
CHAPTER 3
RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

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This chapter contains the research methodology adopted by the researcher to study the missing children problem. As seen in the earlier chapter through other international and national studies, the missing children problem is multi-faceted and encompasses diverse issues. The main aim of the research is to provide valid and accurate information based on empirical data, and the research methodology has been designed and developed accordingly.

Rationale of the study

The issue of missing children is taking on enormous proportions across India, and research is needed for the design and implementation of programs and policies for child protection and intervention. This study is an attempt to explore the issue of missing children, aims to understand the phenomenon and provide some accurate information on the subject. The purpose of this study is to develop a deeper understanding of the problem. It is an exploratory study since the problem of missing children is complex and multi-faceted. This entails exploring the family environment, circumstances under which the child went missing and the response of the police authorities to the situation.

This research can help in making early intervention and prevention frameworks that address the risk and protective factors surrounding why children go missing. Relevant frameworks would include developmental crime prevention and early intervention, prevention of child abuse and neglect, and family and domestic violence.

This research also aims to identify the steps that could address the gaps in the missing children agenda, implementing strategies and educating police, stakeholders and the public on missing children. The study can be a resource for Government agencies, Law Implementation agencies, Juvenile Justice System and social organizations working in the area of Child Rights and Child Protection and has the overall aim of recommending and justifying action taken to prevent, protect, provide for, or rehabilitate children who are at the risk of going missing, are already missing or have been traced and require rehabilitation.

Research usually takes place in a world where important decisions are taken by those with the most power (governments, elite, donors, international agencies). Those with the least power are far removed from decision making. Research on the worst forms of child exploitation, including trafficking, deals with some of the most powerless members of society. If exploited and abused children are involved in research, this can challenge existing hierarchies and power relations.

The overall purpose of this research is to develop information which will provide guidance for policies that will address effective, efficient handling of missing children's cases for their quick and safe recovery as well as enable stakeholders to take preventive measures for keeping children safe.

Significance of the problem in Social Work Perspective

Missing children is a significant issue which requires a child-focused response. The implications of a child going missing are severe, and impact the child, family and society as a whole. Protection and safeguards are required to be put in place for safety of children, and interventions

at several levels are necessary to address and combat the issue of missing children and the affected families. The police hold the most essential position of authority when a child is reported missing, but a holistic approach is required in the care and protection of children, which involves the stakeholders at the government level, the community level and the individual level. It is the responsibility of social work practitioners to bridge that gap and support those that have responsibility and primacy for the safety of children who live in their communities.

The emotional and societal cost of a child going missing is incalculable, such as the emotional impact on the child's family, and the child's future contribution to society. A study done in UK, Report of the Parliamentary Panel (2007) Safeguarding Children and Young People who Runaway or go Missing from Home or Care attempted to quantify the cost of missing children to the police service and the figure was estimated to be at £ 222 million. While no study has been done in India to ascertain the same, there is no doubt that the implications of the missing children problem is huge, and social work interventions are urgently required to address the issue keeping in focus the needs of the child, family and society.

Objectives of the study

The objectives of this study are as follows:

- To create a comprehensive understanding of the phenomenon and the problem of missing children. It includes nature, extent, significance and problems related to existing social norms and legal framework dealing with it and the challenges in the implementation of the rules and regulations.

- To evaluate and analyze the policy level gaps in addressing the problem of missing children.
- To highlight the problem of missing children and sensitize the general public and government machinery about the serious threat posed by the phenomena of missing children supported by various case studies.
- To draw the attention of all concerned with child rights to focus their attention on the problem and take steps to combat the same.
- To provide stakeholders in the child protection system with information giving them a better understanding of the affected families' needs.

Research Design

In order to design programmes to combat the problem of missing children, valid, accurate information is needed - to identify the most urgent problems and the most effective ways to intervene. This research is designed with this as its primary goal. While academic research is designed mainly to prove or disprove a hypothesis, this study aims to collect information needed for an action to take place, in order to design practical solutions to a practical problem.

