



# **CASE MANAGEMENT for Missing Children Homicide Investigation**

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## SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS

### Introduction

The murder of an abducted child, particularly by a stranger, is a rare event. There are estimated to be about 100 such incidents in the United States each year. The victims are typically “average” children, leading normal lives, and growing up in normal families. The vast majority of them are girls, with the average age between 11 and 12 years old. In most cases, the initial contact between the victim and killer is within one-fourth mile of the victim’s residence.

These cases are typically reported to a law enforcement agency as a “missing child.” Often there is no initial indication of foul play, just a report that the child is unaccounted for. This is a difficult time for the investigator, not knowing whether the “missing child” is simply late in returning home, is the victim of foul play, or has been abducted. Any report to the police of a missing child should be taken seriously. As many facts as possible surrounding the missing child occurrence should be obtained as quickly as possible. An assessment of the nature of the case made should be made expeditiously. Factors to consider in assessing the case should include the age and gender of the child, the circumstances surrounding the child’s missing status, and the history of the child.

Immediate action is dictated by two facts: 1) there is typically over a two-hour delay in making the initial missing child report, and 2) the vast majority of the abducted children *who are murdered* are dead within three hours of the abduction. Because of these critical time features, there is a need to respond quickly in a comprehensive, labor intensive investigation. Over half of the child abduction murders are committed by a killer who is a total stranger to the victim. However, the relationship between the victim and the killer varies with the gender and age of the victim. The youngest females, 1 to 5 years old, tend to be killed by friends or acquaintances,

while the oldest females, 16 to 17 years old, tend to be killed by strangers. But both the youngest and oldest male victims are likely to be killed by strangers.

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

Almost two-thirds of the killers have prior arrests for violent crimes, with slightly more than half of those prior crimes committed against children. The most frequent prior crimes against children are rape and other types of sexual assault. Most of the murderers’ prior crimes are similar in MO to the child abduction murder.

Commonly, the killers are at the initial victim-killer contact site for a legitimate reason. They either live in the area or were engaging in some normal activity. Most of the victims of child abduction murder are victims of opportunity. Seldom does the killer choose his victim because of some physical characteristic of the victim. The primary motivation for the child abduction killer is sexual assault.

A unique pattern of distance relationships exists in child abduction murders. Often, the initial contact site is located very close to the victim’s last known location. Conversely, the distance between the Initial Contact Site and the Murder Site increases to distances greater than one-fourth mile. The distance from the Murder Site to the Body Recovery Site again decreases to less than 199 feet in the vast majority 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 Seen Site suggests thorough neighborhood canvass and area searches be completed to locate the initial contact site. 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 completed to locate it.

It was discovered that once the murder investigation has begun, *the name of the killer* is likely to be in the investigative file *within the first week*. This provides an opportunity for investigators who may have run out of viable leads to regroup and review everyone whose name has been uncovered during the investigation. Similarly, 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. Also, while at times the media seem to “get in the way,” in the end they are much more likely to have a positive effect on the investigation than a negative one. In short, the media are more likely to bring witnesses forward than to aid the killer in his escape.

### ***How Can We Protect Our Children?***

One question answered by this research is this: What can we tell parents to help them protect their children? 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 the abductions occurred within one-half block. Perhaps the most important single thing we can do as parents to protect our children is to be certain that our children are supervised, even if they are in their own front yard or neighborhood street.

“Stranger Danger” has become a common warning issued by American parents to children. There has been extensive publicity about educating children to avoid abduction by “not speaking to strangers” and “not getting into cars with strangers.” We should carry those

precautions one step further. Our children should be taught *not to even approach* a car, *whether the occupant of the car is a stranger or not*, no matter what they tell or ask them.

Citizens need to be aware of strangers and *unusual* behavior in their neighborhood. 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 most instances, that 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 may be a person with criminal intentions. Finally, we need to remind parents that if their child is missing, they must *call the police immediately*. An immediate response to a missing or abducted child may be the difference between life and death for the child.