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Program Narrative

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1. Introduction

ACQUISITIONS

This Program Narrative gives the background and reasons why additional funding is needed to complete the analysis and final report for the "National Study of Law Enforcement Policies and Practices for Missing Children." Also discussed are remaining study activities, major analysis dimensions, the content of the final report, and the expected utility of the report for police policy and practice. The study included three phases, the report will make use of data and findings for all three study phases:

- A national survey of police agencies that investigated missing child cases to determine case characteristics, investigative priorities and procedures, obstacles to investigation, and case outcomes;
- site visits to 30 jurisdictions to conduct interviews with various police and shelter agency personnel to get detailed information about police response and problems in connection with missing children cases;
- interviews with parents and guardians who reported a missing child to the police, and with children who returned after a missing event, to describe cases, case outcomes, and police responses from the points of view of parents and children.

The goal of the remainder of the study is to integrate the three phases to generate information about police actions, decisionmaking and case outcomes in a way that informs future law enforcement policies and practices.

In the next section the need for additional time and support is explained. There are two major reasons: (1) delay in completion of Phase III data collection, and the extensive data cleaning and file construction that was required to determine sample case outcomes and eligibility, and compute weights for the Phase III parent interviews, and (2) design modifications and delays in connection with Phases I and II. Details are given below.

In section three below the analysis and final report preparation tasks are discussed. The overall goals and major analysis dimensions are

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described. The approach for identifying implications for policy and practice is discussed. In section four there is a short discussion of the timetable for completion of the analyses and final report.

The original award under cooperative agreement 86-MC-CX-K036 was to Research Triangle Institute and the URSA Institute--corecipients. This supplemental application is for funding to RTI only in connection with analysis and preparation of the final project report. The budget request that accompanies this application is a minimum needed to complete the final report. As indicated in the budget and narrative, approximately half time support is requested for the three RTI analysts who have worked on the study from its inception for the April-May 1990 period when report preparation is undertaken. Modest additional computer programming, secretarial and clerical support is requested. As will be clear from later discussion the data analysis and report preparation tasks are carefully focused to address only the major goals of the study.

2. Need for Supplemental Funding

The preparation of the analysis file for the missing children project involved substantially more effort than was expected due to serious problems with the data collection process. These data collection problems included an inadequate control system, no secondary case identification system and inadequate quality control.

The full scope of these problems was not apparent until preparation of the analysis file was well underway. The documentation received with the tapes from URSA noted only a few cases with missing sections, and did not indicate that there were any cases for which no forms had been received.

Efforts to identify and correct these problems were complex, time-consuming, and expensive. URSA submitted the data in 14 separate files, one for each section of each form. The first step in analysis file construction was to merge these into one file with one data line for each case. At this stage, duplicate ID's and missing interview forms were discovered. Since no back-up ID was keyed, we were found to use certain variables such as the child's age and sex to resolve these.

The following steps were necessary to prepare a data file that would support the calculation of response rates, generation of sampling weights and that is relatively "clean".

a. Reconstructing the control system

RTI staff requested and received all the control sheets that URSA had. These were coded and keyed at RTI. There were 186 cases for which an ID had been assigned in the field but no form had ever been received by URSA, and 300 cases for which at least one form (generally a case extraction form only) had been received, but no control form was submitted. Comparison of the completed control forms that were available with the interview data in the file also revealed a large number of discrepancies between what was recorded on the control sheet and what was in the data file. For example, there were 68 occurrences in which the case control sheet indicated an interview form had been completed, but no data was in the file.

b. Reconstructing the sampling process

RTI requested and received the sample listing sheets used by the field interviewers. In addition, we requested any other information that the field supervisor had kept about cases which were missing from the files. A list with sparse handwritten notes about a few of the cases was submitted. RTI staff examined the sample listing sheets and these notes on a case-by-case basis and then coded any information about the casetype and final result of the case that was available.

c. Assignment of a final casetype and eligibility code to each case

An iterative process was used to assign a final casetype and eligibility code to each case. (This should have been done in the field by interviewers and monitored and checked by the data collection supervisor.) First, several of the key variables such as age, sex, length of time gone were cleaned. This involved comparing the magnitude of the discrepancies on these variable for each case, setting criteria for choosing a final value, and examining data on the various forms and on the sample listing

sheets to fill in the missing data. Then the eligibility determination formula for each casetype was applied to each case in the file to check whether the interviewers had correctly determined eligibility.

