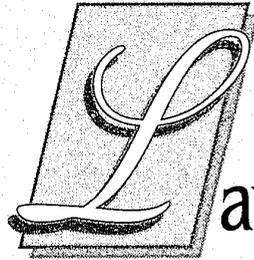


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U.S. Department of Justice
Office of Justice Programs
Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention



Office
of
Justice
Programs
Research
Summary



Law Enforcement
Policies and Practices
Regarding Missing Children
and Homeless Youth
Research Summary

A Publication of the
Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention

Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention

The Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention (OJJDP) was established by the President and Congress through the Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention (JJDP) Act of 1974, Public Law 93-415, as amended. Located within the Office of Justice Programs of the U.S. Department of Justice, OJJDP's goal is to provide National leadership in addressing the issues of juvenile delinquency and improving juvenile justice.

OJJDP sponsors a broad array of research, program, and training initiatives to improve the juvenile justice system as a whole, as well as to benefit individual youth-serving agencies. These initiatives are carried out by seven components within OJJDP, described below.

Research and Program Development Division develops knowledge on national trends in juvenile delinquency; supports a program for data collection and information sharing that incorporates elements of statistical and systems development; identifies how delinquency develops and the best methods for its prevention, intervention, and treatment; and analyzes practices and trends in the juvenile justice system.

Training and Technical Assistance Division provides juvenile justice training and technical assistance to Federal, State, and local governments; law enforcement, judiciary, and corrections personnel; and private agencies, educational institutions, and community organizations.

Special Emphasis Division provides discretionary funds to public and private agencies, organizations, and individuals to replicate tested approaches to delinquency prevention, treatment, and control in such pertinent areas as chronic juvenile offenders, community-based sanctions, and the disproportionate representation of minorities in the juvenile justice system.

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Concentration of Federal Efforts Program promotes interagency cooperation and coordination among Federal agencies with responsibilities in the area of juvenile justice. The program primarily carries out this responsibility through the Coordinating Council on Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention, an independent body within the executive branch that was established by Congress through the JJDP Act.

Missing and Exploited Children Program seeks to promote effective policies and procedures for addressing the problem of missing and exploited children. Established by the Missing Children's Assistance Act of 1984, the program provides funds for a variety of activities to support and coordinate a network of resources such as the National Center for Missing and Exploited Children; training and technical assistance to a network of 43 State clearinghouses, nonprofit organizations, law enforcement personnel, and attorneys; and research and demonstration programs.

OJJDP provides leadership, direction, and resources to the juvenile justice community to help prevent and control delinquency throughout the country.

Law Enforcement Policies and Practices Regarding Missing Children and Homeless Youth

Research Summary

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**U.S. Department of Justice
National Institute of Justice**

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The Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention is a component of the Office of Justice Programs, which also includes the Bureau of Justice Assistance, the Bureau of Justice Statistics, the National Institute of Justice, and the Office for Victims of Crime.

Foreword

The problem of missing children has concerned Americans for generations. Precisely because any problem affecting our children is one that should concern us, it is essential to have an objective analysis of these problems to provide a sound foundation for corrective action. *Law Enforcement Policies and Practices Regarding Missing Children and Homeless Youth* is a significant contribution to that critical assessment.

As with many other social problems, our law enforcement officers are on the front lines of the missing child problem. Whether a child is abducted, runs away, or is lost, the police department is often the first public agency contacted. In the face of myriad responsibilities, a police department is also one of the most stressed public agencies.

This report summarizes the findings of this national study in areas such as the police response in cases concerning missing and homeless youth, factors affecting that response, and parental evaluation of the response. Case profiles and their outcomes, and the effects of police response in shaping those outcomes, are also analyzed in the study.

The objective of this study is to improve police effectiveness and efficiency to enhance the safety of our children. Strengthening the police response is an important step in developing communitywide strategies for recovering missing children and returning them safely to their families.

John J. Wilson

Acting Administrator

Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention

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Why was this study done?

The problem of missing children has become one of national concern

Since the early 1970's, the issue of missing children has become firmly established as a Federal legislative and programmatic focus. In 1974, Congress enacted the Runaway Youth Act (Public Law 93-415), which established a grant mechanism for the development of local facilities for runaway youth, and recommended the development of statistics on the prevalence and characteristics of runaway youth.

The level of public and private attention to the missing children problem increased in the early 1980's. This attention was largely a response to a few tragic and highly publicized cases of young children who were abducted and murdered. Several organizations were formed by parents of lost or murdered children, including Child Find, the Kevin Collins Foundation, and the Adam Walsh Resource Center. The Federal role in addressing the missing children problem was expanded in 1980 with the passage of the Parental Kidnapping Prevention Act (Public Law 96-611). In 1984, the Missing Children's Assistance Act was passed as Title IV of the Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention Act of 1974. As amended, the act requires the Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention (OJJDP) to conduct periodic studies of the incidence of missing children. The act facilitated the establishment of the National Center for Missing and Exploited Children (NCMEC), which has a national toll-free hotline; it also authorized the OJJDP Administrator to award grants for research, demonstration, and service programs and for technical assistance related to the missing children problem.

In the past few years, additional Federal legislation has enhanced services for runaway youth. Amendments to the Runaway Youth Act of 1974 (Public Law 96-509 and Public Law 98-473) recognized the need for services to families after a youth has returned home, and added the term "homeless" in recognition of the fact that some youth continue to stay away from home or do not have homes to which to return. In 1988, Congress passed the Anti-Drug Abuse Act (Public Law 100-690), which makes grants available to carry out research, demonstration, and service projects related to the illicit use of drugs and is designed to develop and support community education activities and counseling programs for affected runaway and homeless youth.

For many years, the term "missing children" was used to describe several different phenomena—children who left home voluntarily, those who were abducted, and those who were simply lost. Ambiguities associated with the term made it difficult to estimate the magnitude of the problem and to formulate appropriate public responses. Recently, as a result of this and other studies funded by OJJDP, many of the conceptual and quantification problems have been addressed.



