
CHAPTER 5
**DISCUSSION, CONCLUSION AND
RECOMMENDATIONS**

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The study on missing children is an initiative which aims to identify the overall framework of legislation, policies, societal perception and causes and ways in which the problem of missing children can be effectively addressed. The seriousness of the problem can be judged from the alarming rise of missing children in Ahmedabad from the beginning of the year 2012 with the disappearance of 11 year old Vishwa Patel who is yet to be traced as of this moment. The media has taken up this issue resulting in increased awareness among the public and a forum for parents of missing children to voice their distress.

Discussion

This research has examined background of the children who went missing, behavior of the child at home and at school before going missing, satisfaction of the parents with the police response to the missing child incident, the episode of the child going missing as best described by the parents and the concerns of the parents. In this section discussion on the findings in each category is depicted.

Background of the Missing Child

Studying the socio-economic background of missing children provides an insight on the missing children problem. The profile that emerges is that most missing children come from poor economic backgrounds, and is more likely than not from single parent families, mostly mothers.

According to this study, the highest number of missing children is from the age group 13-17 years. This finding is consistent with the studies done in other countries such as USA, Canada

and UK and supports the conviction of the police that majority of missing children listed every year are actually runaways and are not taken against their will. The finding that the bulk of the missing children consist of females can be linked to trafficking, but there is no empirical data to make such a suggestion.

Research studies in the US have shown that the majority of missing children cases involved suspected runaways. Abduction cases accounted for one percent of the total report; those committed by family members comprised the most frequent form of abduction (as opposed to abduction by strangers). In addition, 88 percent of the children reported missing were age 13 or older, and 60 percent were girls. According to Betty-Ann Blaine, in a study done by the organization Hear the Children Cry, deterioration of family life; instability/shifting households; crippling levels of poverty; lack of adequate social support systems and heartbreaking levels of hopelessness are key factors leading to children running away from homes. The annual report of the Pakistan-based organisation Lawyers For Human Rights And Legal Aid revealed that 4500 Bangladeshi girls are sold in Pakistan in a single year.

This study shows that most of the missing children come from impoverished backgrounds with parents who have little economic security. The parents of all the missing children at Nithari were poor, migrant labourers who settled in the Noida suburb to make a living. Poverty and the issue of missing children are interlinked. People living a hand to mouth existence are less likely to have access to safe places for their children or have adequate resources to meet the needs of their children, much less ensure their child's safety.

The study reveals that majority of parents earn income of less than 2 lacs annually, putting them in the lower socio-economic bracket. According to a study done by a unit in the Department of

Local Government in Jamaica, there is a strong link between missing children and poverty levels. The majority of children who go missing are driven from home because of poor economic circumstances which deprive them of some basic needs. The study further points out that the authorities had noticed this pattern years prior to 2009. The study confirms that the children from working-class homes are the most vulnerable in society because of the breakdown in family life. Many of the homes are single-parent households (mostly mothers only) that, unlike their upper middle-class and upper-class counterparts, lack the financial means to implement security mechanisms. The needs brought on by the dire financial straits of lower middle-class homes often result in parents sending the children out on the streets to sell quick-cash items in a desperate bid to supplement the family's already thin disposable income. These children are put at risk and their vulnerability is further advanced with their exposure in the public domain, states the study.

This study has shown that half of the parents interviewed are married, while the other half consisted of single parent homes due to separation, divorce or death. While the many of the missing children have both parents present in the home, a large segment belong to single parent units, whether it is separation, divorce or death. Children with a single parent are more vulnerable as their needs might not be adequately fulfilled in a setting where a single parent is solely responsible for providing for the children as well as raising them. Within the family setting, there are numerous issues which result in parents being alienated from their children. These include issues of parenting, of children believing that at that age they need greater independence or there might be an absence of sufficient family support. That would lead some children to actually leave the house for a period of time.

Another issue is that when single parents go to work, their children are usually left exposed, causing them to fall prey to various forms of dangers. According to The Office of national Statistics, UK, Children who grow up in one-parent homes are more likely to suffer poor health, do badly at school and fall into crime or drug abuse when they are teenagers.

The level of harmony in the household and behaviour of the missing child are useful indicators in making an assessment of the level of risk to the child and vulnerability to outside factors. For example, a child having a network of friends who are largely unsupervised, oppositional, defiant, involved with drugs and other antisocial behaviors is more likely to indulge in similar behavior and cause family conflict. With attempts to communicate resulting in arguments, raised voices, interruptions, name calling, hurt feelings and failure to reach an acceptable agreement, children in these situations are more likely to run away from what they believe is an unacceptable situation. This study found that parents have described their children in the age group of 13-18 as having had some behavior issues at home and at school and the highest number of missing children in this age group is most likely to have run away

Behaviour of Child

It has been found that 19.15% of children had poor levels of adjustment in the family, with several serious issues and 37.23% of the missing child exhibiting serious problem behavior and 21.81% of the parents stating that they argued excessively with their parents. Problem behavior at school is also an indicator. While 22% of the respondents said that their child did not attend school, which could be attributed to several reasons such as poverty and migration, 13.30% have

been described by their parents as excellent students, and 18.09% are described by their parents as having had poor academic performance. While excessive pressure on children to perform well at school can be a factor for a child running away, poor performance at school leads to the child to feel isolated, rejected and resentful towards authority figures. These are two extremes and a balanced approach on the part of the parents and school authorities is required to tackle the problem.

According to the study, a significant number of children are said to watch television for more than two hours a day. There is empirical data to prove that children who spent more than two hours a day at a screen had a 60% higher risk of psychological problems than children who had fewer viewing hours. A small percentage of children have been reported by their parents as consuming drugs and alcohol at 4.79%, but this data cannot be ascertained as the parents may well be unaware if their child had such a habit.

