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**CHAPTER 5**  
**MISSING CHILDREN: CASE STUDIES**

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## **CHAPTER 6**

### **MISSING CHILDREN: CASE STUDIES**

This chapter covers five case studies of missing children. As it has been seen in chapter 1, missing children can be classified into five categories (NISMART-1, 1990). The researcher attempts to provide insights into the different facets and dimensions involving the issue of missing children through the case studies depicted in this chapter. The case studies reflect the unique circumstances and situations relating to each particular case, in the discussion following each case study, the observations of the researcher in respect to each case is provided.

#### **Case Study 1: Stanger Abduction**

Manju is 22 years old, a careworn mother of two children whose haggard face and scrawny limbs make her look much older than she is. She is eager to talk to the researcher and believes that the researcher would somehow assist her in locating her missing child. Meeting Manju at her rented lodgings in a congested Ahmedabad chawl, the small dwelling is clean, and her meagre belongings are arranged neatly with everything in its place. This is in sharp contrast to the filth in the narrow lanes of the slum outside, where dogs, rats and flies inhabit surrounding area along with the human inhabitants. There are half-naked children peering curiously inside the house, and run away in a fit of giggles when the researcher attempts to beckon them inside. Manju's 5 year old son stares at the researcher solemnly, cautiously staying by his mother's side. The father has left for work and will spend his day providing his services as a human mule, loading and unloading heavy sacks of grains from trucks at a local warehouse. Manju supplements her husband's income by working as a domestic help at five houses at a nearby residential society which she describes as having many big cars.

Manju settles down after she rummages through a worn cloth bag containing some papers, a tattered diary, and pictures of various gods and goddesses. In her hand she has a dog-eared family photograph which she offers to the researcher. The researcher sees a younger looking Manju, wearing a yellow saree with her head covered and holding a 24 month old baby girl. Manju's husband is staring vacantly at the camera, standing stiffly beside Manju while her little boy is next to his father looking slightly bewildered. The picture is ordinary, there is nothing special about it. But two things make this photo important. This picture, taken nearly two years ago, is the only one that Manju has of her daughter, Janvi. Janvi, now four years old, disappeared in November 2011. It is through this photograph Manju relives memories of her little girl, and this is what she could produce to the police when she was asked for a picture of her daughter. It was rejected, an outdated photograph understandably not of any use to the police.

With tears in her eyes, Manju begs me to help her find her little girl, whom she believes has been abducted to be sold into a life of prostitution. She narrates the sequence of that fateful day, describing how she dressed up her daughter in a red sweater, a slight chill in the air indicating the onset of winter. She had kneaded dough to make a few thick rotis for a hurried breakfast, keeping two as usual for the children to snack on during her absence while she went about her chores at the houses she worked for. The researcher interrupts, wanting to know who took care of her children while she was away at work. Manju says she has always left the children alone, they would amuse themselves playing in the lane outside their home with other children. She does not have any other alternative, her parents and in-laws are in their ancestral village and she does not have extended family in the city. When she returned home from work, her daughter was gone. She does not know the precise time when her little girl went missing, and her son, just a year older, cannot provide any answers.

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“Every day I look at this picture, I look at my daughter's little clothes, and I go to the police station to beg them to help me,” Manjua says. “But often the police just refuse to let me in. They've told me to give up, that it will be better for me if I think of my daughter as dead.”

The researcher accompanies Manju to the police station, another fruitless journey where Manju is turned away without any assurance of hope from the police, or even a token display of interest in her case. The police officer present on this day recognizes her, and brushes her off rudely. “Why give birth to children if you are not able to take care of them?” the officer asks Manju. The officer is less condescending towards the researcher when the purpose is explained to him. He speaks in a conspiratorial whisper, stating that parents often sell their own children when they have too many mouths to feed.

Police are often tempted to blame the victim. But four-year-old Janvi, who will indeed likely never be found, whether she was lost, stolen, sold or murdered, bears no blame for what happened. Manju says she feels guilty because she knows she failed her daughter. A mother, she says, is supposed to protect her children. “What kind of a mother am I”, she asks the researcher, “that I could not even keep my child safe?”