Qualitative as well as quantitative data collection approaches have been used in an attempt to collect the necessary information on the causes, nature and extent of missing children in Gujarat. Quantitative data collection was vital to determine the magnitude of missing children. Qualitative data was essential to establish the aspects of missing children not directly amenable to quantification but which determined or influenced the whole phenomena of missing children. Field research was carried out to understand the current situation of missing children in Gujarat.

The study has been done by adopting the Interview schedule method, data collection from primary and secondary sources, discussion, observation and interview of parents of missing children.

Theoretical and Operational Definitions

There is no universal definition of a missing child.

In USA, children are considered missing if they have disappeared from the guardianship of their legal custodian. Additionally, children who purposely leave without the intention of returning, sometimes referred to as runaways, are considered missing. They are considered missing until they are either found (alive or otherwise) or until a certain length of time has passed after which they are considered dead; the period of time varies by jurisdiction. (Source: NISMART-1)

In the UK, where until today there has been no clear separation between adults and children in the data collection, the Association of Chief Police Officers (ACPO) has defined a missing person as: "anyone whose whereabouts is unknown whatever the circumstances of disappearance. They will be considered missing until located and their well-being or otherwise established". (Source: Guidance on the Management, Recording and Investigations on Missing Persons, ACPO, UK, 2005)

In India there is no working definition of a missing child. For the purpose of this study, we shall define a missing child as "a child under the age of 18 whose whereabouts is unknown to his or

her parent, guardian or legal custodian”.

Data Source

The design of the research required two forms of data source, both primary and secondary to be obtained to gain insights into the missing children problem.

Primary Data: Primary data was collected from the parents of missing children through in depth interviews following separate interview schedules along with observation.

Secondary Data: Quantitative Government data of reported cases has been compiled, analysed and interpreted from social work perspective. Secondary data was obtained from Missing Persons Cell, Police Bhavan, Gandhinagar.

The study was conducted over two phases and incorporated both a quantitative phase based on the analysis of secondary data sources and a qualitative phase based on semi-structured interviews with key informants, namely, parents of missing children, police personnel and NGOs.

Phase one of the research involved the analysis of secondary quantitative data available from Police Bhavan, Gandhinagar. This data do not distinguish the numbers of children, that is persons under 18 years from the other adult categories of missing persons.

Data was provided detailing the age and gender of missing children reports by the Missing Person's Bureau, Police Bhavan, Gandhinagar from 2000-2011 and it is upon this data that the analysis is based. Further information was not centrally available.

In phase two of the research semi-structured interviews were conducted with parents of missing children and a more detailed breakdown relating to the missing children in terms of age, gender,

family background and incident leading to and police response to the missing episode was compiled. In the absence of substantive data on the actual numbers of children reported as missing, interviews sought to qualitatively assess the extent of the problem.

Universe and Sample

The study involved the use of in depth, semi-structured interview during the pilot study which provided the researcher with several insights. On the basis of the pilot study, the researcher restructured interview questions and altered the language of the interview questions in accordance with the comfort level of the respondent. At the onset of the data collection process, the researcher commenced with random sampling process, having procured the list of potential respondents, i.e, parents of missing children from data provided by the police during secondary data collection. However, certain developments occurred – the case of Vishwa Patel, an 11 year old girl who went missing in January 2012 brought media attention to the issue of missing children and parents of missing children united to form a group to highlight their distress. The movement gained increasing momentum and parents of missing children were united in their efforts to raise public awareness in the community.

When the researcher visited one of the parents involved in the movement, it resulted in the respondent identifying other potential or key informants who were later contacted. Therefore snowball sampling procedure came about as a natural outcome during the process of data collection in the light of these developments.