Parental satisfaction with Police response

One of the findings of this study is that there is a lack of a standard operating procedure when it comes to initial police response to report of a missing child. There is a crucial need for detailed, police procedures and policies for responding to missing child cases as it would result in more proactive investigations. As well as describing the roles and responsibilities of officers or units assigned to specific investigative functions, search and rescue, and analytical functions, comprehensive policies and procedures should include directions concerning the actions to take place when a report is first received.

While missing children is not solely an issue for the police, they play a key role until the missing child is located safe and well. They are also well placed to provide a referral point for missing children and their families to receive appropriate support so that the missing person incident is not repeated. Safeguarding of the young and vulnerable is the responsibility of everyone, including the police. When the police are notified that a child is missing, there is a clear responsibility on them to prevent the child from coming to harm. The temptation for the police to view the report of a missing child as simply an administrative exercise (i.e. a matter of filling the form in rather than genuine police enquiry) appears to be the norm. Most parents have stated that the police instructed them to wait for two days before filing they were persuaded to file a report.

Parental Description of the episode

This study has found that majority of the missing children cases constitute runaways. This may be one of the reasons why the police are reluctant to take missing children cases as a priority issue, and assure the parents that the children would return on their own. Majority of the parents have described their child as having run away after an argument over money. Scolding from parents over watching television, school performance were the second major issues of conflict between parents and children described as having run away from home. More female runaways were having conflict with parents over romantic relationships.

Parental Concerns

The picture that emerges from this study is of a large group of families striving simultaneously to cope with the practical effects of the loss of their missing child – especially the economic impact – while enduring the emotional strain of not knowing what happened to their child, what circumstances their child is living in and whether their child is alive or dead. The difficulties

faced by the families to trace their missing child are numerous and interlinked and affect various aspects of their daily lives.

Majority of the parents have suffered financial distress caused by having a child going missing. Losing wages due to their search for the child is a common occurrence, and much of their earnings have to be spent on making short trips to the police station, long trips to other regions in search of their child and railway stations, bus terminals and orphanages.

Conclusion

The issue of missing children is a complex and multi-layered one requiring a coordinated multi-agency response. At the outset, the first problem is that there is no clear cut definition of a missing child, or trafficking. The only statute that deals with trafficking is the Immoral Trafficking Prevention Act which deals with prostitution and not trafficking on the whole. Therefore, response of law enforcement and investigating agencies to trafficking tend to be perfunctory at best. As a result, maximum children who go missing may become victims of trafficking at one stage or another. This phenomenon is not understood or even investigated and therefore no logical conclusion can be drawn from it.

At the mezzo level, there is lack of adequate knowledge management system. Database of missing children at all levels are haphazard and fragmented, and cannot be shared across systems. Therefore, a child missing in one state and found in another cannot be reunited with his family at the earliest, if at all. Lack of coordination among various departments aggravates the problem. Ideally, a case of a missing child can be dealt with at the district level while working in sync with the police, child welfare committees, Juvenile Justice Boards, Children's Homes, Management of Shelter Homes, district legal services authority and any child rights commission.

The police do not have a standard operating procedure on how to respond to a case of a missing child. In several countries throughout the world, An AMBER Alert or a Child Abduction Emergency -a child abduction alert bulletin- is issued upon the suspected abduction of a child, since 1996. AMBER Alerts are distributed via commercial radio stations, internet radio, satellite radio, television stations, and cable TV by the Emergency Alert System and NOAA Weather Radio (where they are termed "Child Abduction Emergency" or "Amber Alerts"). The alerts are also issued via e-mail, electronic traffic-condition signs, the LED billboards which are located outside of newer locations along with the LED/LCD signs of billboard companies or through wireless device SMS text messages.

Response protocol such as Amber Alert is not in place within our police system. A standardised mechanism on how to proceed with investigation of a missing child has not been established resulting in haphazard and ineffective police action.

Human resources at the level of the police station are inadequate. Qualified and adequately trained personnel in the police to handle missing children cases are desperately needed. Professional social welfare workers in Child Protection agencies are required. Lack of financial resources to address the issue of missing children is also a hurdle. Budget allocation should be made towards setting up of systems, providing training, procuring equipment and setting up data banks within a centralized system.

Suggestions and Recommendations

The suggestions and recommendations will have to take into account the various stakeholders without which effective solutions cannot be undertaken. There is the need for comprehensive cross-agency working, for effective information sharing, for good quality and well researched information and communication. Therefore in formulating suggestions and recommendations, we have to create partnerships between government entities, voluntary organizations and the community to develop effective, all-inclusive policies and procedures. However, with the police being the most important authority in the case of missing children, they have the responsibility of providing leadership to the community in relation to missing children issues by encouraging partnerships and building capacity of the community.

The suggestions and recommendations therefore have been made for the following categories of stakeholders in the community on dealing with the issue of missing children:

- a. Parents
- b. Schools
- c. Police
- d. Government
- e. Civil society

Parents

Child safety begins with the parents. Parents have the primary responsibility to ensure that their children are kept safe, and that the opportunity for their children to become victims is eliminated or at the very least, minimized. The first step is to be aware that children are not immune to abduction because they are close to home. The most important single thing that parents can do is

to make sure that their children are supervised, even if they are in their own society playground or neighborhood street.

Children should be taught about personal safety with age appropriate instructions being given to them. Parents should warn children of the danger of talking to strangers, or accepting any gifts from them. Children need to be cautioned not to approach a car, whether the occupant is a stranger or not, no matter what they tell or ask them.

When a child goes missing, reasonable searches and enquiries should be made by the parents in an attempt to establish the whereabouts of the missing child. The police should be informed as soon as the child is confirmed missing and all efforts must be made to provide accurate description of the child along with a recent photograph. Where the child is located without police knowledge and assistance, it remains the responsibility of the parents/ agency that has care of the child to notify the police immediately.