In the past few years, additional Federal legislation has enhanced services for runaway youth.

What in the past has been called "the missing children problem" is in reality a set of at least four distinct problems.

Police are usually the first agency to respond in missing child/youth cases

When a child or youth runs away, is abducted, or becomes lost, parents and caretakers usually notify the police, who are required to make decisions about the type and intensity of resources that should be committed to the investigation. How police exercise this discretion is affected by a variety of factors, including departmental policy, departmental organization, and the perceived risk of harm to the child.

Police have a limited capacity to investigate and must decide which cases will receive the most attention. Missing child or youth cases involving a serious violation of law (such as abduction), very young children, or a potentially dangerous situation are likely to receive intensive investigative attention; other cases, such as those involving runaways, are likely to be viewed as less serious. The current study attempts to fill the void in understanding factors that influence law enforcement agencies to commit investigative resources to such cases.

Study goals and methodology are described

This report summarizes the results of the National Study of Law Enforcement Policies and Practices Regarding Missing Children and Homeless Youth, which was conducted by the Research Triangle Institute (RTI) and the URSA Institute. The study was funded by OJJDP, a component of the U.S. Justice Department.

The purpose of the study is to describe the police response, the factors associated with that response, and parent/caretaker satisfaction with police handling of cases of runaway, throwaway, and abducted children that were reported to them. The analyses also focus on the profiles of cases and their outcomes, as well as on the relationship between police responses and case outcomes. This information can provide guidance in the development of policies that address police effectiveness and efficiency as well as the safety of children and youth.

Data were collected in three ways:

- **Mail surveys of police departments.** During 1987, a standardized questionnaire on how police departments respond to missing children cases was sent to 1,060 randomly selected law enforcement agencies throughout the United States. The agencies were stratified by size, according to the number of sworn officers, and by region of the country. Completed questionnaires were received from 791 agencies, which is a response rate of 75.4 percent.
- **Site visits to police departments.** Thirty police departments (a systematically selected subset of the mail survey) were selected for onsite interviews during 1988. All levels of law enforcement personnel were interviewed to gather detailed, qualitative information about police departments' responses to missing children cases.
- **Interviews with parents or caretakers.** Interviews were conducted with 960 parents or caretakers who had reported a child missing to the police

in six metropolitan areas between March and July 1989. The caretakers included foster parents or staff at group homes and other juvenile residential institutions. In addition, 378 children were interviewed.

The purpose of the interviews was to learn the circumstances and outcomes of cases and to determine the degree of parental satisfaction with police handling of cases. This information was obtained to supplement the information obtained from the site visits and the mail survey.

For purposes of analysis, law enforcement agencies were divided into three categories by size (large, medium, and small) based on the number of sworn officers. Large police departments were defined as those having 300 or more officers, medium-size departments as those with 100 to 299 officers, and small departments as those with fewer than 100 officers. All departments selected for site visits and parent/caretaker interviews had at least 50 sworn officers.

Who are missing children and what happens to them?

Children and youth can be reported missing under a variety of circumstances

Public discussion of the missing children problem has lacked clear definition of its nature and magnitude. What in the past has been called "the missing children problem" is in reality a set of at least four distinct problems: (1) a runaway; (2) parental (or family) abduction; (3) stranger (or nonfamily) abduction; and (4) unknown or otherwise missing (Collins, McCalla, Powers, and Stutts, 1989; Finkelhor, Hotaling, and Sedlak, 1990; and Fisher, 1989).

In the current study, a missing child or youth is defined as a person under 18 years old who has been reported missing to a local police agency. Categories of children reported missing are defined as follows:

- **A runaway** is a child/youth who has left (or not returned to) a parent's or caretaker's supervision without permission. A subset of these young people are throwaway children/youth who have been forced to leave their parents' or guardians' homes or are not allowed to return.
- **Parental/family abduction** indicates that a parent or other relative has wrongfully taken, kept, or concealed a child/youth from another parent or legal custodian.
- **Stranger/nonfamily abduction** indicates that a child/youth was taken, kept, or concealed by a person not known to the child and/or his/her parent, legal guardian, or caretaker.
- **Unknown or otherwise missing** indicates that a child/youth is missing and the facts of the case are insufficient to determine if the child was abducted, the victim of an accident, or left home voluntarily.



Many runaways
returned home
within a day or two.

In the current study, the ratio of police file reports of runaways to those of family abductions was 55 to 1.

This report does not deal with "unknown or otherwise missing" cases because relatively few such cases were identified during the data collection period and they were too diverse to support a qualitative, descriptive analysis. Police usually had pursued "unknown or otherwise missing" cases vigorously until they were resolved or classified into the runaway or abduction categories.

Additionally, this study was concerned with police handling of homeless youth. For purposes of the study, homeless youth were defined as youths ages 14 to 17 or unemancipated runaways living on their own in the local jurisdiction without a parent or guardian.

Past experience with missing children cases and the children/youth involved usually influence police handling of new cases. Some basic facts, gathered from interviews with parents and youth who were identified in the Missing Persons records of six metropolitan police departments, are provided here as background for consideration of police policies and procedures.

Children and youth may run away

Most cases of missing children reported to police involve runaways. Interviews with parents or guardians of runaways who were reported to police over a 3-month period provided information about the runaway children/youth and their experiences while away from home.

Of the 667 youngsters who stayed away overnight or longer:

- **Most were teenagers:** 46 percent were 14 or 15 years old and 24 percent were 16 or 17. The remaining 30 percent were younger than 14 years old, with only a few (2 percent) age 10 or younger.
- **Most were girls:** 59 percent.
- **Most came from families that were or had been broken:** 55 percent came from single parent families and 10 percent from blended families; 28 percent lived with both natural parents; and the remaining 6 percent were from some other family situation.
- **Most ran to someone they knew:** 66 percent of these youth had initially run to a friend's or relative's home; 13 percent initially ran somewhere else, for example, to a mall or nearby arcade, to the downtown area of their city, or to another city. Twenty-one percent of parents and guardians did not know where the youth had gone first.
- **Many returned home within a day or two:** 48 percent of these youth returned home within 2 days. About half (51 percent) were gone for 3 days or more, including 21 percent who were gone for a week or more.
- **Many already had some experience as runaways:** 52 percent had run away at least once prior to the incident for which data were gathered in this study; 22 percent had previously run away six or more times.
- **Some had traveled a long distance:** About 10 percent went more than 50 miles from home during the incident; about 3 percent left the State.

