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Missing Persons Units

Introduction

In 1994, almost one million cases of missing persons were reported to law enforcement agencies nationwide (Levine 1995). That same year, the Texas Crime Information Center (TCIC) logged 76,800 reports, a figure which represents the seventh increase in missing persons reports in eight years within the state (TCIC 1994). These increases, which are reflective of national trends, have increasingly been referred to as "the missing persons problem."

Although many types of crimes are decreasing in Texas and nationwide, missing persons reports are rising. Because of the prevalence of the problem across all areas of the country, even the smallest departments find it necessary to have officers available who have training and experience in handling these cases. And while these officers may not be a part of a large department with a separate missing persons unit, they generally are not short on work.

Missing persons cases present special needs in a community and special problems to police agencies. These needs and problems exist in every department in the state, regardless of size. Texas' six largest police jurisdictions accounted for 36.4 percent of all missing persons reports in the state in 1995. While this number accentuates the size of the problem for big cities, it also demonstrates that smaller communities must come to terms with the problem as well.

This bulletin examines how 32 municipal Texas agencies are handling this growing problem. Initial reports, follow-up, departmental organization, and available resources are examined and compared, where possible, to national data. Department size is considered in the presentation of much of the data.

History and Background

A quick review of criminal justice history indicates that the missing persons problem is not new. It has been noted anecdotally that America itself was founded by runaways. Throughout our history, we have solved missing persons cases through various means, sometimes by redefining laws, sometimes through conventional investigations.

Traditionally, the problem has been viewed mainly in terms of runaway children. Without question, these cases comprise the largest portion of all missing persons cases. In 1995, for instance, 91.3 percent of all reported cases in the six largest Texas jurisdictions were reports of missing juveniles. Research indicates that the vast majority of these were runaway children, though the exact number is not discernible. These numbers go a long way in explaining the fact that most of the literature on missing persons has been directed toward the phenomena of missing children. Literature about missing adults is virtually nonexistent, mainly because adults are completely free to do as they please. The same was once true of juveniles in our country.

In the mid-nineteenth century male youths were free to move about, leaving home sometimes to find their fortunes, sometimes just to get away. Times have changed, however, and so have the laws governing the freedom of juveniles to move about freely without supervision. While leaving home at an early age was once looked upon with respect and admiration, it is now generally frowned upon by adults. And while laws did not always exist making it illegal to feed or give shelter to a juvenile, today such help is defined as "contributing to the delinquency of a minor." Additionally, a much higher premium is now placed on education, resulting in more stringent working laws for children and

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stiff penalties for employers who hire juveniles without work permits (Lipschutz 1977).

Given these changes, however gradual, it should come as no surprise that the number of persons reported missing has been steadily increasing. Changes in attitudes about the freedom of children coupled with an increasing admiration for free spiritedness among American adults in the World War I and flower child eras has resulted in a magnification of the problem throughout the twentieth century. Additionally, there is no reason to believe that problem families are becoming less common.

Through the years, sensationalized cases have brought the issue to the attention of the American public and the legislature. Most Americans are familiar with Adam Walsh, and most Texas law enforcement personnel can recall the name of Amber Hagerman. Tragedies such as these grip the attention of all Americans.

Activist criticisms of inadequate resources available to police agencies to assist them in their searches resulted in numerous acts being passed in the eighties which were intended to help investigators find those reported missing with less effort. Much of this effort was spent trying to establish a national database which could serve as a repository of information on each individual. For example, the FBI's unidentified persons files were implemented in 1983 through the authority of the Missing Persons Act of 1982 (Best 1988; Haglund 1993). In large part due to the very nature of the crime, activist efforts have been directed toward improving the capacity to solve the crime after it occurs rather than preventing the crime from occurring in the first place. The burden of reducing the incidence of missing persons has clearly been placed on the shoulders of law enforcement.

Today, however, we continue to see a steady increase in persons reported missing to police. Thorough research done on missing and runaway juveniles has done little to provide solutions. One study demonstrated that among the most common reasons for children to run away were poor grades and coming from a home in which neither the mother nor the father were "warm" toward the juvenile (Goldmeier and Dean 1973). However, knowledge of the reasons for running away has not been translated to ways to lower missing persons rates (Hirschel, et al. 1988).