When a child goes missing from home, the parents should search the house especially the closets/ almirahs, trunks and suitcases, in the beds especially the beds with boxes and under beds, inside large appliances like fridge, washing machines, and inside vehicles, and all other places where a child can crawl and hide. The police should be notified immediately if the parents are still unable to locate the child after a thorough search of the house and surrounding area. The parents should dial 100 or visit the nearest police station with all the details like appearance, age, cloths the child is wearing along with the most recent photograph of the child. A detailed description of the clothing worn by the child and the personal items he or she had at the time of the disappearance should be provided to the police. Any personal identification marks, such as

birthmarks, scars, tattoos, or mannerisms that may help in finding the child should be included.

A picture of the child that shows these identification marks should be provided to the police.

It is important for the parents to limit access to their home until police arrives and has collected possible evidence. Since clothing, sheets, personal items, computers, and even trash may hold clues to the whereabouts of the missing child, parents should take care not to touch or remove anything from the child's room or from the home.

If a child disappears in a market, the police should be notified immediately and the parking attendants and security officers should be alerted. The parents should provide child's name, date of birth, height, weight, and any other unique identifiers such as eyeglasses and braces as well as birth marks. The precise time that the parent noticed that the child was missing and what clothing he or she was wearing should be provided to the police along with a list of friends and sites most frequented by the child. All extortion attempts should be reported to law enforcement. (Adapted from Case Management of Missing Children Homicide Investigations, OJJDP, 1997)

Schools

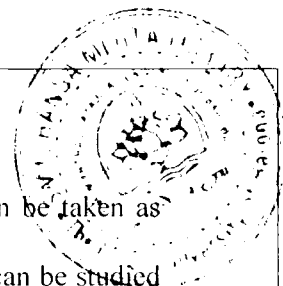
Schools are required to become the center of prevention efforts. Children learn a great deal in the classroom about the basic rules for living. Schools offer an already existing system for delivering educational messages. Thus, it is important for schools to provide children with accurate information about their personal safety. Programmes on child safety should be taught in schools. These programmes should be designed to increase children's ability to recognize and avoid potentially dangerous situations and help better protect themselves. Equally important is the

development of self-esteem at every level of the educational process, because children with self-confidence are less likely to be victimized.

The school based programs should be based on the following goals: enhancing a child's ability to avoid victimization, enhancing a child's self esteem, reducing the feelings of guilt and blame that often are associated with victimization, promoting disclosure of abuse and victimization, enhancing communication between parents and children about personal safety. Children can be taught to recognize appropriate and inappropriate touches and understand the difference. They can be taught assertiveness skills to help avoid an offender's advances. If the knowledge, self-confidence, and assertiveness skills of children are improved, they would be safer because they would be better able to recognize danger and resist potential offenders. Ensuring that children learn these valuable skills need to be a part of the school curriculum goals.

Police

The Police form the most important authority involved in the missing children issue. The response parents/guardians receive from them when approaching the police station to report a missing or abducted child is one of the most critical process in the entire investigation. When the police receives the report of a missing child, there is seldom a clear indication as to whether the child has simply wandered off or been delayed and will be found in a short time or is instead the victim of foul play. This information can only be determined by investigating facts of the case and avoiding preconceived judgments. The assessment and approach the police officers take during the initial response to these situations may have profound implications for whether the child is recovered and returned home safely or remains missing or worse, is not found alive.



A Standard Operating Procedure needs to be put in place so that swift action can be taken as soon as a child is reported missing. Models are available in other countries which can be studied and reworked to suit local conditions after which it can be set up in India. A highly skilled investigation and rapid response task force on missing children needs to be created. Training and capacity building of police officers and other stakeholders at the field level should be conducted periodically to ensure that their approach towards the parents and children would be more sympathetic. Special beat policemen should be placed at key areas like railway stations and bus terminals since children often get separated from their parents at these crowded places. These special officers should be trained to spot children in distress and take necessary action. All complaints of missing children need to be registered and treated as a cognizable crime and investigations conducted on priority basis.