-
- **Some had spent at least one night with no secure place to sleep:** 12 percent.
 - **Some runaways were victimized or otherwise harmed:** 3–5 percent were victims of theft, sexual abuse, or other physical harm during the incident; 7 percent of parents and guardians believed their children had suffered some mental harm.

Children and youth may be abducted by a family member

Police investigate many fewer family abduction cases than runaway cases. For instance, the National Incidence Studies on Missing, Abducted, Runaway, and Thrownaway Children (NISMART) study estimated that there were nearly as many family abductions (approximately 155,800) reported to police in a year as there were runaways (about 181,600). However, the site visit interviews revealed that police in many departments often referred family abduction cases elsewhere, for example, to prosecutors or social service agencies. In fact, in the NISMART study, the incidence of runaways that parents said they had reported to police compared with the incidence of family abductions that parents said they had reported to police produced a ratio of 1.2 to 1. In the current study, the ratio of police file reports of runaways to those of family abductions was 55 to 1. Consequently, it appears that the family abduction cases identified in police files during the current study were a small percentage of total cases, possibly having features that led police to identify them as appropriate for investigation.

Of the 58 children who had been abducted by a parent or other family member:

- **Most were very young:** 56 percent were 5 years old or younger; 42 percent were under 2 years of age.
- **Most were returned within a week:** 75 percent were returned in 7 days or less; 28 percent were returned within 24 hours.
- **Many appeared to be serious cases:** the abducting parent concealed the child in 55 percent of the cases, threatened or demanded something of the complainant parent in 42 percent, and took the child out of State in 21 percent.
- **Some children were harmed:** 5 percent of the parents interviewed reported that their abducted child had been physically abused; 19 percent believed the child had been harmed mentally.

Children and youth may be abducted by someone not related to them

Nonfamily abductions are rare and are considered serious. In this study, parental interviews were completed for 11 cases of nonfamily abductions, or attempts at abduction.

Nonfamily abductions are rare and are considered serious.

Parents and police sometimes differ in their views about how aggressively the police should investigate cases.

There were similarities and differences among these cases:

- **Most of the children were young:** five were 5 years old or younger, four were between 5 and 10 years old, and two were teenagers; five were girls and six were boys.
- **Most of the perpetrators were known to the child or the parents:** nearly half were boyfriends of the child's mother and the rest were divided almost evenly between "others" and strangers (such as an acquaintance of the child); all were male.
- **Most of the victims were not missing for very long:** eight children were gone for 2 hours or less; one was held for 14 hours (by someone known to a parent), one for 3 days (by a stranger), and one for 3 months (by someone known to the parent).
- **Nearly all of the victims were forcibly moved during the episode:** most were taken from the street and moved in a car to another location.
- **Four females were sexually abused:** three girls (two age 8 and one age 15) were taken from the street, sexually molested, released within a short time, and the cases were reported by the parent after the child returned home. A fourth, a 17-year-old girl, was reportedly abducted by an acquaintance and held in a motel room in another State for 3 days before being returned by the abductor.

How do police respond to missing child/youth reports?

Missing child/youth cases are perceived differently by police and parents

When parents or guardians initially call the police, they often know little more than that their child is not where he or she is supposed to be. During this initial contact, police ask a series of questions to identify the caller and the nature of the incident in order to classify the case for further action. Decisions concerning the type of case and the level of risk are not usually made at this point. Most police departments assign a patrol officer or investigator to gather additional information before deciding on an investigative response.

Information provided to the police about missing children cases is often insufficient for accurate case classification and risk assessment. Thus, factors such as departmental policy, resource availability, parental preferences, and the subjective evaluation of police all influence the investigative response. Investigative responses range from fairly straightforward information gathering, such as obtaining a description of the missing child, to aggressive and resource-intensive activities, such as interviewing witnesses and enlisting the help of investigative specialists. From the perspective of the police, the goal is to commit the appropriate level of investigative resources to each case.

Parents and police sometimes differ in their views about how aggressively the police should investigate cases. Exhibit 1 illustrates typical disparities in the way parents and police view the risks and their expectations of police responses for the various case types. Parents often expect police to pursue cases more aggressively than police think appropriate. Agreement between police and parents is likely to be high for nonfamily abductions, but for runaways, family abductions, and otherwise missing cases, a consensus on police handling may be absent. The major reason for the disparity in perceptions by police and parents is probably a parent's belief that a child or youth is in more danger than the police believe, based on their experience with similar cases. This disparity can result in parental dissatisfaction with police response.

The initial procedures for handling calls that report a missing child or youth can affect police understanding and classification of a case, and the effectiveness of later investigative procedures in recovering the child or youth. The national mail survey showed that 85 percent of police departments made a written report of all missing child or youth calls that were received. Nearly all police departments that prepared a written report on a missing child case did so on the basis of the first call. In other words, there was no waiting period prior to writing a report. However, most departments surveyed had not formalized their procedures with a written policy for dealing with missing child and youth cases. Nationally, only 27 percent reported having a written policy specific to missing children. Larger police departments were much more likely to have written procedures. The length and specificity of departmental policies vary greatly.

Most departments surveyed had not formalized their procedures with a written policy for dealing with missing child and youth cases.