Tools of Data Collection

The researcher obtained informed consent from the key respondents before proceeding with the interview process. The sensitive nature of the study made it imperative for the researcher to follow an informal approach during the interview process. Care was taken to ensure that the respondents' feelings were respected which entailed altering the sequence of questions on several occasions. During the pilot study the researcher found that the parents were unwilling to refer to their children in the past tense, and preferred to talk about their child as though they were still present in the family. With the respondents becoming emotional at several stages during the interview process, the researcher was required to be understanding and comforting while being objective in recording the responses.

In addition to the interviews with parents of missing children who were the key respondents, several police officers were instrumental in providing additional information and shared their views on the issue of missing children.

The tools of data collection can therefore be summarized as below:

- **Semi-structured interviews:** The areas of discussion were predetermined through an interview schedule, but the subjects were permitted to approach these in their own way. A typical interview lasted around 40-45 minutes.
- **Observation:** Observation by the researcher made it possible to confirm much of the data about economic conditions, relations within community and family, and other elements related to the missing child episode, such as police response to the matter. During interviews and throughout field visits, field notes were taken of observations of

respondent parents and their environment as well police officers responding to the situation.

Inclusion Criteria

The study contains only reported cases of missing children.

Exclusion Criteria

The study has not included unreported cases and cases of missing children who have eventually been found as homicide victims. Further, children missing from State Homes has not been included in this study as it involves an entirely different focus altogether and is a topic for a new research undertaking.

Limitations of the Study

The study relied on the data available with the police which, as the study shows, have limitations and simply do not tell us the number of children reported as missing. The arising methodological difficulty from the police data is that the figures relate to the numbers of reports of missing children and not the numbers of actual children.

This study establishes the facts pertaining to missing children according to current available information and interview data. It incorporates information gathered from NCRB, NGOs and Police. It is important to emphasize here the small-scale nature of the study; therefore the researcher has not attempted to address all the issues relating to this problem. All efforts have however, been made to provide and present findings based on empirical data.

Researcher Experience

Establishing trust and rapport with the respondents were the most important aspects of the study as the subject was very emotional and parents were reluctant to answer questions to a stranger with a questionnaire. Trust and rapport were built over time, almost always requiring several visits. Repeated meetings helped the researcher to establish trust and build relationships.

The researcher consciously worked hard to be accurate and objective, and to fairly and accurately record the responses of the parents as well as depict the lapses on the part of the system as it is. It was not part of the researcher's job to push an agenda, but rather to be relentlessly objective and prevent any sort of bias to seep in during the course of this study.

During the initial interview, the researcher found that parents were reluctant to refer to their children in the past tense. Therefore respecting the sentiments of the respondents, the researcher asked questions in the present tense as though the children were still a part of the household. The most sensitive questions were left until the end of an interview, during which time the researcher had built up understanding of the general situation and broader context. It was important for the researcher to respect the local customs and norms, and be appropriately attired during home visits. All the respondents were assured of confidentiality and assured that their names as well as the names of their children would be changed in the research report, which allowed the parents to be honest in their responses.

It was important for the researcher to emphasize that the research study was an academic exercise which would aid in implementation of policies and laws for protection of children and help contain the problem. The parents were almost always hopeful that the researcher would somehow assist in tracing their children, and which the researcher found particularly painful to

address. However, it was essential to clarify that participating in the study would not in any way ensure the child's safe return.

The researcher's experience during the collection of secondary data was positive, with all police officers and concerned authorities being co-operative and approachable. They were honest with their opinions and pragmatic about the situation and possible solutions, accepting for the most part limitations and lapses in the system. However, most officials are unanimous in their opinion that the onus lies on the part of the parents when it comes to child safety. During visits to the police station with parents, a marked difference was observed. While the researcher was always treated with a certain respect, the police extended no such courtesy to the parents, and empathy with the situation of the parents was found to be lacking. The issues that have been identified in this study are complex, and attempt to address them all in a comprehensive manner is beyond the scope of this study. Rather, the aim is to provide a framework of reference for further research so that effective measures can be taken based on these studies and bring about reforms in child safety and protection.

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