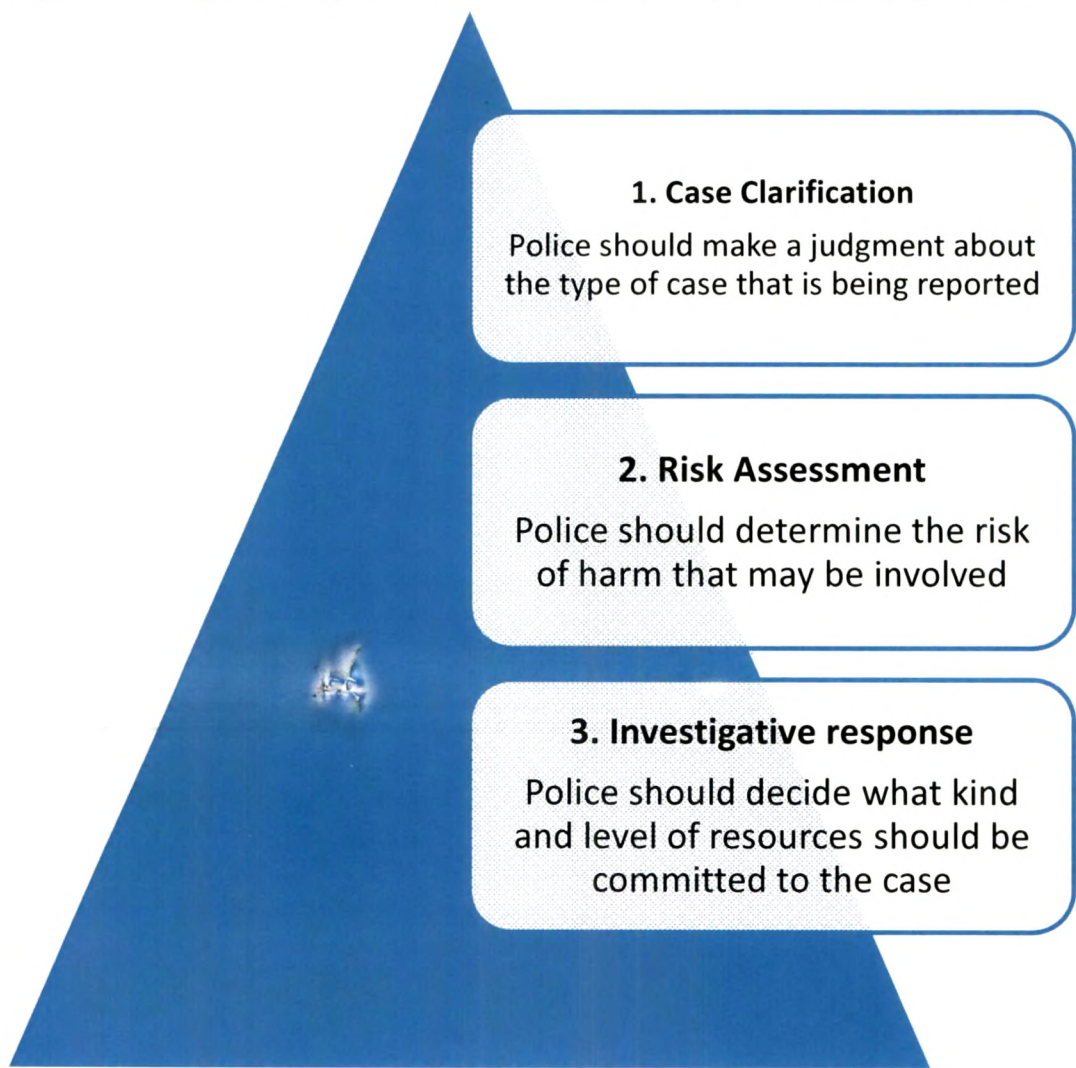
The Police Station should set up a Neighbourhood Watch System along with the citizens of a particular locality. Collaboration and coordination of the police with the local people would enhance trust in the system while making the citizens more responsible and aware.

All police stations should maintain separate registers for missing children. It should be made mandatory for the police to file an FIR (First Information Report). The report should contain the following information in detail: what exactly happened- name and description of child, the facts of the episode, sequence of events, date and time of the child discovered missing, place last seen, names and addresses of witnesses (if any) and name and address of the complainant.

A case file should be individually maintained on every missing child report. The following details should be recorded which would provide valuable information. These details should include:

- Age of child
- Photograph of the child
- History of absence(s)
- Time of day/night of missing episode
- Physical/learning difficulties of the child, if any
- Previous behaviour patterns
- State of health and any requirement for medication
- State of mind at time of absence
- Whether child is perceived as running to someone or from a situation
- Number of occasions when previously reported as 'Missing'
- Group and peer behaviour
- Any other particular circumstances at the time of incident.
- A full record must be maintained of all actions taken and messages received/given. This recording should be made in the child's file within the system maintained by the Police.

Figure 6: Proposed steps for Police Action on report of missing child



Source: Sylvia Mao

Government

The complexity of the missing children issue and the significant resources that are required to address the problem effectively requires government support. The Police cannot address this complex challenge alone. Coordination and communication between stakeholders are essential. Strong partnerships are required, not only within the States but across the nation. The government has to assume responsibility and acknowledge that the issue of missing children requires attention and effective mechanisms are required to be put in place to address it.

There are several steps which can be taken at the onset which are given as follows. A concrete definition of a Missing Child is necessary. A National Centre for Missing and Exploited children needs to be established on a priority basis by the government. A centralized database of missing children needs to set up. There should be a system for centrally collating relevant information relating to all incidents of a child/young person going missing from home, in order to develop a multi-agency coordinated response. Nodal officers on missing children should be present in every district. The officials should be given specific responsibilities to trace and provide care and protection to the missing child. The nodal officer is to be made accountable for ensuring that all steps are taken to trace the missing child. He should be made point of contact for all information related to the missing child for the parents of the missing child, the police, the NGOs and other systems. All efforts should be made to unite rescued children and placed in homes with their parents and legal custodians.

State Governments should take necessary action and investigate the crime, wherever police

negligence or inaction has been reported. The Daily Diary Register maintained by the Police should be regularly monitored to ensure that all missing children reports entered therein have been duly taken cognizance of and FIRs filed.

The following recommendations for the government can be classified into four broad themes:

- Establish government funded programmes relating to missing children establish and operate a national toll-free telephone line for individuals to report information regarding the location of any missing child, or other child 13 years old or younger whose whereabouts are unknown.
- Establish and operate a national resource center designed to provide technical assistance to state and local governments and police agencies, disseminate information about innovative and model missing children's programmes, and periodically conduct national incidence studies to determine the number of missing children.
- Analyze, compile, publish, and disseminate an annual summary of recently completed research relating to missing children with emphasis on effective models of inter-governmental coordination and effective programmes designed to promote community awareness of missing children, among others.
- Prepare an annual comprehensive plan for facilitating cooperation and coordination among all agencies and organizations with responsibilities related to missing children.

It is imperative for the government to come to recognize that all missing children, regardless of the reason they are missing, may be at risk of violence, victimization, and exploitation. Once this realization occurs, it will change the present laissez-faire attitude towards this issue and effective policies and procedures aimed at child safety and protection can be formulated. Much of the progress required in law enforcement's response to missing children lies on the enactment of effective legislation and creation of valuable resources which only the government can provide.

Civil Society

It is important to realize that different agencies in the community cannot afford to address the missing children problem while working in isolation. Public health, criminal justice, social services, education, human rights organisations, media and businesses – all have a common interest in addressing the problem of missing children, and can find more efficient and effective ways to achieve eliminating this problem by working together.