Method

Data used in this TELEMASP Bulletin were derived from the responses of 32 police agencies within the state of Texas.

The data collection instrument was a nine page survey which was in large part adapted from a survey published in a June

1989 report by the Research Triangle Institute (RTI) through a grant provided by the Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention (OJJDP). The RTI study surveyed some 800 police agencies from across the country on the subject of missing children and serves as some basis for comparison throughout this analysis. Some questions for the present study were based on the questionnaire used in the original RTI report. These questions were modified, however, to obtain data on missing adults and elderly as well as children.

Because of the disparities in the literature on missing persons, this study is intended to address not only how departments handle juvenile cases, but adult and elderly as well.

Written Policies

A general trend in policing has been to establish written Standard Operating Procedures (S.O.P.) for virtually every type of regularly handled case. These procedures often detail exactly how a case of a certain type should be handled. Bennett and Hess (1995) state that there are three reasons for a department to establish effective standard operating procedures. First, a written procedure assists officers in determining how to handle a case correctly. Second, concise procedures are increasingly mandated by civil liability concerns. Lastly, the establishment of effective standard operating procedures can be precedent to a department receiving accreditation.

Survey respondents indicated that only 56.7 percent had established an S.O.P. relating to the investigation of missing persons. This number seems remarkably low given the prevalence of missing persons reports, but is actually exceptionally high when compared to the national rate of 27 percent as reported in the RTI study (Collins, et al. 1989). Rated by size, standard operating procedures are shown to be much more prevalent in larger departments, though this trend does not hold steady through each of the four size levels used in this analysis. All of the responding departments with 1000+ officers had established a written S.O.P. for missing persons. In departments with 250 to 999 sworn officers, 83 percent had a written policy. The lowest ratio was found in departments with 150 to 249 sworn officers, with only 25 percent indicating that they had a written policy, while 46 percent of agencies with less than 150 sworn officers had established written policy directives to cover this area (Collins, et al. 1989).

Separate Units

Responding agencies ranged in size from 25 sworn officers in the smallest department to one agency with over 4,200 sworn officers. One hundred percent of these agencies reported that they had investigated some type of missing

persons case within the last five years. Of these, 100 percent of departments indicated that they had investigated cases of runaways and missing adults and 87.5 percent said they had investigated cases of parental abduction and missing elderly. A smaller percentage of departments had investigated cases involving an abducted adult (65.6%), an unknown missing child (62.5%), a child abducted by a stranger (59.4%), or an abducted elderly person (18.8%).

Rated by size, little difference in types of cases investigated can be detected. Departments with fewer than 150 officers accounted for one-half of the jurisdictions that had investigated cases in which an elderly person had been abducted. Additionally, they accounted for almost one-fifth of cases in which a child was abducted by a stranger. Of the five departments with 1000+ officers, one had investigated a case of elderly abduction (20%) and all had investigated cases of a child abducted by a stranger. Overall, agency size seemed to have little to do with the type of missing persons cases that may arise.

Agency size had a great deal to do, however, with what area of the department handled missing persons reports. As department size increased, presence of a separate missing persons unit also increased by 25 percent across each size category. This was expected, given that larger jurisdictions must handle a higher number of reports than smaller departments and therefore can better justify devoting a dedicated unit to that end. The five largest responding jurisdictions all had separate missing persons units. These results are presented in Table 1.

Of those agencies which do not have a separate missing persons unit (n=21), eleven agencies indicated that their criminal investigations division is responsible for missing persons investigations of all types. An additional three departments reported having a crimes against persons division which handled these cases. The seven remaining departments indicated that age was the most significant factor in determining which unit will handle a case. In these departments, cases involving missing juveniles were referred to a juvenile unit, while adult cases are typically handled by crimes against persons or general detective units.

The Initial Report

Of the thousands of reports that a missing persons unit may take, the largest percentage of these never go beyond that stage. Reports may be made in haste or those who were "missing" may turn up soon after the report has been made. Immediate investigation of each case may not only be unfeasible, but also unnecessary. To this extent, the duties of a missing persons unit may be largely procedural. Therefore, departmental procedures such as report writing, waiting periods, and follow up are perhaps of greatest interest in the examination of missing persons units. It is in this area that departments differ the most, and it is in this area that most suggestions for improvement have been made by outside examiners. Much of this bulletin is dedicated to a review of these procedures.