Exhibit 1: Potential Conflicts in Police-Parent Expectations About Responses to Typical Child/Youth Cases

Case Type	Police View	Parents' View
1. Runaways		
Risk:	Minimal (unless otherwise indicated)	Medium to high
Mission:	Social work, not crimefighting	Find and return child ASAP
2. Family Abductions		
Risk:	Minimal (unless otherwise indicated)	Medium to high
Mission:	Civil, not criminal matter	Return child—punish offender
3. Nonfamily Abductions		
Risk:	High	High
Mission:	Return child ASAP, apprehend offender	Return child ASAP, apprehend offender
4. Otherwise Missing		
Risk:	Minimal (unless otherwise indicated)	High
Mission:	Classify case and act accordingly	Find and return child

Call takers assign a high priority to kidnappings by strangers and reports of very young missing children.

Most departments follow similar procedures for handling cases

The most common way in which law enforcement becomes involved in such cases is for a person to report a missing child. Less common are instances in which patrol units "spot" youth whom they suspect are in need of assistance or are runaways, youth on the streets asking for assistance from passing patrol units, and officers becoming aware of a youth's situation because the youth was either involved in criminal activity or was the victim of a crime.

Most large jurisdictions divide communication functions between "call takers" and dispatchers. Call takers are responsible for answering telephones and recording information necessary to dispatch a police unit, or, in some instances, to complete a missing persons report, and for making the initial case classification. Of course, officers in the field may change or modify the initial classification as more information is acquired.

Response priorities are routinely assigned to each case. Some police departments have elaborate, formal response systems; others proceed in an informal manner. However, the nature and level of concurrent calls for service affect both the time in which a car is dispatched and the time in which a patrol unit responds to the call. In all jurisdictions, call takers assign a high priority to kidnappings by strangers and reports of very young missing children. The presumption is that children in such cases may be in extreme physical danger. Routine reports of runaways generally receive a low response priority. Some agencies, however, make distinctions among runaway cases.

In many jurisdictions, a patrol unit is dispatched to the scene whenever a missing child is reported, regardless of the age of the child or the category of the case. In other departments (either due to a large influx of calls for service or because runaway cases receive low departmental priority), a unit is dispatched only if the child is under a certain age. However, even jurisdictions that ordinarily follow age criteria for patrol response always send a patrol car if a child of any age has disappeared under mysterious circumstances or foul play is suspected.

Patrol officers normally make a written report about an incident as soon as they encounter the reporting party but there are a few exceptions to this rule. For example, if the child may be in danger, the officer may defer writing the report and immediately begin a search or take another appropriate action.

In general, the younger the child, the greater the concern exhibited by patrol officers. Higher priority is also given if the child is missing at night or is in a dangerous area, for example, near a body of water, heavy traffic, or a wooded area. Major concern is shown if foul play is suspected. The patrol officer in the field is expected to call his or her supervisor for further instructions regarding "questionable" cases, that is, if foul play is suspected or if the child is in imminent danger. In most cities, the patrol officer's supervisor decides whether to take supplemental actions, such as dispatching more cars or calling in an investigative unit. In some cities the patrol officer is required by policy to notify a specified investigative unit.

In most jurisdictions, once a patrol officer has completed the preliminary investigation, his or her report is forwarded to a detective in an investigative unit for followup. However, in cases involving suspected foul play or if a small child may be in danger, or if there are other extenuating circumstances, an investigator may join in the investigation with the patrol officer from the outset. In either situation, investigators generally do not begin their separate investigations until patrol officers have finished their activities. Typically, followup investigations by detectives begin a day or two after a missing child report is taken. Generally speaking, because of limited resources, most of an investigator's followup activities are performed over the telephone rather than in person. The detective assigned to a case contacts the reporting party, usually the parent, to determine if the child has returned home, if the child has been heard from, or if the parent has had any additional ideas about the child's possible whereabouts. The investigator may then contact the child's friends, relatives, and school, and query social workers, hospitals, shelters, and other organizations or persons who may have knowledge of the child, depending on how serious the case is perceived to be.

Police responses vary with different types of cases

As indicated above, police response varies greatly, according to the very different situations inherent in the reports of missing children:

Runaways

- Police told parents to "call back later" in only a small percentage of such cases. The mail survey indicated that only 2 percent of large police departments reported they had waiting periods before runaway cases could be officially reported. This was consistent with information from parents: only 3 percent of the parents interviewed reported they were told to call back later.
- In more than 75 percent of the runaway cases, parents said an officer came in person to take a report. This is roughly consistent with the results of the police department mail survey. For instance, 62 percent of large police departments responding to the mail survey reported they always or usually "sent a car to the scene" in runaway cases.
- In virtually all cases, parents said police collected basic information when an officer came in person, but other police actions were not so common. In 63 percent to 75 percent of cases, police asked for a photograph of the child, asked for the name of a friend or relative to contact, or asked about the child's favorite haunts. In about 40 percent of the cases, parents said police searched the neighborhood. In about 20 percent of the cases, police issued an "all points bulletin" (APB); in about 10 percent of the cases, they called other officers into the investigation. Searching the home and other police procedures were uncommon during the in-person contact.
- Police often made suggestions for actions that parents might take to help locate their child. However, these suggestions rarely included contacting a

Sixty-two percent of large police departments responding to the mail survey reported they always or usually "sent a car to the scene" in runaway cases.

Race, sex, and family income had little, if any, effect on the way that police handled cases of runaways.

runaway hotline or a missing child agency or similar services. Police gave parents a case number 58 percent of the time, described the investigative process 33 percent of the time, and told parents how to get a copy of the police report 37 percent of the time.

- In nearly 75 percent of the cases, police made one or more contacts with the parent/caretaker after the initial report; for example, a police officer telephoned or visited in person in 60 percent and 48 percent of the cases, respectively. Parents often initiated repeat contacts with the police. In more than 50 percent of the cases, parents called police to report the child's return.
- Race, sex, and family income had little, if any, effect on the way that police handled cases of runaways. However, a few case characteristics did shape the police response. For example, police were not very likely to call for backup to locate children older than 12. This reflects the fact that many police departments consider missing children cases involving younger children as their priority cases, which require certain procedures and often include calling for backup. Expressions of parental concern were another factor associated with initiation of searches and the issuance of APB's. Long duration of the child's absence from home was associated positively with an in-person visit and followup by the police department.