More anganwadis and crèches need to be set up so that children are kept in a safe place when the parents are working. Consideration needs to be given as to why children run away from home and measures taken to prevent repeat runaway episodes. The development of family support community based services and effective individual work with children are required. Family advocacy services should be set up to provide support, crisis-intervention, and technical assistance to families and law enforcement agencies.

A statewide initiative to educate families about keeping children safer should be initiated. There should be school meetings and conferences about child safety. Urban communities should be

engaged in protecting children from becoming victims of sexual exploitation. Campaigns to educate families about measures to help keep children safer from individuals who seek to harm children, to help families respond in the event a child becomes missing, and to assist families with recognizing symptoms in suspected cases of sexual exploitation needs to be put in place. Developing and disseminating programs and information to the general public, schools, and other entities about the prevention of child abduction, sexual exploitation, and child safety through community outreach efforts should be organized.

Citizens need to be aware of strangers and unusual behavior in their neighborhood. They need to have presence of mind and write down descriptions of people, vehicles and license numbers. For example, when a citizen witnesses an adult pulling a struggling child in a public place, it is easy to interpret the event as a guardian taking control of an unruly child. In most instances, it is exactly what it is. However, nothing prevents a citizen from evaluating the circumstances, intervening and certainly from noting descriptions and license numbers, because it might be a person with criminal intentions.

INTERVENTION STRATEGIES: ACTION PLANS

Action Plan at the Micro Level: For Expectant Parents

A program at healthcare facilities can be initiated which educates and informs expectant parents to prevent infant abduction. It can be initiated in hospitals and maternal homes. Personnel in healthcare facilities and at prenatal visits should remind parents of the measures they should take to provide maximum child protection. The guidelines listed below provide a few parenting techniques that can also help prevent abduction of infants while in the healthcare facility where the baby is born and once the parents take the baby home. They should be shared with expectant parents at prenatal visits, during the tour of the facility pre-delivery, and during the parents stay at the time of birth. Infants' risk levels of abduction are substantially elevated when parents are not properly educated about the safety issues involved.

Guidelines for parents: At the hospital

- It is of paramount important for the parents to be deliberately watchful over the newborn infant.
- At some point before the birth of the baby, parents should investigate security procedures at the facility where they plan to give birth to the baby and request a copy of the facility's written guidelines about procedures for "special care" and security procedures in the maternity ward. It is essential to know all of the facility's procedures in place to safeguard the infant while staying in that facility.
- Parents should never leave the infant out of their direct, line-of-sight even when they go to the restroom or take a nap. If parents leave the room or plan to go to sleep, they should

alert the nurses to take the infant back to the nursery or have a family member watch the baby. When possible, parents keep the infant's cradle on the side of the bed away from the door leading out of the room.

- After admission to the facility, parents should ask about the facility's protocols concerning the routine nursery procedures, feeding and visitation hours, and security measures. Parents should not hesitate to politely ask direct questions and settle for nothing less than an acceptable explanation.
- Parents should not give their infant to anyone without properly verified identification as issued by that facility. It is important to find out what additional or special identification is being worn to further identify facility personnel who have authority to transport the infant. Parents should speak to a person in authority (*e.g.*, unit director, charge nurse) if they have any questions or concerns. Parents should make sure everyone who is helping them watch the infant while they are in the facility understands these safeguards and does not release the infant to any unauthorized person.
- Parents should become familiar with the staff members who work in the maternity unit. During short stays in the facility, parents can ask to be introduced to the nurse assigned to the mother and the infant.
- Parents should question unfamiliar persons entering their room or inquiring about their infant — even if they are in the facility's attire or seem to have a reason for being there. They should alert the nurses' station immediately.
- It is important to determine where the infant will be when taken for tests, and how long the tests will take. Parents should find out who has authorized the tests. If the parents are uncomfortable with anyone who requests to take their infant or unable to clarify what

testing is being done or why the infant is being taken from their room, it is appropriate to go with the infant to observe the procedure. Or if the parents are unable to accompany the infant, they can request a family member to go along.

- For the records to take home, parents need to have at least one color photograph of the infant (full, front-face view) and compile a complete written description of the infant including hair and eye color, length, weight, date of birth, and specific physical characteristics.

At Home

- Only allow persons into the home who are well-known by the mother. It is ill advised to allow a mere or recent acquaintance into the house. There have been several cases where an abductor has made initial contact with a mother and infant in the hospital setting and then subsequently abducted the infant from the family home.
- If anyone should arrive at the home claiming to be affiliated with the healthcare facility where the infant was born or other healthcare provider, they should immediately call up the hospital and make enquiries. A high degree of diligence should be exercised by family members when home with the infant.
- The infant's family is the primarily responsible for the infant's safety, and all family members should be sensitive to any suspicious visitors.
- In the age of social media, parents should use caution in posting photographs of their infant on websites. When doing so, access should be limited to those they know personally and trust. To limit anyone else's potential misuse of a photograph of their

infant, parents should carefully consider anyone's request to take a picture of their infant and only share photographs of their infant with those they know personally and trust.

At public places

- If parents must take their infant out, whenever possible, they should take a trusted friend or family member as an extra set of hands and eyes to protect and constantly observe the infant.
- Parents must never leave a child alone in a motor vehicle. They should always take the child with them.
- Parents should never let someone they don't know pick up or hold their child.

Runaways

One of the findings of this study is that majority of the missing children constitute runaways. It is always difficult to establish just why (or for which particular combination of reasons) a young person runs away from home. However, Christine Vincent, in *Teenage Runaways: What Can a Parent Do?* has identified six reasons. The six reasons identified are:

There are some young people who have been influenced by peers and/or the media and think that home is too restrictive or dull. They mistakenly believe that by running away, life will be full of freedom and good times. These young people believe they are 'running to' freedom, adventure, new places, experiences and people. It is not that home is a bad place but the young person thinks there is a more exciting and rewarding world to meet.

