



CASE MANAGEMENT for Missing Children Homicide Investigation

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Most children who are not where parents expect them to be, are "missing" for a very short period of time and reappear on their own, with no evidence of foul play. However, some children are missing against their will. The great majority of those children, even though they have undergone a traumatic experience, are not harmed seriously and are returned home alive. Many of them are taken by estranged parents or other family members. A small group is victimized by more predatory abductors, who want to make money by ransoming the child, to sexually molest the victim, and/or to kill the child. The list of children who are abducted and killed each year by someone who is not a family member is relatively small, compared to the number of missing children or to other types of child murder.

Because of their rarity among criminal homicides their complexity, emotion and high profile nature, they are extremely difficult to investigate. *This research was undertaken in an effort to better understand these types of murders, and to identify investigative techniques and strategies that will improve the efficiency and effectiveness of the criminal investigations and the apprehension rate of the murderers who abduct children.* The focus is on cases of child murder in which the victims were abducted or, at the time of the initial report to the police, were suspected to have been abducted.

The murder of a child who is abducted by a stranger is a rare event. There are estimated to be about 100 such incidents in the United States each year, less than one-half of one percent of the murders committed. There is approximately one child abduction murder for every 10,000 reports of a missing child.

The victims of these cases are "average" children, leading normal lives, and living with normal families, typical low-risk victims. The vast majority of them are girls (76%), with the average age being slightly over 11 years of age. In 80% of cases, the initial contact between the victim and killer is within 1/4 mile of the victim's residence.

These cases are generally reported to a law enforcement agency as a "missing child" (58%). Often there is no initial indication of foul play, just a report that the child is missing or runaway. This is a difficult time for the investigator; not knowing whether the "missing child" is late or has been abducted. The investigator is in a position of having to decide on a course of action when time could be a very critical factor.

Any report of a missing child should be taken seriously. As many facts as possible surrounding the disappearance should be obtained as fast as possible, and an assessment of the nature of the case made

expeditiously. Factors to consider in assessing the case should include the age of the child, the circumstances surrounding the child's missing status, and the history of the child.

Fast action is necessary since, 1) there is typically over a two hour delay in making the initial missing child report (60%), and 2) the vast majority (74%) of the abducted children *who are murdered* are dead within three hours of the abduction. Because of these critical time features, it is important to respond quickly with a neighborhood canvass and search of the area.

Over half (57%) of these child abduction murders are committed by a killer who is a stranger to the victim. Family involvement in this type of case is infrequent (9%). However, the relationship between the victim and the killer varies with the gender and age of the victim. The youngest females, 1-5 years old, tend to be killed by friends or acquaintances (64%), while the oldest females, 16-17 years old, tend to be killed by strangers (also 64%). The relationship between the killer and victim is different for the male victims. The youngest male victims (1-5 years old) are most likely to be killed by strangers (also 64%), as are the teenage males (13-15 years old, 60% and 16-17 years old, 58%).

The average age of killers of abducted children is around 27 years old. They are predominantly unmarried (85%) and half of them (51%) either live alone (17%) or with their parents (34%). Half of them are unemployed, and those that are employed work in unskilled or semi-skilled labor occupations. Therefore, the killers can generally be characterized as "social marginals."

Almost two-thirds of the killers (61%) had prior arrests for violent crimes, with slightly more than half of the killers' prior crimes (53%) committed against children. The most frequent prior crimes against children were rape (31% of killers) and other sexual assault (45% of killers). Sixty-seven percent of the child abduction

murderers' prior crimes were similar in M.O. to the murder that was committed by the same killer.

Commonly, the killers are at the initial victim-killer contact site for a legitimate reason (66%). They either lived in the area (29%) or were engaging in some normal activity.

Most of the victims of child abduction murder are victims of opportunity (57%). Only in 14 percent of cases did the killer choose his victim because of some physical characteristic of the victim. The primary motivation for the child abduction murder is sexual assault.

After the victim has been killed, 52 percent of the bodies are concealed to prevent discovery. In only 9% of cases is the body openly placed to insure its discovery. When searching for the victim, searchers must be aware of this fact and look under branches, rugs, or debris. The fact that so many of the bodies are concealed also requires that searchers be placed at intervals approximately equal to the height of the victim.

A unique pattern of distance relationships exists in child abduction murders. The initial contact site is within 1/4 mile of the victim's last known location in 80% of cases. Conversely, the distance between the initial contact site and the murder site increases to distances greater than 1/4 mile (54%). The distance from the murder site to the body recovery site again decreases, to less than 200 feet in 72 percent of cases.

There are investigative implications of these spatial relationships. If the initial contact site is not identified by the police, the clearance rate drops drastically, and vice versa. The close proximity between the initial contact site and the victim's last known location suggests that a thorough neighborhood canvass and area search be completed to locate the initial contact site.

Similarly, knowledge of the location of the murder is important to the investigation. The murder site is second only to the body of the victim as a source of physical evidence that can be connected with the killer. Its close proximity to the body recovery site suggests that a thorough search be conducted to locate it.

It was discovered that once the murder investigation has begun, *the name of the killer* is known to the police *within the first week* in 74% of cases. This provides an opportunity for investigators who are stalled regroup after a week or two, and evaluate everyone connected with the investigation. Likewise, it is not uncommon for the police to have actual contact with the killer before he becomes a primary suspect, for example, during the initial neighborhood canvass.

While at times the media seems to "get in the way," in the end they are much more likely to have a positive effect on the investigation (31% of cases) than a negative one (6% of cases). In short, the media are more likely to bring witnesses forward than to aid the killer in his escape. The media had no effect at all in 63% of the investigations.

One question answered by this research is: What can we tell parents to help them protect their child? Even though child abduction murders are rare events, the thing for parents to do is to eliminate, or minimize, the opportunity for their children to become victims. The first step is to be aware that children are not immune from abduction because they are close to home. In fact, well over half of these abductions that led to murder took place within three city blocks of the victim's home and approximately one-third of them within one-half block. (It is probably not a good idea to send an unescorted ten year old girl to the grocery store to buy a quart of milk.) The greatest single thing we can do as parents is to be certain that our children are supervised, even if they are in their own front yard.

There has been much publicity about, "not speaking to strangers" and "not getting into cars with strangers." We should carry that precaution one step further. We should also educate our children *not to even approach* a car, *whether the occupant of the car is a stranger or not*. We should tell our children, "if someone offers a ride, asks for directions, or offers treats, *turn around and run* to a safe place, and tell (their guardian)."

Citizens need to be aware of strangers and *unusual* behavior in their neighborhoods. They need to have the presence of mind to observe and to write down descriptions of people, vehicles, and license numbers. Many child abductions are witnessed by people who do not realize that a crime is being committed. For example, when a citizen observes 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 fact, in most instances, that is exactly what it is. However, nothing prevents a citizen from evaluating the circumstances closer, perhaps intervening, and certainly, noting descriptions and license numbers.

Last, we need to tell parents that if their child is unaccounted for, *call the police immediately*. Do not delay.

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