Manju fights poverty, an indifferent society and an equally indifferent police system. She does not have the luxury of staying at home and caring for her children, and society does not provide her with child services she can avail of when she is forced to leave her children and go to work. When she loses her child, she is blamed for being careless. The researcher tells Manju it is not her but the society who has failed her daughter. The researcher leaves Manju as she holds on to the forlorn hope that her child will return home eventually.

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## **Discussion**

This is obviously a case of stranger abduction, as a three year old cannot vanish from the vicinity of her home. Even if she wandered off and got lost, any person coming across a distressed toddler on her own would immediately take the child to the local police station. There are various levels at which intervention is needed as seen from this case study. Firstly, a missing child complaint does not come under cognizable offences. Police action therefore can oscillate between being helpful or lackadaisical and treat the matter as being the lowest in its priority list.

The attitude and approach taken when responding to a report of a missing child may determine whether the child is recovered promptly and safely or remains missing and/or in an exploitative environment. Each stage of the case therefore, from initial report to case closure, forms a critical component of the child protection response.

The Police Department must therefore provide each officer with the necessary tools and training to enable them to act quickly and decisively when confronted with reports of missing or abducted children. An important tool is a clearly worded policy containing logical procedures and best practices to follow when receiving reports pertaining to these incidents.

Secondly, Manju did not have any safe place to keep her children while she went to work. With nuclear families more a norm today than an exception, and rising costs forcing both parents to earn, adequate facilities for child care need to be established where working mothers can leave their children for the duration of their working hours. Anganwadis are already a fixture in every ward, and its premises can be utilized to provide a safe place to keep children at no extra cost to the government. Effective prevention and an informed community can reduce the social and economic costs associated with missing children.

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## Case Study 2: Lost

A curious nine-year-old Mukesh ventured out of his home in Asarwa on September 6, 2011 to watch a religious procession. Still in his school uniform, that was the last his mother saw of him. Since then, it has been countless rounds to the Shahibaug police station for the poor and completely broken parents. The police first refused to acknowledge a complaint, then Mukesh's Asarwa Municipal School intervened and filed one on behalf of the parents. With no word from the police, father Madanlal, who works as labourer, searched all over north Gujarat, even visited his village in Rajasthan to look for his son. Mukesh's mother Narmada, who is a cart-puller, has, in fact, contacted so many people that she has exhausted all photographs of Mukesh. With only one photo left, the couple gets photocopies made. They want the police to put up posters of Mukesh's photo which his school has prepared but with the police not taking any interest, Narmada's meagre earnings of Rs 50 now go into making photocopies of the poster. She pastes it wherever she goes.

"When we went to Shahbaug police station, instead of registering the complaint immediately, police asked us to wait if my son returns on his own," says Narmada, his mother. "The police did not help us in searching the places where we thought he could be. My husband and I searched ourselves. Even today when we go to the police station, many times they refuse to meet us."

For Mukesh's poor parents, both of whom work, it is a dilemma — if they go searching for him, the family, including Mukesh's sister and 80-year-old grandfather, will starve. Still, they have been knocking on police's doors. The day Mukesh went missing, father Madanlal tells the researcher, he went to the police to lodge a complaint. Instead of registering his complaint,

Madanlal was told to wait for a "couple of days". Though Madanlal kept visiting the police station, he has never been informed what the police have done to trace his son. In between, a policeman came home to ask if the boy had returned. "If he returns, just inform the police station," he said and went away.

For Narmada, as she tells the researcher, the worst part is when they sit for their meals and she sees the empty spot where her son used to sit.

## **Discussion**

The apathy of the police in dealing with the parents of missing children when they visit the police station is a refrain echoed by majority of the parents. The Police and provincial authorities have a moral and legal responsibility, as well as the power and resource, to provide timely help. The reluctance of the Police to file an FIR has been documented even by the committee investigating the Police lapses on the Nithari case. This is further confirmed by the parents the researcher interacted with for the study. There is a crucial need for a change of attitude on the part of the Police. It should be made mandatory for the Police to register an FIR immediately when a missing child is reported.