Other young people may run away as a reaction to real events or imaginary or anticipated consequences. Many departures are impulsive. Some young people run away impulsively

following an argument with parents (usually involving restrictions) or from fear of punishment by parents for some action. For example, a young girl may run away after an argument with a parent over her desire to watch a movie with friends. In a short time, she may return once her anger cools. Depending on the circumstance, it may be a form of retaliation toward the parents. Running away may also occur as a reaction to a teenager's discovery that he/she failed an exam, or as a reaction to the expectation of parents which they feel they cannot meet.

Some young people run away for more serious reasons which usually involve longer periods of conflict with parents. Frequently the conflict results from: truancy and/or subject failure at school use of alcohol and/or drugs the teenager's association with friends who are law breakers too many restrictions by parents on clothes, hours or work at home (from the young person's point of view).

Children may run away from forms of abuse and neglect that have continued over long periods within the family. Young people who have experienced frequent fighting with a parent or parents, sometimes resulting in personal injury, may run away to prevent its re-occurrence. Similarly, children who are sexually abused by a parent or family member may run away. Some parents psychologically or emotionally abuse their child by being verbally abusive, making excessive demands, rejecting the child or behaving inconsistently. Such behaviour can lead a child to run away in order to preserve their mental health. Other parents neglect their child by failing to provide for his/her basic needs and proper levels of care.

Other young people have been asked to leave home or 'thrown out' by parents or guardians. This form of rejection usually eventuates after prolonged conflict or when parents have given up

trying to help or control their teenager's behaviour. Some parents never really wanted their child and asking their teenager to leave home is seen as a solution from the parent's view.

Some young people are placed in custody or care of government or voluntary institutions as a result, usually, of a children's court case. They may be sent to a remand centre, institution, hostel or residential program to live permanently or for a period of time. If these young people run away from such institutions they are classed as missing persons.

Runaways - signs of preparation

Far more children run away from home than are abducted and parents should be aware of signs of preparation prior to a child's departure. If signs are observed and acted upon many runaway cases could be prevented. These include:

- **growing isolation** - greater reticence than normal in a child
- **excessive arguing** - increased irritation erupting into rows
- **abrupt mood swings** - increased frequency and/or intensity of mood swings
- **increased home discipline infractions** - a greater number of rule infractions pertaining to the home and family life increased school violations - truancy, slipping grades, indiscipline
- **increased sleeping** - can be indicative of underlying problems and/or depression sufficient to result in running away reduced communication with family members generally

- **parental arguments** - personal, financial and marital problems resulting in parental conflict. Some children may alleviate their anxiety in the face of such circumstances by removing themselves from the scene.
- **threats to run away** - take them seriously and try to remove the causes of the child's dissatisfaction. Talk through the dissatisfaction but do not counter with threats of punishment as, if they do eventually run away, such threats might deter a return.
- **family crisis** - such as distressing death of parent or sibling
- **sudden change in friends**
- **unexplained money or possessions** and/or the making of mysterious phone calls - could indicate an intention to run away and/or involvement in dishonest or immoral practices.

Source: The US National Network of Runaway and Youth Services

Clearly some of these behavioural cues are no more than part of the normal developmental process and some of these cues may become more noticeable in the early teen years. Most children may manifest some of these signs at various times in their lives. But, just as the early signs of an illness should be acted upon, so should early signs of a child's dissatisfaction with his/her environment. Commonsense has to be exercised by parents in interpreting such cues but, if convinced they are significant, assistance should be sought. Sources of assistance include school counselors, family doctor and local government health/psychiatric services.

Runaways - prevention

Adolescent children in particular undergo stresses in coping with their social environments, especially their families. Parents are advised to improve communication with their offspring through the following ways:

- **Pay attention** - really listen to what your children say
- **Give them respect** - support your child's struggle to grow and accept the maturity he/she has already achieved
- **Try to understand** - consider things from your child's point of view
- **Avoid labels** - identify the real problem in your household without resorting to meaningless labels
- **Do not hassle** - show interest without probing; too many questions can cut off information
- **Do not use emotional blackmail** - children resent being manipulated into conforming with the wishes of parents
- **Use team work** - work together in identifying problems and their solutions
- **Do not always give answers** - encourage your child to arrive at her own answer to some problems
- **Make children responsible** - offer your children options rather than orders but help them understand the consequences of their actions
- **Praise the positives** - describe to your child his/her positive as well as negative behaviour and how such behaviour affects those around them; ensure you reinforce positive behaviour rather than negative behaviour
- **Talk about feelings** - share your feelings with your child and vice versa; love in the home is perhaps the best method of preventing children running away.

Source: Preventing Missing Children by Gerald Arenberg et al (1984)

Action Plan at the Macro Level: For the Police

The attitude and approach the Police Department and its officers take in responding to reports of missing children may very well determine whether the child is recovered promptly and safely or remains missing for months or years or, even worse, is never recovered. Each stage of the case, therefore, from initial investigation through successful recovery, forms a critical component of a thorough Police response.

The Police Department must provide its officers with the tools enabling them to act decisively when confronted with reports of missing children. The single, most important tool an agency can provide is a clearly worded policy directive containing understandable procedures for officers to follow as a guide through each stage of the investigation.

Policies and procedures are of limited value, however, unless the Police Department ensures every member receives direct instruction about the policy's intent. Additionally, specific training and awareness about the overall issue of missing children will help each officer understand the critical role he or she plays in this important area of child protection.

For example officers should be aware they might encounter several types of missing-child cases, each with their own unique response requirements. They include the types of cases noted below.

A. Nonfamily abduction involves a child who has been wrongfully taken by a nonfamily perpetrator through the use of physical force, persuasion, or threat of bodily harm.

B. **Family abduction** occurs when, in violation of a court order, a decree, or other legitimate custodial rights, a member of the child's family, or someone acting on behalf of a family member, takes or fails to return a child. This is also referred to as parental kidnapping and custodial interference.