d. Modifications and Delays in Phases I and II

A second major reason why additional time and support is needed for the study is design modifications and delays in connection with the earlier Phases I and II of the study. Details were given in a letter to Mr. Douglas Thomas of OJJDP dated November 4, 1988. The reasons were summarized on page 3 of the letter as follows:

- research activities not originally proposed that were requested by OJJDP and/or recommended by the advisory board,
- delays in study activities while awaiting review or approval or because some activities took longer than expected, and
- study design modifications required by early findings and other factors.

In spite of these formidable challenges the study is close to completion, but in need of additional financial support to complete study activities.

3. Analysis and Final Report Preparation

A final report outline is given in Exhibit 1. Included are a general background and introduction, a chapter that presents the conceptual foundations of the study, a methodological chapter and several chapters that deal with the various missing child and youth categories: runaways, throwaways, family and nonfamily abductions, and otherwise missing cases. Some general discussion of the framework for analysis is given here to provide an idea of the content and goals of the report.

a. Framework for Analysis

Police agencies fulfill a wide variety of functions; the enforcement of criminal laws is only one. Many daily activities of police departments require that police operate on the boundary separating law enforcement and

Exhibit 1

Outline: Law Enforcement Policies and Practices for Missing Children and Homeless Youth: Integrated Final Report

Executive Summary

Part 1: Study Objectives and Design

Chapter 1: Introduction and Background

- 1.1 Public concern regarding missing children problem
- 1.2 Legislative Response
- 1.3 OJJDP Initiative

Chapter 2: Conceptual Foundation of Study

- 2.1 Study Objectives (describe and evaluate police practice)
- 2.2 Police as public agency
- 2.3 Case Types - definitions and implications for police

Chapter 3: Methodology

- 3.1 Overview - purpose of three phases
- 3.2 Phase I
 - A
 1. sample design
 2. instrument development
 3. data collection
 4. response rates/sample weights
- 3.3 Phase II
 1. sample design
 2. instrument development
 3. data collection
 4. site visit summaries
- 3.4 Phase III
 1. sample design
 2. instrument development
 3. data collection
 4. response rates/sample weights

Exhibit 1 (continued)

Part II: Findings and Policy Implications

Chapter 4: Runaways

- 4.1 Introduction: Phase I and II Key Findings
- 4.2 Case Characteristics: time gone, demographics, etc.
- 4.3 Investigative Actions: type and intensity
- 4.4 Investigative Obstacles: are police identified obstacles impediments?
- 4.5 Risk Assessment: adverse outcomes and their correlates
- 4.6 Special Topics
- 4.7 Implications for Policy and Practice

Chapter 5: Throwaways

- 5.1 Introduction: Phase II and National Incidence Study Findings
- 5.2 Case Characteristics: time gone, demographics, etc.
- 5.3 Investigative Actions: type and intensity; comparison with runaways
- 5.4 Risk Assessment: adverse outcomes; comparison with runaways
- 5.5 Special Topics
- 5.6 Implications for Policy and Practice

Chapter 6: Family Abductions

- 5.1 Introduction: Phase I and II Key Findings
- 5.2 Case Characteristics: time gone, demographics, etc.
- 5.3 Investigative Actions: type and intensity;
- 5.4 Investigative Obstacles: are police identified obstacles impediments?
- 5.5 Risk Assessment: adverse outcomes and their correlates
- 5.6 Special Topics
- 5.7 Implications for Policy and Practice

Chapter 7: Non-Family Abductions

- 6.1 Introduction: Phase I and II Key Findings
- 6.2 Case Characteristics: qualitative analysis
- 6.3 Police Response: type and intensity
- 6.4 Implications for Policy and Practice

Chapter 8: Otherwise Missing

- 7.1 Introduction: Phase I and II Key Findings
- 7.2 Case Characteristics: qualitative analysis
- 7.3 Police Response: type and intensity
- 7.4 Implications for Policy and Practice

Exhibit 1 (continued)