Family abductions

- Most police actions related to family abductions occurred at a rate similar to those for investigating runaways. Nine of 10 parents said an officer visited to take a report in person; this compared with 8 of 10 in-person visits to investigate runaways. "Suggest calling a lawyer" was a very common recommendation by police in family abductions.
- Parents/caretakers ranked their satisfaction with police handling of family abduction cases. Seventy-one percent of the parents/caretakers rated the length of time it took for an officer to initially respond as "very good" or "excellent." Fifty-eight percent of parents/caretakers rated the police effort to recover their abducted children as "very good" or "excellent." Ratings were "very poor" or "poor" for the length of time to respond and police effort to recover the child, 20 percent and 26 percent, respectively.

Nonfamily abductions

- Police and parental perceptions are likely to be in close agreement on the aggressive police investigations needed in nonfamily abductions. However, among the 11 cases of nonfamily abductions for which a parental interview was completed, parental views on the overall police response were mixed. Six of the respondents described police response as "excellent" or "very good," but five believed it was "neither good nor bad" or that it was "poor."
- None of the parents/caretakers who reported nonfamily abductions were told to call or return later. An initial report was either taken by police at the first contact, or the parent/caretaker was told that an officer would visit to take a report. In all cases in which a parent/caretaker was told that an officer would come to take a report, an officer did respond in person.

Police rank the obstacles to their investigations

The mail survey asked police departments to rank the greatest obstacles to investigative success in the three types of cases: (1) runaways; (2) family abductions; and (3) nonfamily abductions. Success was defined as the recovery and return of the child or youth.

- **For runaway cases**, 72 percent of police departments chose the age/independence/mobility of youth as the most important obstacle to a successful investigation. Three other obstacles to the investigation were named in 53 to 58 percent of responses: (1) difficulty of knowing whether the child or youth was voluntarily absent; (2) inadequate information available to locate children or youth outside the jurisdiction; and (3) the fact that running away is not a criminal offense.
- **For family abduction cases**, 70 to 80 percent of police departments agreed on the importance of three obstacles: (1) difficulty in verifying custody; (2) statutes, or laws, regarding custody; and (3) lack of family cooperation. There was less apparent agreement on the importance of obstacles regarding cooperation with four other sources: (1) other police departments; (2) their own prosecutors; (3) other States' prosecutors; and (4) judges. These perceived sources of obstruction were named by 32 to 43 percent of departments.
- **For nonfamily abduction cases**, there was a similar pattern of consensus. The degree of agreement among 90 percent or more of the departments was very high on the importance of three obstacles to the investigation: (1) difficulty in securing witnesses, (2) difficulty in obtaining physical evidence, and (3) difficulty in classifying the case. Considerably fewer departments (31 to 48 percent) cited lack of cooperation from other police departments or from the family and competition with other departmental priorities as obstacles.

Police have little contact with homeless youth

Law enforcement officers do not routinely use the term "homeless" youth. Some officers acknowledge that there are homeless children who have been abandoned by their parents or kicked out of their homes. But from the police point of view, such youth could (and should) be referred to any one of a variety of social service agencies that could place the youth in a foster home or a group home.

- Approximately 20 percent of police departments nationally reported having a written policy for dealing with homeless youth. Larger departments and State police agencies were more likely than others to have written policies.
- Law enforcement's estimates of the size of the homeless youth problem are directly proportional to the size of the jurisdiction. In smaller jurisdictions, police officers claim that the problem of homeless youth is minimal or nonexistent. Officers in the larger cities maintain that they do

Fifty-eight percent of parents/caretakers rated the police effort to recover their abducted children as "very good" or "excellent."

Most homeless young people who need help go to a shelter, particularly one with an outreach program, or to a social service agency instead of approaching an officer of the law.

have a problem with homeless youth, but admit they have no realistic estimate of the number of homeless youth in their jurisdiction.

- Law enforcement personnel encounter homeless youth primarily when police officers are on patrol, if indeed they encounter them at all. On rare occasions, a juvenile will approach an officer and ask for assistance. Most homeless young people who need help go to a shelter, particularly one with an outreach program, or to a social service agency, instead of approaching an officer of the law. Police sometimes encounter homeless youth when a juvenile becomes the victim of a crime such as a robbery or an assault, or when they need medical attention.
- The mail survey asked police departments what they considered to be "the greatest obstacles to having youth returned home or placed in some other form of protective care (such as a shelter or group home)." Nearly two-thirds of the responding police departments agreed on three obstacles: (1) the age/independence/mobility of youth; (2) the fact that running away is not a criminal offense; and (3) the lack of cooperation from a youth's family. Between 44 to 47 percent cited additional obstacles: (1) not enough shelters; (2) statutes that prohibit taking youth into custody; (3) the fact that the young person has run away from an abusive environment; and (4) a youth's involvement in criminal activities.

Innovative programs address the problem of missing children

Many law enforcement jurisdictions have developed innovative approaches to addressing the problem of missing children, especially runaways.

- Several jurisdictions use unique methods for responding to and investigating runaway cases. For example, in Los Angeles, California, a special patrol unit is assigned to work proactively with youth encountered on the street during school hours. The Chicago, Illinois, Police Department has established a unique automated system of intelligence information to assist investigations. The Metro-Dade (Florida) Police Department's Youth Services Bureau has established a system that includes detectives who are specialists in several youth-related areas. New York City has a special squad for runaways.
- Some jurisdictions have begun to improve the coordination between social services and law enforcement. For example, the "Coping Program," which provides counseling for first- or second-time runaways and their families, is a joint effort of the Lincoln, Nebraska, Police Department and faculty members at the University of Nebraska. A Louisville, Kentucky/Jefferson County unit combines police and social worker teams to respond to cases of missing children.

What are the outcomes of missing children cases?