C. A **Runaway** child, often a teenager, leaves home voluntarily for a variety of reasons. This would include any child 17 years of age or younger.

D. The **Throwaway** is a child whose caretaker makes no effort to recover the child after running away, who has been abandoned or deserted, or who has been asked to leave his or her home and not allowed to return. While not necessarily reported to authorities as missing, children in this category frequently come to the attention of law enforcement.

E. The **Lost, Injured, or Otherwise Missing** child is defined as a child who has disappeared under unknown circumstances. The incident may range from the child wandering away and becoming lost to the child being abducted, wherein no one witnessed the act. These circumstances sometimes involve foul play where those reporting the incident are attempting to cover-up a crime involving the child.

When developing policy and procedures regarding missing children cases, it is essential each response, regardless of what the initial indicators may be, should be governed by an assumption the child is in jeopardy until significant facts to the contrary are confirmed. When officers respond with the missing child's safety as their foremost concern, they will be more likely to collect evidence or information that might otherwise be lost during the critical, early stages of an

investigation. For example, the Police should refer troubled runaways to appropriate social or mental health service agencies. Youths who repeatedly run away from home or runaways with other serious problems should be referred for evaluation or services. This would not be a difficult or a costly set of activities for the police to undertake. Often, it simply would require someone to recognize the need and initiate discussions between the appropriate agencies. The Police should build bridges with the necessary community agencies which deal with Family and Children providing such services.

Pre-incident Planning and Resource Development

Along with the creation of a written policy and procedure, pre-incident planning and resource development are equally important to the formation of an effective Police response to reports of missing children. When these three factors are given equal emphasis, a truly comprehensive response plan will result.

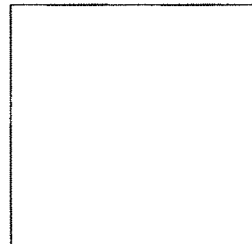
In an effort to more efficiently investigate, manage, and resolve cases of missing children and minimize the emotional stresses associated with these incidents, the Police Department should involve the communities and hold preplanning sessions to assess roles, identify resources, and agree on responsibilities. When implemented, this protocol would not only spell out specific responsibilities, but also serve as the basis for ongoing communication and cooperation.

When the Police respond to the report of a missing child without a plan, time is lost and opportunities are wasted. By adopting planned strategies, officers will be able to exercise more

control over events, react more effectively to unexpected occurrences, and enhance the likelihood of swift and successful case resolution.

In the next section, two forms for the police have been developed and presented to be used when a child is reported missing. There is a need to have a standardized police intake form across the country and across agencies for a match in agency information nationwide. The two forms presented here is an attempt to bridge this gap. The first form is an intake form for capturing essential details to aid in the case investigation. The second form is to assess the level of risk to the child which alerts the police to the situation of the child and would help to gauge the level of risk and instigate appropriate police response.

Police Intake form for Missing Child Report: A model



Recent Photo

a) Basic information about the Missing Child

Full name _____
Date of birth _____
Birthplace _____
Nicknames, if any _____
Current and previous addresses. Who else lived there? _____

b) Physical description of the Missing Child

Height _____
Weight _____
Age _____
Build _____
Hair Color/Length of Hair _____
Eye color? _____
Any Distinguishing Marks – such as tattoos, birthmarks, scars, etc. _____
Most recent photo of the missing person Yes/No _____

c) Habits and Personality of Missing Child

What type of recreation or activities does the child engage in including hobbies?

Are there particular habits that the child has? For instance, does he/she go to a particular spot to play each day?

What type of personality does the child have? Is the child outgoing or quiet? Is the child friendly or depressed?

Did the child face any problems at home or at school?

Did the individual use recreational drugs or alcohol? Yes/No

d) Clothing that the Missing Child was wearing the last time seen

Style and color of shirt

Style and color of pants

Style and color of jacket or outerwear, if any

Type of headwear, if applicable

Type of glasses, if applicable

Type of footwear

e) Activities/Plans of the Missing Child the day they went missing

What were the missing person's plans and/or activities on the day they went missing?

Where was he/she going?

Why was he/she going there?

Provide information about any vehicle or mode of travel the missing child may have access to.

f) Information about the last time the Missing Child was seen

The time and location of where he/she was last seen

The name of the individual who last saw the missing child

The name of the individual who last talked at length with the missing child

The direction the missing child was traveling the last time seen.

The attitude of the missing child the last time seen

Was the missing child complaining of or concerned about anything before he/she went missing?

g) Overall health and condition of the Missing Child

Physical condition

Any known medical problems

Any handicaps or disabilities

Any psychological problems

Any medication that the child is taking

Any addictions that the individual has

h) Potential People that the Missing Child would contact

List all of the child's friends and acquaintances who the missing child may try to contact. Include addresses and telephone numbers.

Risk Assessment Form for Police

1. Name of the child: _____

2. Age of the child: _____

3. Previous behaviour patterns: _____

4. The child's state of mind at the time of absence: _____

5. Does the child have any physical/learning difficulties : _____

6. Does the child have any health problems : _____

7. Behaviour of peers that child is associating with: _____

8. Is the child perceived as running to someone or running from a situation: _____

9. Home environment / family history: _____

10. Any particular circumstance at time of incident: _____

After the completion of the risk assessment sheet, this case is indicated as: (Tick one which applies)

• **Low Risk**
There is no apparent significant risk of harm to the child

• **Medium Risk**
The child is likely at risk of harm.

• **High Risk**
The child is at immediate risk of significant harm. Action is to be taken immediately.

Details of Personnel completing the Risk Assessment Form

Name	Position	Date/Time

Action Plan at the Mezzo Level: For the Government

The government has to assume responsibility and acknowledge that the issue of missing children requires attention and effective mechanisms are required to be put in place to address it. The immediate need is to have a concrete definition of a missing child, and to clearly articulate certain mandates through a legislative act.