Chapter 9: Summary and Conclusions

- 9.1 Case characteristics comparison across case types
- 9.2 Investigative Obstacles: are police identified obstacles same factors as associated with more serious cases
- 9.3 Consistency of parent/police perceptions of police action
- 9.4 Risk Analysis: correlates of risk, consistency of risk factors from police perspective to actual (identified) risk factors

Chapter 10: Recommendations

- 10.1 Changes in police policy and practice
 - 10.2 Collaboration between police and other agencies
 - 10.3 Need for additional public resources
 - 10.4 Legislative change
 - 10.5 Future research needs
-

social welfare provision. They come to the aid of crime victims or individuals in need of protection; their decisions about actions to be taken are often guided not by consideration of broken laws, but by perceptions about the risks of harm. The vast majority of missing children cases are in the latter category.

Nonfamily abductions of children are an exception in this regard. These events are unambiguously criminal and involve substantial risks of physical harm to victims. Police departments respond accordingly. They commit available resources to the investigation of these cases on a high priority basis. Findings from the police department survey that was Phase I of this study, show that nonfamily abduction cases are investigated aggressively (Collins et al., 1989: 62-70). Nonfamily abduction cases, however, are a small proportion of total missing children cases (Collins et al., 1989). Runaways are a large majority of missing children cases.

[Blice agencies are faced with the need to make a number of decisions when they receive a report of a missing child or youth:

- they must make judgments about the type of case being reported and the risks of harm that may be involved, i.e., case classification and risk assessment;

- they must decide what kind and level of resources will be committed to the case, i.e., the investigative response;
- often, police must take a social service posture to respond appropriately to cases.

Moreover, decisions frequently must be made with insufficient information, in the context of inadequate or inappropriate resource availability, and about matters police are not (theoretically) mandated to concern themselves.

b. Case Classification and Risk Assessment

In the most general sense, a child is missing when he or she is not where they are supposed to be. When parents or guardians initially call the police they often know little more than this. During this initial contact, which is often with a call taker or dispatcher trained to make case priority assignments, a series of questions will be asked to identify the caller, the nature of the incident, and to classify the case for further action.¹ Decisions about type of case and level of risk are not usually made with certainty at this point. Most departments assign a patrol officer or investigator to gather additional information before deciding on investigative response. This officer asks reporting parents a variety of questions to permit judgments about case type (runaway, abduction, etc.), and risk of harm. For example, police assess whether the child has voluntarily left home. Younger children and those with a disability are usually viewed as being at greater risk of harm than older, healthy children. Case classification and risk assessment then shape the subsequent activities of the police.

Often the information provided to the police about cases is insufficient for accurate and unambiguous case classification and risk assessment. This absence of sufficient information for clear decisionmaking requires that police exercise discretion in their choice of response. In such cases, factors such as departmental policy, resource availability,

¹Forst et al. 1988: 37-44 describe how these initial reports are handled.

parental preferences, and the subjective evaluation of the police all influence the investigative response.

c. Investigative Response

Police decisionmaking about how aggressively to pursue missing child cases, then, depends on the information they have about case type and risk of harm and their interpretation of these data. Investigative responses range from fairly straightforward information gathering such as getting a description of the missing child, to aggressive and resource intensive activities such as interviewing witnesses and enlisting the help of investigative specialists. From the perspective of the police, the goal is commitment of the appropriate kind and level of investigative resources considering legal and risk factors, departmental policy and resource availability, competing higher priority demands, and other considerations.

Nonfamily abductions aside, most missing children cases are not regarded as serious by police. Typically, they are runaways who return home safely within hours or days, are lost children who are found quickly, or involve custody disputes between estranged parents that are resolved without harm in a short time. These events may be emotionally traumatic and have long-term negative consequences for parents and children. But from the police perspective, they do not involve serious law violations or risk of harm and thus do not warrant the heavy commitment of police resources. These police judgments are occasionally wrong with tragic consequences, as when a case with a routine "profile" turns out to involve serious injury or death. The typical nonserious nature of most children cases inclines the police to a low or modest commitment of their resources in the absence of evidence suggesting a case may be serious.