Most runaways return home on their own

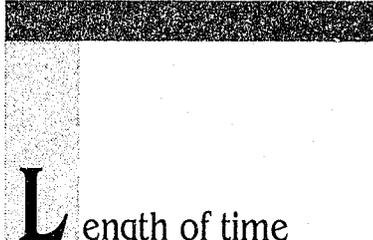
Most runaways return home voluntarily within a few days without police intervention or assistance. However, the return of runaways is sometimes a problem for police, especially when a child has traveled a long distance or out of State. If parents do not have the resources to arrange for bus or plane transportation for a child's return, the responsibility may fall to the police. In this situation, police often request that a social agency coordinate the child's return or implement an existing Interstate Compact. Many States have Interstate Compact agreements that specify conditions for the detention and return of runaway children. Sometimes police coordinate the return of a runaway child or youth to his or her home jurisdiction; however, this is a task most departments are not well equipped to carry out.

In more than 9 of 10 police departments, police verify that a child has returned home before closing a case. Police policies and procedures often involve other closeout procedures. Police departments that responded to the survey said they "always" or "sometimes" do the following:

- Interview the child/youth—52 percent.
- Refer the child/youth/family for counseling—50 percent.
- Obtain a medical examination for the child/youth—6 percent.

Case closeout is sometimes ambiguous—as when a runaway youth establishes a residence outside the jurisdiction where the case originated. Police departments differ in their procedures for such cases, but if such a youth appears to be at risk, police officers will pursue such cases proactively. In cases where the child or youth has not been located, many police departments keep the case open until the child reaches the age of majority; some police departments keep cases open beyond this age.

Police and other agencies are sometimes faced with difficult decisions in connection with the recovery of runaway or throwaway youth. The term "throwaway youth" generally refers to children who have been abandoned by their parents and caretakers, or have been kicked out of their homes. Returning the child to his or her previous living situation may appear inappropriate or even dangerous if the living situation is an abusive or neglectful one. Many police departments attempt to involve local social service agencies in these cases. Unfortunately, appropriate social services are not always available, or the child's family may be unwilling to accept help. Sometimes adverse living conditions appear intractable, options are limited, and difficult choices are required.



Length of time away from home was *not* associated with victimization or sexual exploitation of runaways.

When police requested a photo of the runaway youth, parents and caretakers were more than twice as likely to be satisfied with the overall handling of the case.

It is generally difficult for the police to detain runaways

It is not legally permissible in most States to detain runaways for more than a minimal period of time; the time varies from a few to as many as 72 hours. About 4 of every 10 police agencies indicated that the inability to detain runaways was an obstacle to successful handling of these cases. Police officers in many places believed the time allowed for holding runaways was insufficient, especially if the return of an out-of-State runaway was required or if arranging an alternative living situation appeared advisable. Some police departments acknowledged holding runaways longer than the legal amount of time so that arrangements appropriate to the child's interest could be made.

Recovery of abducted children is less ambiguous

Police activities surrounding the recovery of abducted children are usually less ambiguous than in the case of runaways. Family and nonfamily abduction cases investigated by police are much more like criminal investigations of other kinds of offenses than are runaway cases. The police investigate the facts of a case, attempt to identify an offender, recover the victim, make an arrest, and refer the case to the prosecutor. The cases are then closed in the same way as are other criminal cases.

Runaway cases sometimes have adverse outcomes

Parents and caretakers reported whether their children were victimized during the runaway event. An analysis was made of the characteristics of children and events that were associated with the victimizations:

- Children age 12 and younger were more likely than teenagers between the ages of 12 and 17 to be sexually exploited. These younger children were more likely to be victimized violently than teenagers age 13 to 14.
- Whites were more likely than African Americans to be victimized violently.
- Youth traveling 10 to 50 miles from home were more likely to be victimized violently than those traveling less than 10 miles from home.
- Runaways who had no secure place to stay while away from home were more likely to be exploited sexually.
- Having a history of six or more previous runaway incidents was associated with sexual exploitation and victimization by theft.
- Length of time away from home was *not* associated with victimization or sexual exploitation of runaways.

The incidence of victimization and exploitation was not high enough for analyses of family and nonfamily abduction cases to be conducted.

Police actions can affect case outcomes

There is some evidence that police actions had positive effects on the outcomes of runaway and abduction cases:

- Based on police departments' reports of the investigative actions undertaken and the speed with which cases are closed, a larger number of investigative actions was associated with relatively swift closing of child runaway and nonfamily abduction cases.
- Based on parents' reports of police investigative procedures, certain police actions resulted in a child's more speedy return.

The direct relationship between police activities and quicker recovery is important because the length of time a child or youth is away from home is associated with some adverse incident outcomes.

Parents evaluate police response

Parents, and caretakers of youth in juvenile residential institutions were asked about their satisfaction with the initial time it took police to respond to reports of runaway children, the effort police expended to recover runaway children and youth, and their overall satisfaction with police handling of cases.

Certain police actions were closely associated with satisfaction. When police officers visited in person to take a report, parents and institutional caretakers were more than five times as likely to be satisfied with their response time as when they made no in-person visit. When police requested a photo of the runaway youth, parents and caretakers were more than twice as likely to be satisfied with the overall handling of the case. Interestingly, only one of the six study sites reported dissatisfaction with police handling of cases. This suggests that overall departmental policy can affect satisfaction with the handling of cases.

Exhibit 2: Parent and Institutional Caretaker Satisfaction With Police

	Excellent or Very Good Rating
Household runaways (parent response)	
Time to respond	66%
Effort expended	49
Overall satisfaction	54
Institutional runaways (caretaker response)	
Time to respond	73%
Effort expended	45
Overall satisfaction	59

Police have a limited capacity to investigate missing children or youth cases and must decide which cases will receive the most attention.

Patrol officers normally took a written report as soon as they located the reporting party.

What have we learned from this study?