The level of support for parents of missing children is insufficient. Coping with the trauma of having a child who is missing demands courage and determination on the part of parents and other family members. When the parents are poor, they are caught between looking for their missing child and earning a living. These parents battle the pain of a missing child and the guilt at having to choose between earning a livelihood and searching for their child. An agency where

parents of missing children can obtain guidance, emotional support and resources needs to be established. Counseling services to enable them to deal with the trauma and learn coping skills should be set up.

Families, friends and the missing people themselves suffer significant impacts associated with the missing person incident. These include impacts related to health, work, quality of life, emotional, relationship and economic issues. An Australian research has shown at least 12 people are affected for each missing person's case. Families need to be connected with support services to assist them to cope with the impacts while the missing person is located and with the reconnection to ensure that issues influencing the disappearance are addressed.

### **Case Study 3: Unknown reason**

Every new visitor fills Salim Khan with the hope that there might be some news of his son, Arif. Two years ago, the 12 year old left home in the morning to go to school and never returned. Khan, a resident of Ahmedabad's old city, shows the researcher a photograph of a smiling boy wearing a school uniform. He excelled in studies, his father proudly says, and aspired to be a doctor. Khan pleads to the researcher for help in finding his son, wiping away tears as he sits on a run-down cot, the only piece of furniture in a tiny dilapidated dwelling. The congested lane where he lives has many children running around gleefully, oblivious to the suffering of a missing child's father.

The father continues talking about his son to the researcher, remembering how happy he was at school, and how he enjoyed getting into mischief with his friends. Khan believes his son was abducted on his way to school. He did not even reach school that day, says the distraught father.



He feels helpless, he tells the researcher. "Who will listen to a penniless driver", he says. He blames his poverty in his inability to help his son. His two younger children live like orphans now, his wife having passed away in the last year waiting for their son to return. Life has conspired against him, Khan says. The disappearance of his son destroyed his family. As if being poor was not enough, Khan tells the researcher bitterly.

"How can a child vanish into thin air?" asks Khan. The researcher enquires about police action in searching for his son. Khan describes the apathy of the police when he went to the police station to report his child as missing. They were reluctant to file a report he says, assuring him that the child must have skipped school to have some fun and would be back soon. Unable to get the police to take any action, he says he went searching at the main bus terminal at Gita Mandir, and keeps making rounds of the railway station, and also his relatives place in the hope that his son had decided to visit them. When the police finally registered his report, all they did was come for a visit to his house and enquire if the boy had returned. Khan has never been told what is being done to trace his child.

Khan continues to feel guilty, he believes he could have done something to protect his child. At times his despair is so great he wishes for death. But he has to live for his two younger sons, and he goes through each day hoping for a miracle. He still wants to believe his son will return someday, he tells the researcher.

## **Discussion**

This case study depicts the emotional trauma that family members face when a child has gone missing. Disappearance of a child has an effect on the individual, his/her family and the

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community as a whole. The problems that family members of missing children face are complex and can be overwhelming. Besides the uncertainty about the fate of their child, they usually have to cope with economic, social and legal problems as well. Many parents have searched in vain for their beloved child, year after year. In many cases, family members of missing children suffer from symptoms of complicated grief and often find it hard to cope with necessary activities at work and at home. There is a need for acknowledgement of the consequences of the disappearance of a missing child to the child's family. Khan lost his son, and his wife died within a year of his son's disappearance. His two children, as Khan acknowledged, are more like orphans, as he struggles to keep his sanity in coping with the death of his wife, earning a livelihood, raising his children alone and still make attempts to search for his missing son.

