 500,000 per year.

Children who are abducted by strangers rather than parents or acquaintances have been studied somewhat more intensively. The National Center for Missing and Exploited Children (NCMEC) has found that in stranger abductions, females were more likely than males to be taken. The mean age of the victims was 10.5 years, and abduction itself was often the prelude

to another serious crime such as sexual assault or murder.

The long-term consequences for children of running away or being abducted are not well understood. Yet

### From the Administrator

The issue of missing children is a national problem affecting parents, communities, and law enforcement agencies. Since this is a relatively new area for juvenile justice, there is much we do not know about these cases.

In an effort to find answers, the Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention (OJJDP) has made missing children issues a top priority. We moved as quickly as possible to fund several research projects, while, at the same time, making sure they met the needs of the juvenile justice community.

We are beginning to see some results from these projects. One of the first results to come in is a study on police agencies' response to missing children cases. The results of the first phase of the study are reported in this OJJDP Update on Research.

*Update* is a new publication OJJDP has designed to keep juvenile justice practitioners up to date on research, demonstration, and statistical projects supported by OJJDP. Our goal is timely information in an easy-to-read format. We hope this publication will help keep practitioners informed about significant juvenile justice issues.

Verne L. Speirs  
Administrator



many studies have suggested that such episodes may lead to emotional trauma, including fear, shame, worry, nightmares, and personal and social dysfunction that may persist for years.

The police are usually the first agency to respond in missing child/youth cases. The nature of their response may be critical to the child's safe and rapid recovery. The question of how police handle missing and homeless children and youth cases is therefore very important, however, until now, there has been little systematic evidence to answer this question. This national survey on how the police respond to missing children and youth cases provides this information for the first time.

## The survey

- The survey on police and missing children is the first phase of OJJDP's three-part project, which is being conducted by the Research Triangle Institute of North Carolina and the URSA Institute of San Francisco. This summary is based only on the results of Phase I of the study.
- Phase II of the study, which is underway, involves personal onsite interviews with police administrators, supervisors, investigators, dispatchers, and patrol officers in 30 police departments, in order to gather a more detailed understanding of police actions in missing cases.
- Phase III of the project will study the episode from the parents' and children's points of view. After the study is completed, a model police program or programs will be developed for possible adoption by departments.
- The purpose of Phase I was to gain a better understanding of how police make decisions about missing and homeless cases involving youths.

During the spring and summer of 1987, 1,060 questionnaires were mailed to a nationally representative sample of State and local law enforcement agencies. The results reported below are based on surveys returned by 791 police departments (a 75 percent response rate).

The agencies were asked to provide

information on the following topics: the numbers and types of missing child/youth cases reported during 1986; the department's investigative procedures; and the rate of closure for these cases. In addition, they were asked about their experiences with a related case—homeless youth. And finally, respondents were asked a series of questions about departmental size, organization, and recordkeeping practices.

The definitions and categories of missing children used in the survey were based on those used in the NCMEC investigator's manual. The main categories of missing child/youth cases in the study are: runaways, parental abductions, stranger abductions, and children missing for unknown reasons (hereafter referred to as "unknown missing").

## Police response to missing children cases

What actions do police departments take when a child or youth is reported missing? The survey covered the following issues: how departments first respond to such a report; how they decide whether a case is high priority; what the obstacles are to successful investigation; how case investigation is affected by departmental organization; and case closure.

In many instances, the type of case (runaway, parental abduction, etc.) and the size and organization of the department affected how police handle missing children cases.

## Initial response

Since many police departments did not use the survey categories in classifying missing child cases, it was not possible to formally estimate the incidence or prevalence of the types of cases reported to the police from the survey data. Some conclusions, however, can clearly be drawn.

Police departments received more reports of missing runaways in 1986 than any other type of missing case. Only 7 percent said they had no runaway cases. About half the departments surveyed had 1 to 10 runaway reports; about one-third had 11 to 100

runaway reports. The second largest category was parental abductions, but 58 percent had no reports in this category. Less than 5 percent had more than 10 cases of any type of abduction in 1986.