Major findings are summarized

At the most general level, this research indicates:

- Police have a limited capacity to investigate missing children or youth cases and must decide which cases will receive the most attention. Cases involving (1) a serious violation of the law (such as abduction), (2) very young children, or (3) a dangerous situation were likely to receive intensive investigative attention, while other cases (such as those involving older runaways) were likely to be viewed as less serious.
- Most of the reported missing children cases in police files involved runaways. Nonfamily abductions were rare. Most police departments referred most reports of family abduction to another locus or agency, such as the local prosecutor or a social service agency. Police usually pursued cases of children reported missing for "unknown" or "other" reasons relatively vigorously until the disappearances were resolved or classified as abductions or runaways. Police then continued with the reclassified cases according to usual procedures for the case type involved.

Most departments followed similar procedures for handling cases:

- Police most commonly learned about missing children from reports by parents or other responsible adults. Few large police departments (2 percent) reported in the mail survey that they had waiting periods before beginning investigation of runaway cases; only 3 percent of parents interviewed said they had been told, "Call back later."
- In many jurisdictions, a patrol unit was dispatched to the scene of every reported missing child incident; some jurisdictions dispatched a patrol unit to the scene only in cases considered more serious.
- Patrol officers normally took a written report as soon as they located the reporting party. When a child was believed to be in impending danger, they deferred the report until after searching for the child or taking other appropriate action.
- The information available to police early in a missing child case was often insufficient for accurate case classification and risk assessment.
- Typically, followup investigations by detectives began a day or two after the patrol report was taken; however, in cases classified as serious, when foul play was suspected or a small child was considered in danger, detectives usually joined patrol officers at the scene.
- Most followup investigative activities were performed by telephone rather than in person, because of limited resources.
- Police often suggested actions that parents might take to help locate their child.

-
- Most runaways returned home on their own without police intervention or assistance.
 - Police usually verified that a child had returned before closing a case.
 - Although most parents were generally satisfied with police handling of cases involving their children, a significant percentage were not; this perception may be based on incomplete information about police activities.

Some runaways were victimized during the episode by sexual or nonsexual assault, theft, or sexual exploitation:

- Children age 12 and younger and white youth of all ages were more likely to be victimized in some way than teenagers and African-American youth.
- Traveling 10 to 50 miles from home, having no secure place to stay, and having a history of six or more previous runaway incidents were factors associated with some form of victimization.
- Length of time a youth was away from home was not associated with victimization or sexual exploitation.

Police had little contact with homeless youth:

- Police primarily encountered homeless youth after they had become crime victims or when police suspected them of a crime; such youth went to a shelter or responded to an outreach program when they wanted help, instead of approaching an officer of the law.
- In general, the actions taken by patrol officers in homeless youth cases were the same as those taken when officers located a runaway.

Police note obstacles, make recommendations

During site visits, police, especially patrol officers and those responsible for followup investigations—juvenile officers, missing persons investigators, and other detectives—had a great deal to say about the obstacles to investigating reports of missing children. The factors most commonly mentioned by the officers are outlined below, in addition to recommendations by some officers:

- **Inability to detain status offenders.** Most States limited the time police could hold runaways after they picked them up. In all but two of the sites visited, periods were limited, varying from 3 to 12 hours for in-state runaways, and up to 72 hours for runaways from other States. Most officers expressed frustration at these constraints on their ability to detain runaways, particularly at the difficulty it created in handling repeat runaways (who often ran away again shortly after being returned home or taken to a shelter) and youth from other jurisdictions (for whom the process of identification and return might take longer than the time allowed). Most police departments would choose to be selective in detaining runaways if they had the legal authority to do so, because of limited police personnel and resources.
- **Limited resources.** Except in the smallest communities, the numbers of missing children reported monthly overwhelmed the investigative staff.

Traveling 10 to 50 miles from home, having no secure place to stay, and having a history of six or more previous runaway incidents were factors associated with some form of victimization.

Police would like to see more aggressive action against abducting parents by district attorneys.

Investigators in medium- to large-size cities carried a caseload of 200 to 300 cases each month; patrol and investigative officers had time to perform only cursory investigative and followup activities. One officer suggested that a police department should institute a missing persons investigative unit separate from the juvenile unit; the new unit would investigate runaway and routine parental abduction cases from the start, rather than after eventual referral by juvenile officers.

- **Inadequate community resources.** Officers frequently mentioned that their communities did not have enough shelter space and/or counseling programs to help resolve the personal and family problems that frequently cause children to run away. Police and shelter workers believed there was a need for more short-term care and services for runaway and homeless youth. Shelter workers wanted to see longer term programs for homeless kids that would provide shelter while teaching survival skills needed in ordinary adult life. These needs appeared to be especially pressing for runaway and homeless children in medium- to large-size jurisdictions and for children from outside the jurisdiction.
- **Poor followup and prosecution of abducting parents.** Police in most jurisdictions visited believed the local district attorney was reluctant to prosecute in cases of parental or family abductions. They therefore believed they were being used as an adjunct of the civil court simply to locate and return these children, and were not serving in a law enforcement capacity. At a minimum, police would like to see more aggressive action against abducting parents by district attorneys; ideally, they would like district attorneys to handle the investigations of these cases.
- **Runaway children's low rank among departmental priorities.** This is especially so for older youth who have run away. Juvenile or missing persons officers are genuinely concerned about locating these young people, but most other patrol officers are only minimally interested in helping them. Police are trained to fight crime and believe they should focus their time on acts and events that constitute an immediate threat to potential victims. Those who specialize in juvenile work are more likely than others to see runaways and missing children as potential victims. A related problem was noted by several officers: police are generally responsible for collecting evidence to convict suspects of crimes, taking them into custody, and "putting them in a place where we have control over them." Runaway children do not easily fit into such an organizational mission, so officers perceive few positive results from such efforts.
- **Lack of cooperation/poor communication from other law enforcement agencies.** This was mentioned especially by departments in relatively small jurisdictions where police see the problem of missing/runaway children as "manageable." These departments complain about lack of response or cooperation from larger police departments, often nearby, regarding efforts to locate youth from the smaller jurisdictions who have fled to the larger ones. They also complain about lack of shared intelligence regarding illegal acts and/or victimization of youth who have run away across jurisdictional lines, and about poor intradepartmental communication regarding policies

and practices affecting missing children. Some police departments were found to have poor internal communication about missing child cases, probably stemming in part from low departmental priorities for such cases. Officers at several law enforcement agencies recommended a greater national uniformity of laws pertaining to missing children, especially runaways. For example, Federal legislation was recommended that would require all law enforcement agencies to enter data on missing children into the National Crime Information Center (NCIC) within a reasonable time period. NCIC is a national computer data base that can be accessed by law enforcement agencies to obtain information about missing persons and fugitives. (Note: Since data were collected for this study, the National Child Search Assistance Act of 1990 was enacted by Congress; it requires every Federal, State, and local law enforcement agency to immediately report to NCIC each case of a missing child under the age of 18.)