There is a need for an agency capable of providing the immediate type of emotional assistance and support that the family of a missing child requires. The parent of a missing child may feel isolated, unsupported, vulnerable, angry, and impotent in his or her ability to come to the child's aid. The parent may experience emotional and perhaps physical shock. At most times, parents simply do not know what to do and how to cope. Support can be provided through assisting the parent in establishing physical and emotional guidelines for his or her thoughts, feelings, and behavior. Parents also need to know that while the missing child may totally consume the consciousness and awareness of the parent, their other children have needs which cannot be ignored. Typically, children cannot developmentally deal with intense emotions or situations and there is a necessity for the remaining siblings to survive the situation. Parents need to be counseled to ensure that the daily structure is followed while fulfilling the siblings' basic needs.

#### **Case Study 4: Runaway**

Savita is a woman in her mid thirties, living with her husband who works as a security guard at a residential society in Ahmedabad. She meets the researcher at her one room dwelling allocated to them at the society where her husband works. Her niece, Moni, has been missing for more than three years. She was 15 when she went missing and would be 18 now. Savita tells the researcher that Moni lived in a village with her parents in Kheda before she came to join her uncle in Ahmedabad. Her parents had sent her to the city in the hope that she would add to the family's income by working as a domestic help along with her aunt Savita. They entrusted their daughter to the uncle's care, believing that she would be safe living with him in the city.

Savita tells the researcher that Moni was a quiet girl and settled easily with them. She helped her aunt with the chores at home every morning before they left together to work at various houses in the vicinity. Savita says Moni was with them for nearly 6 months before she disappeared without leaving any message. Abduction has been ruled out, she went out of her own free will, Savita says. When the researcher asks why she believes so, Savita says Moni's few belongings were gone the day she went missing. She has never contacted her family since then, not even to let them know where she is or how she is doing.

It is not difficult to understand what happened to Moni, her aunt says. When they began their search for her, it emerged that she had befriended a man at one of the societies where they did domestic work. The man was in his twenties called Aakash and worked as a security guard. They would meet in secret, they were told by neighbours who had seen them. The day Moni went missing, Aakash had disappeared as well. Moni's relatives reported the matter to the police. The

police, she says, were unhelpful. The girl has eloped, the police told them, and added that there was nothing they could do.

The researcher questions Savita on whether they have any hopes of Moni's return. The shame caused by Moni to her family is immense, Savita tells the researcher. She feels that it is better to forget about her niece, and her parents have no wish to search for her either. Even if she comes back, Savita says, there would not be any place for her in the community.

## **Discussion**

While the case of Moni on the surface displays the cause of her going missing as elopement, it should not be forgotten that she was a minor at the time of her disappearance. Young teens are impressionable and easily manipulated; they do not realize the danger of running away with someone whom they think cares for them. Since Moni is yet untraced, it is impossible to ascertain her fate. There is a possibility of her being happily married to the man she ran away with, but the chances of her landing in a prostitution ring is far greater.

According to CEOP (2009) Strategic Threat Assessment on Child Trafficking in the UK, there has been growing concern over the grooming of children and young people (mainly girls) into sexual exploitation. The principal profile of sexual grooming is that of older males who befriend vulnerable girls, gaining their trust, and eventually becoming their 'boyfriends'. These relationships are carefully planned so that the groomer gains control, placing them in a position of power and enabling them to perpetrate and facilitate varied and serious sexual offences against vulnerable girls, often by groups of men.

The police are of the view that most cases of a missing female between the ages of 15-18 are routine elopement cases and blame extreme poverty, illiteracy, casual attitude of parents in the upbringing of their children and influence of movies for this phenomenon. Police sources cite difficulty in prevention of elopement of young girls and blame their parents for failing to control them. The attitude of the police is extremely negative when it comes to young girls going missing. When a young girl went missing in Uttar Pradesh and her father went to DIG S. K. Mathur for his help in recovering his daughter, the DIG suggested his daughter had in fact eloped and said had it been one of his relatives he would have shot her dead.

"I don't have magical power to recover your daughter. If your daughter has eloped then you should be ashamed of it. I would have killed my sister if she had eloped or else I would have committed suicide," Mr. Mohammed, the father was told, according to the video footage. The officer's comments provoked outrage among women's rights campaigners but highlighted the medieval mindset of the police.