Police are also inclined toward the nonaggressive investigation of most runaway and family abduction cases because they are viewed as "family" or social work matters. Running away from home is not a violation of law in many places. The legal custody status of family abduction cases is often ambiguous. These events often involve conflicts between parents or between parents and children, and are seen as problems in the home that are not resolvable by police intervention. As will be discussed below, some of these problems do justify or require police intervention, but most are viewed by police as outside their responsibility.

Often there is not agreement between the police and parents or between the police and other public or private agencies about the appropriate nature and level of police responses to missing children. Such disagreements arise from lack of common understandings about police responsibilities, and from limited law enforcement resources.

d. The Police Officer as Social Worker

Investigation of missing children cases often uncovers illegal parent or guardian behavior such as sexual abuse or neglect, or family/living conditions so destructive that intervention is required. Such circumstances are particularly difficult to deal with and police departments differ markedly in their responses. Some departments are proactive with well-developed policies and arrangements for handling these cases. More commonly, policies and practices are not specified. Human and financial resources and appropriate interventions are often scarce. Intervention may be foregone because a department or officer has a limited vision of appropriate law enforcement intervention and/or because of limited resources and the absence of options.

e. Parent Perceptions of Police Responsibility

There are sometimes differences between parent and police perceptions about how aggressively the police should investigate cases. Exhibit 2 illustrates typical disparities in the way that parents and police view the risks and expected police responses for the various case types. The potential for differing expectations between police and parents is significant for three of the four kinds of cases. Agreement between police and parents is likely to be high for nonfamily abduction, but for runaway, family abduction, and otherwise missing cases, a consensus may be absent. Parents' generally expect police to pursue cases more aggressively than police think appropriate. The major reason for disparity between police and parents is likely to rest on parent's belief that a child or youth is in more danger than police think to be the case.

Exhibit 2. Potential Conflicts in Police-Parent Expectations About Responses to Missing Children Cases

Case type	Police	Parents
1. <u>Runaways</u>		
Risk	Minimal (unless otherwise indicated)	High
Mission	Social work not crime fighting	Find and return child ASAP
2. <u>Family Abductions</u>		
Risk	Minimal (unless otherwise indicated)	Medium to high
Mission	Civil not criminal matter	Return child--punish offender
3. <u>Non-Family Abductions</u>		
Risk	High	High
Mission	Return child ASAP, apprehend offender	Return child ASAP, apprehend offender
4. <u>Otherwise Missing</u>		
Risk	Minimal (unless otherwise indicated)	High
Mission	Classify case and act accordingly	Find and return child

The final report will examine how often and what kind of disparities exist between police and parents' perceptions and whether there is frequent parental dissatisfaction with police actions. These findings may have implications for police handling of missing children and/or information-sharing between police and parents.

f. Goals of Report

This study has accumulated information from the police, parents, and children about various aspects of missing children incidents and the police response to these cases:

- the characteristics of incidents,
- correlates of the incidents,
- police investigative activities,
- obstacles to investigation,
- risk factors for negative incident outcomes such as victimization during the missing event.

The goals of this report are to describe incidents, the police response and its effects, and the outcomes of the incidents. Parent and police perceptions will be compared. Risk factors for negative outcomes will be identified. The relationship of police activities to case characteristics and their outcomes will be described.

A major goal of the analyses will be to identify implications for policy and practice. For example, in Phase 1 of the study, police identified case characteristics they believe to be risks for negative outcomes and which they used as a basis for assigning case priorities. By analyzing actual cases it will be possible to determine whether risk factors identified by the police are those actually associated with negative outcomes. Results may confirm the accuracy of police assessments and thus reinforce existing policies and practices. On the other hand, changes in police responses may be suggested by findings that identify risk factors not emphasized by police.

4. Timetable

Completion of a draft final report is projected for the end of May or very early June, 1990. The draft final report will be submitted to OJJDP, and Advisory Board members will be asked to review it. When comments are received, the report will be revised and the final version submitted to OJJDP.

REFERENCES

- Collins, J.J., McCalla, M.E., Powers, L.L., and Stutts, E.S. (1989). The Police and Missing Children. Research Triangle Park, NC: Research Triangle Institute.
- Forst, M.L., Vivona, T.S., Garcia, A., and Jang, M. (1988). National Study of Law Enforcement Policies and Practices Regarding Missing Children and Homeless Youth. San Francisco, CA: URSA Institute.