What actions did police departments take on first receiving reports of a missing child or youth? The majority (85 percent) made a written report of all such calls. There were rarely waiting periods for accepting these reports, an apparent change from practices only a few years ago. Cases were then classified. Most departments (72 percent) classified 90 percent or more of their missing child/youth cases within 24 hours.

In addition, most departments sent a unit to the scene, conducted personal interviews with the missing child's parent or guardian, and obtained a description of the child. Most also reported the case to State and national missing persons files. In other respects, departmental actions diverged, often according to the size and organization of the department, and the type of case being investigated.

## High priority cases

How do police decide which cases to pursue most aggressively? The survey asked departments to rank 17 factors that triggered their classification of a case as high priority. Departments ranked different factors as most important, depending on the case type. But in general, four factors apparently indicated that a child or youth was particularly at risk: if the child were 8 years of age or younger; had a condition requiring prescription medication; were mentally handicapped or disabled; or were in danger of sexual exploitation.

Not surprisingly, departments reported that they most actively investigated stranger abduction or unknown missing cases—where children might be expected to be most at risk. There was a consensus that stranger abduction cases should be pursued with all available police resources to bring about the rapid, safe recovery of the victim. There was more variation among departments in their investigation of runaway and parental abduction cases.

## Obstacles to investigation

While police cited different obstacles to successful investigation, according to the kind of case, they tended to agree on the main obstacles. For example, in runaway cases, the most important obstacle (cited by nearly three-fourths of the departments) was the "age/independence/mobility" of the child or youth. In parental abduction cases, the greatest obstacles reported were the difficulty in verifying who actually had custody of the child, the custody laws, and the lack of family cooperation. In the case of stranger abductions, the main obstacles cited were the difficulty in securing witnesses, obtaining physical evidence, and classifying the case.

## Impact of departmental organization on investigation

Some significant differences emerged in police handling of missing children cases, when organizational features of departments were taken into account.

One important difference was whether departments had a written policy for dealing with missing child/youth cases. Nationally, only 27 percent of police departments had a written policy. The larger the department, the more likely it was to have a written policy: While only 23 percent of departments with fewer than 50 officers had a written policy, 82 percent of departments with 300 or more officers did. Whether a department had a written policy was significant, the survey found, in terms of some case investigations. Of the departments with written policies there was a direct association between the number of written specifications and more vigorous investigation of runaway and unknown missing cases.

Another difference emerged in how departments assigned responsibility for investigating missing/child youth cases—for example, whether the case was assigned to a missing persons unit or to a juvenile unit.

Nationally, 58 percent—usually the larger departments—reported that they had juvenile units. When the juvenile unit was located in the inves-

tigations unit of the police department, which was the case in the majority of departments, then missing cases were usually assigned to that unit.

But assigning juvenile missing cases to a juvenile unit was not necessarily the most effective strategy if the goal is an aggressive investigation. In fact, the survey found that, overall, juvenile units investigate missing cases *less* aggressively than do units that specialize in missing cases.

Departments that assigned responsibility for missing child and youth cases to missing persons units were more likely to undertake certain investigative actions, including: calling in investigative specialists; issuing an all-points bulletin in parental abduction and unknown missing cases; checking hospitals in runaway and unknown cases; and circulating photos in parental abduction cases. The survey also found that the more officers assigned to missing persons units, the more intensively runaway and unknown missing cases were investigated.

Yet another difference that emerged from the survey was the finding that, overall, larger departments tended to take fewer investigative actions in runaway and parental abduction cases. There was little difference among departments in their handling of stranger abduction cases. There were two exceptions to this general rule: larger departments were more likely to check with runaway shelters or social service agencies, and to call in investigative specialists. These exceptions are probably due to the fact that larger departments usually have more resources available. It remains puzzling that larger departments took fewer investigative actions, on the whole. The researchers indicated that this finding should be interpreted cautiously because it was impossible for the survey to control for workload effects that are strongly correlated with department size.