There is an urgent need for sensitization programmes for the police to bring about a change in the way they view and approach cases of missing children as a whole, and young girls in particular. Raising awareness among young people and those responsible for them is the best form of preventing children and young teens from falling prey to people with nefarious intentions. By sensitively informing young people of the risks they face and the services they can access, they will be empowered to protect themselves.

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## **Case Study 5: Benign Explanations**

In many cases, there are benign explanations for a child being reported missing. Such cases are resolved quickly without requiring police intervention and without the child coming to any harm.

A 5-year-old boy wandered away from his home while playing by himself. His mother was occupied with household chores and did not notice his disappearance. After an hour when she called him for lunch, she became alarmed when he did not respond. The community members gathered together to trace the missing child and a report was filed immediately with the police. Upon searching, the child was found sleeping at a kirana store a few blocks away from the chawl. The shopkeeper had seen the boy crying and led him to his shop. He fed the child and after eating the child fell asleep. The community members found the child unharmed and returned the boy to his mother. The child was found before the police arrived. The records however show that the child is still missing.

A 14-year-old girl and her 10-year-old brother were at Kankaria Lake with their father. While he was busy buying ice-cream, they went ahead and inadvertently got separated from him and got lost. Losing sight of his children caused the father to be very alarmed, and asked any person he came across for help. While he was searching for the children, they were trying to find him, the police was informed. It took a few hours before the father found his children unharmed. The police records still show the children as untraced.

A 13-year-old boy was scolded by his parents for not being interested in his studies and spending more time playing cricket. Upset at the scolding he received, the boy stole some money from the

house and ran away. When the boy's absence was discovered, the police was informed. The boy was gone for 3 days before he returned home safely. He had intended to go to his uncle's place in Rajkot, but his money ran out. He called his father from a local phone booth and asked to be retrieved from the bus stop in Anand.

## **Discussion**

The cases described as above depict instances of children being reported missing with benign explanations requiring little police intervention. The police routinely receive such complaints and usually matters are resolved without requiring police assistance. This understandably leads the police to assume every report of a missing child to a trivial matter, not requiring urgent action. Therefore, police officers' initial response to a report of a missing child is to ascertain whether the circumstances are such that a heightened level of response is warranted. If risk factors exist, then the decision to employ prompt response methods is clear. In other situations where the circumstances are not clear, officers should keep the missing child's safety in mind and act accordingly.

To eliminate chances of police dismissing a missing child report as benign incidents in which the child is expected to be recovered eventually, there should be a mandatory risk factor assessment to be done by the police in every missing child's case. The level of risk can be categorized as low, medium and high, with every level having specific assessment criteria.

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## **Conclusion**

The issue of missing children is a complex and multi-layered one requiring a coordinated multi-agency response. The case studies attempt to cover the spectrum of missing children's cases and highlight the areas where attention should be focused, interventions required and measures undertaken to address them. While the onus is on the effective and prompt response of the police to a missing child report, the parents have the primary responsibility to ensure the safety of their children. At the community level, adequate infrastructure is required for families with both parents working. Levels of support to families of the missing children are felt to be insufficient and need to be addressed urgently.



### **In the parents' own words**

"I remember my son 50-100 times a day...When someone knocks at the door there is the feeling that he has come back. The pain...I cannot describe."

Mother of Santosh, missing since 2006

"I do not cook any of my son's favourite food anymore."

Mother of Hitesh, missing since 2009

"Even if my child is dead, it is fine. It is not knowing that is killing me. I just want to know if my child is alive or dead"

Father of Payal, missing since 2011

"I am always hopeful that my child will come back. I dream of her often."

Father of Vishwa, missing since 2012

"I wish my child was dead. Not because that would make me stop missing him, but because then I would know that he would stop missing me. He was only four years old."

Mother of Rahul, missing since 2006

"If it is raining, I wonder if my child will get wet."

Mother of Mukesh, missing since 2007

Parents holding a demonstration in Ahmedabad to create awareness on the issue of missing children



Source: Google images

Banners put up by parents of missing children in Ahmedabad as part of “Search my Child” campaign.



Source: Google images