The government should establish A Missing Children's Act which mandates the following:

- Immediate response of the Police to reports of missing children.
- No establishment or observance of a waiting period before accepting a case.
- Entry must be made by law enforcement within two hours of receipt of a report of a missing or abducted child.
- Recognize the need for greater government coordination of local and state efforts to recover missing children.
- Establish a government agency solely dedicated to missing children.

The agency established should have master-level trained social service professionals to work proactively with families, law enforcement, social service agencies, and other mental health agencies to provide a support network for child victims and their families.

These services should include:

- Counseling
- Training
- Referrals

- Support for runaways, parents/guardians, and families
- Crisis-intervention services

The Government should to work with the Police, NGOs and the civil society to ensure correct measures are in place for monitoring and assessment of performance on missing incidents. Furthermore, the Government, in conjunction with stakeholders, needs to develop a shared risk assessment model for practitioners to use across all sectors. It should scope the options for extending and improving the support available to families of the missing, identifying mechanisms by which every family gets the support it needs; and better information should be provided to families on the support available from Police, other agencies and NGOs.

Summary

There is clear evidence from work done so far by police forces and partner agencies in the developed countries that significant inroads can be made into reducing the volume of unnecessary reports by taking a proactive or problem solving approach. It is necessary, therefore, to develop a strategic framework that will help to deliver a problem solving approach to cases. This will help to reduce the number of missing children incidents that need to be dealt with by the police and lower the risk of harm to these vulnerable children. This can only be achieved by understanding the causes of their going missing.

A child going missing should be regarded as an indicator of other issues. Such incidents may lead to uncovering exploitative and criminal behaviour against vulnerable children and teenagers. There is usually a reason why a child goes missing, and understanding the circumstances and causes creates an opportunity for the police and other relevant authorities to identify intervention

measures that can stop or minimise further disappearances. More importantly, it will draw attention to the safeguarding issues related to going missing and assist in the identification and investigation of crimes which are linked to, or are the cause of, someone going missing. It is also crucial for all involved that a non judgmental attitude is adopted on receiving complaint of a parent reporting a missing child, and care should be taken to ensure that the parents, who are already distressed, receive support and empathy at all levels and stages of their ordeal.

Whilst there are numerous facets to the missing children phenomena, the efforts of all agencies involved can be grouped into achieving four key outcomes:

Ensuring the immediate safety of the child who goes missing

Whilst most children who go missing are found quickly, each child that goes missing is in a vulnerable situation and at risk of potential harm. There is an immediate need to assess the likely risk posed to each child reported missing, and to act accordingly to ensure their safety. Whilst the police have the leading role to play in this situation, there is a need to harness and coordinate the important contribution that can be made by other organisations such as care homes, social services, health units, local voluntary and non- governmental organisations, and individuals in the community.

Resolving cases expediently

Whilst most missing incidents are resolved quickly, many thousands remain open for longer periods of time, increasing the risk to the missing person and increasing the emotional and practical burden on their family and friends. There is a need to develop and utilise existing and new methods of resolving disappearances. This will require creativity, resourcefulness, and a willingness to challenge preconceptions and change attitudes and mindset of the agencies involved.

Preventing children from going missing

Whilst children go missing for many different reasons, but there are cases where prevention is possible, such as those involving runaways. The key to prevention lies in understanding local problems and developing local solutions. There is an urgent need for better information on who goes missing, why and from where; and for a host of local organisations and individuals to act and intervene.

Support for the families left behind

Families suffer pain and turmoil when a child goes missing. While the emotional distress they suffer is unavoidable, being left unsupported and having to cope with systematic failures in relieving the burdens imposed on them are avoidable. There is an immediate need to improve the quantity and quality of emotional support available to families. This will present a challenge as it would require awareness and will across the political, social and commercial sectors.

Figure 7: Four major areas for intervention



Source: Sylvia Mao

Need for further research

Without adequate data on how many children are actually missing, what are the causes for them going missing, measures needed to be taken to address these issues cannot be formed. Therefore it is crucial for more research to be done on this issue. This study reveals that there are several areas which require the attention of planners and programme implementers. Policy decisions based on research findings are rooted in ground reality, and therefore have the capacity to bring about tangible improvement in the situation.

As research is a vital input for development, researchers can study social factors which have the potential to make an impact and curtail the problem to a certain extent. For example, this study has found that runaway children constitute the majority of missing cases. Further research studies can be undertaken to study this phenomenon and preventive measures can be put in place to avert runaway episodes. Findings can guide program improvements designed to prevent future running away.

There is usually a reason why a child goes missing, and understanding the circumstances and causes creates an opportunity for the police and other relevant authorities to identify intervention measures that can stop or minimize further disappearances. More importantly, it will draw attention to the safeguarding issues related to going missing and assist in the identification and investigation of crimes which are linked to, or are the cause of, a child going missing. Research in these key areas will provide valuable aid in establishing prevention strategies and in taking proactive action.

There is a need for research on affected families of missing children, to understand their needs and the support they require to cope with the situation. Requirement for effective support services would differ according to each family, some might require practical search assistance, information and advice, for another it might be practical support in the home so that they could concentrate their efforts on the search. It is also important to understand how families deal with their grief, the coping strategies they use and the kind of support they require from the community.

Studies on runaways need to be undertaken so that early intervention and prevention measures can be put in place. Lack of research in this area would make it difficult to address the issue of children running away from their homes. Research in this area would assist in the establishment of relevant prevention frameworks.

To conclude, as the Report of the United Nations Secretary-General's Study on Violence against Children notes: "no violence against children is justifiable; all violence against children is preventable." While legal obligations lie with States, all sectors of society, all individuals, share the responsibility of condemning and preventing children going missing and responding to the missing children issue. Children's uniqueness – their human potential, their initial fragility and vulnerability, their dependence on adults for their growth and development – make an unassailable case for more, not less, investment to ensure prevention and protection from harm.