- **Poor communication with social service providers/agencies.** In many jurisdictions, police said there was poor communication between their agency and social service providers. This affected law enforcement in two ways.

First, social service personnel refused to provide information that could help resolve cases or protect a child being sought. For example, many shelters have had a policy of not telling anyone a youngster was there until a day or two after he or she arrived, in order to give the youth time to think. To the police, such a practice meant they had to look for a child longer than necessary.

Second, police said they could not obtain health-related information from social service agencies; most police departments use this information as one basis for deciding how serious a particular case is. To some extent the social agency policy resulted from State laws designed to protect the privacy of clients of various social service and mental health agencies. Officers in some departments complained that they could not obtain information readily even when the law permitted a sharing of information, suggesting some conflict or misunderstanding over goals between police and social service agencies.

In addition, police believed that children may be erroneously reported missing, for example, when a social service agency has taken a child into custody without informing the responsible adult or police.

What study results suggest

Runaways

The mail survey of police and subsequent site visits both indicated that, in many police departments, cases involving younger children were generally given higher priority and more vigorous investigation, at least initially, than those involving older youth. Parental interviews bore this out to some extent, although less than had been expected. Parents were more likely to report that police called for backup or put out an APB when the runaway child was 12 or younger. Younger runaways were also more likely to be victimized than older



Some police departments were found to have poor internal communication about missing child cases.

Many shelters have a policy of not telling anyone a youngster was there until a day or two after he or she arrived in order to give the youth time to think.

youth, suggesting that police are correct to use young age as an indicator of possible risk.

However, officers at a few departments where site visits took place questioned the value of relying on age alone to signal risk, noting that a single indicator could be misleading. One department had eliminated age as a criterion for determining the priority given to a case, preferring to establish priorities based on specific information about the child and situation, an approach that dispatchers and some patrol officers found confusing. Experienced juvenile officers at another police department were also considering dropping the age criterion. It is probably not appropriate to eliminate age as a criterion for very young missing children. Below some age (perhaps less than 8 or 9 years of age), children who are absent from adult supervision for any significant period are at risk of harm. But above some minimum age, it may be that the circumstances of a case should determine investigative decisionmaking, not an arbitrary age limit.

Many police officers considered first-time runaways to be at some risk and repeat, or chronic, runaways as more able to take care of themselves. However, other officers, suggested that some of these "repeaters" are at risk of harm. As one juvenile detective put it, "Some of these kids are going to end up bloody in a ditch somewhere." In the current study, information from the parental survey indicates that youth with a substantial history of running away were at greater risk of victimization (including sexual exploitation) than first- or second-time runaways. Other indicators of incident severity (a youngster's traveling more than 10 miles from home; having no secure place to stay) also increased a runaway's risk of victimization.

Relationships among these indicators, characteristics of runaway youth, and measures of victimization do not present a clear pattern that would be potentially useful to police as a basis for identifying the "repeaters" most likely to get into trouble. It might be worthwhile to attempt to identify runaway youth at risk of victimization in a systematic way by talking with them about why they run, where they go, and what they do when they run. As part of case closeout procedures, most police agencies do not routinely interview missing children or youth who have returned home. Only 30 percent of large police departments conduct such a final case-closing interview. One jurisdiction routinely investigated repeat runaway cases to determine whether the youth was a victim of physical or sexual abuse in the home. Resources of all public agencies—law enforcement, courts, and social service—are limited. Youth may not be willing to talk freely to police. Interviews with runaways may be a strategy worth investigating, however, especially for intervention in situations of domestic violence or abuse.

Another implication of these findings is that adverse outcomes of runaway events might be minimized by attempting to control the severity of the event itself. There is some evidence from the current study (both from the mail survey of police and the interviews with parents) that vigorous, proactive attempts to locate and return runaways are associated with their quicker recovery. Unfortunately, the analyses do not give much guidance for making recommendations about specific actions police can take to effect quick return. Quick recovery

would reduce the time a youth is exposed to risk, which is a reason for police departments to allocate investigative resources toward this end.

It is likely that some runaway youths have no secure place to stay because shelters are either unavailable, scarce, or not accessible. Adequate shelter resources and effective outreach to encourage youth to stay in a shelter overnight would help minimize the effects of running away.

Family abductions

It appears that police intervene in only a small percentage of reported family abductions. Most police departments refer such cases elsewhere, usually to the family court, district attorney, or social service agencies. Although shortsighted, it would be easy to recommend that police take a more active role in responding to family abduction cases. An increased police role might have some advantages, but investigation of family abduction cases poses some unusual difficulties for police. One site-visited police department had worked with the local district attorney to train two detectives in such investigations. The commander remarked that their training in the relevant civil and criminal law, rules of evidence, and investigative techniques had been complicated, time consuming, and expensive, and required more resources than most police departments could or would devote to such cases. A much expanded police role in family abductions is probably not appropriate in present circumstances. Other legal and institutional responses are probably more important first steps.

Nonfamily abductions

As we have indicated, police tend to respond very aggressively to cases that involve the abduction of a child by a nonfamily member, especially those cases NISMART refers to as "stereotypical kidnapping." There were only a few such cases in this study, and the police need no advice about responding to them.

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