## Followup and case closure

Ninety percent of the departments said they always or usually followed up cases by periodically contacting the families and investigating new leads.

The survey assumed that departments closed cases only when the child was returned. Most departments reported that a high percentage of cases were closed within 72 hours, and a majority reported no cases remained open after 30 days. Runaways and abductions by known individuals were most likely to be closed quickly. About two-thirds of the departments had closed over 80 percent of such cases within 72 hours. More than half of departments closed most of their other types of missing cases in that time also. In closing out cases, virtually all departments verified that the child or youth had returned, and removed the case from information systems.

Stranger abduction cases were more likely to remain open after 30 days. Nearly one-third of departments said that more than 80 percent of their stranger abduction cases remained open after 30 days.

## Homeless youth

The survey also investigated how the police responded to homeless youth. The survey defined a homeless youth as an "unemancipated youth (14 to 17 years old) who has left home and is living on his or her own in your jurisdiction without a parent or legal guardian." Do homeless youth present a serious problem for police? And how do police handle these cases?

About half the largest police departments rated their homeless youth problem as serious or very serious. But the proportion of departments nationwide that called this a serious or very serious problem was small (14 percent). Slightly more than half of departments nationwide rated the problem of homeless youth in their jurisdictions as not very serious or not serious at all.

As in missing cases, most departments usually took certain actions in responding to homeless youth cases. These included arranging transportation home, attempting to locate and notify parents, referring cases to juvenile specialists, notifying the youth's home jurisdiction, and checking with State and national crime information systems. Only about one-fifth of the departments, usually the larger ones,

had established a written policy for dealing with homeless youth.

- Nearly two-thirds of the departments agreed on the three major obstacles in dealing with homeless youth cases: the "age/independence/mobility" of the youth; the fact that running away was not a criminal offense; and the lack of cooperation from the youth's family.

## 2 Policy implications

How can police improve law enforcement's response to cases of missing children and youth? The survey findings suggest that some features of departmental organization are associated with more thorough investigation and rapid closure of missing children cases.

One set of findings was clear: having detailed, written policy specifications was associated with more vigorous investigation of runaway and unknown cases. To encourage vigorous investigation of these cases, departments should develop written policies that specify the investigative actions to be taken.

Additional implications are likely to emerge from this ongoing research. Personal visits to 30 police departments around the country will give a more complete understanding of a variety of complex factors affecting police response so that specific recommendations can be made for legal, organizational, and community change in responding to the problems of missing children.

Interviews with parents, and with children and youth who had been missing will provide additional information about their experiences and how law enforcement agencies respond to their needs—from what is said to parents at the first contact, to case management and followup during the time a case is open.

From the combined information from all three research phases, the changes that might be recommended will deal with police organizational features and case practices such as use of State missing children clearinghouses and other information networks. Findings from this survey suggest that legal status is an important factor in a police department's investigative priorities

for cases of parental abduction and runaways. Specific recommendations for legal change must await further analysis of these and other data.

*The full report, The Police and Missing Children: Findings from a National Survey, was written by James J. Collins, Mary Ellen McCalla, Linda L. Powers, and Eileen S. Stutts. It will be available in the spring from the Juvenile Justice Clearinghouse, Box 6000, Rockville, MD., 20850. The toll-free phone number is 1-800-638-8736.*

## Notes

1. Silbert, M.H., and Pines, A.M. "Entrance Into Prostitution." *Youth and Society—A Quarterly Journal* 13(4): (1982) 471-500.
2. Agopian, M., *Parental Child Stealing*. Lexington, MA: Lexington Books, 1981.

*The Assistant Attorney General, Office of Justice Programs, coordinates the criminal and juvenile justice activities of the following program Offices and Bureaus: National Institute of Justice, Bureau of Justice Statistics, Bureau of Justice Assistance, Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention, and Office for Victims of Crime.*

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