Table 1

Agencies with Separate Missing Persons Units

Agency Size	Number of Responding Agencies	Percent	Number with Separate MP Units	Percent with Separate MP Units
1000+ officers	5	15.6	5	100
250 to 999 officers	6	18.8	3	50
150 to 249 officers	8	25.0	2	25
Less than 150 officers	13	40.6	0	0

Criticisms of the police response to missing persons reports include the lack of established protocol in handling cases, lack of cooperation between various law enforcement agencies, lack of knowledge on the part of officers of how the missing persons system actually works, and poor quality of reports entered into NCIC (Haglund 1993). Additionally, the absence of effective national reporting and classification systems is criticized in many reports. Solutions to a few of these problems, such as lack of knowledge on the part of officers and poor quality entries into NCIC, can be easily solved. Solutions to problems such as poor communication between various agencies are much more complicated, however.

Procedural issues to be examined begin with the initial report made to the police. Nationally, police agencies have received some criticism for their policies at this level. In a 1993 article, William Haglund states that "Often there is inaction and ambiguity about agency responsibility. Families are sometimes forced to turn from one agency to another in a series of frustrating attempts to get a missing persons report taken" (Haglund 1993:367). Agencies may have criteria which must be met prior to their filing a written report. That the reporting party be related to the missing person, that jurisdiction be clear, and whether the missing person is a threat to him or herself or others are examples of these criteria (Haglund 1993). Finally, waiting periods may be imposed by a department before they will make an official report.

Data gathered for this study do not indicate that written reports are a major problem within the state. On the contrary, 93.8 percent of departments indicated that a written report is made of all calls about missing persons. The remaining percentage (6.3%) indicated that written reports are made of some of their calls about missing persons. These data may be somewhat misleading, however, due to waiting periods. While 93.8 percent of all respondents indicated that they make written reports of all cases of missing persons, only 84.4 percent of these same respondents indicated that they file these reports immediately. The remaining 15.6 percent of departments require a waiting period prior to the filing of a written report. Without exception, however, every department which requires a waiting period prior to the initial report applies this waiting period to only selected cases. This is to be expected since the National Child Search Assistance Act, which prohibits agencies from requiring a waiting period in cases involving juveniles, was passed in 1990. Verifying this as a reason for applying the waiting period to only selected cases, every department which indicated having a waiting period also indicated that age was a factor in determining which cases would require a waiting period.

Follow-up

After the initial report has been made, various actions may be taken by the receiving department. Haglund (1993) notes that "The quality of missing persons investigations is agency dependent and conditioned by agency experience, administrative stance, and, often, the local political climate. Attitudes of individual investigators also determine police agency response toward missing persons." While basic procedures are generally similar from department to department, such as the acceptance of the initial report, follow-up actions often differ. The present study evaluates these responses during two intervals of the investigation—those that occur within one or two weeks following the initial report and those in cases which remain open after this period of time.

Extensive data were collected for those actions taken within the first two weeks. Departments were asked to rate their responses to these actions for each age group using a Likert scale. The mean frequencies for these responses, which are presented in Table 4 (page 10), clearly demonstrate differences in how cases are treated across age groups. Almost without exception, means for cases involving children are higher than those for adults or elderly.

Follow-up actions are perhaps most critical in cases which remain unsolved a week to two weeks after the initial report was filed. Departments were queried as to how often they performed various follow-up actions in cases that remained unsolved one or two weeks after the initial report is made and asked to rank the frequency with which they perform these actions in these unsolved cases. Actions specified were maintaining periodic contact with family, the investigation of new leads, re-interviewing witnesses, circulation of posters, checking shelters or social service agencies, and checking other sources such as a locator service. Wide variations can be seen in the treatment of cases by individual departments in assessing the data on follow-up actions.

The most common follow-up procedure was the investigation of new leads, with 96.9 percent of all respondents indicating that they perform this action in their unsolved cases either always (81.3%) or usually (15.6%). Maintaining periodic contact with family members of the missing person was second in frequency with 93.8 percent of departments performing this function either always or usually. The least used follow-up measures were the circulation of posters and checking with information sources such as a locator service, with 25 percent and 31.3 percent utilizing this follow-up option either always or usually, respectively. These data are presented in Figure 1.

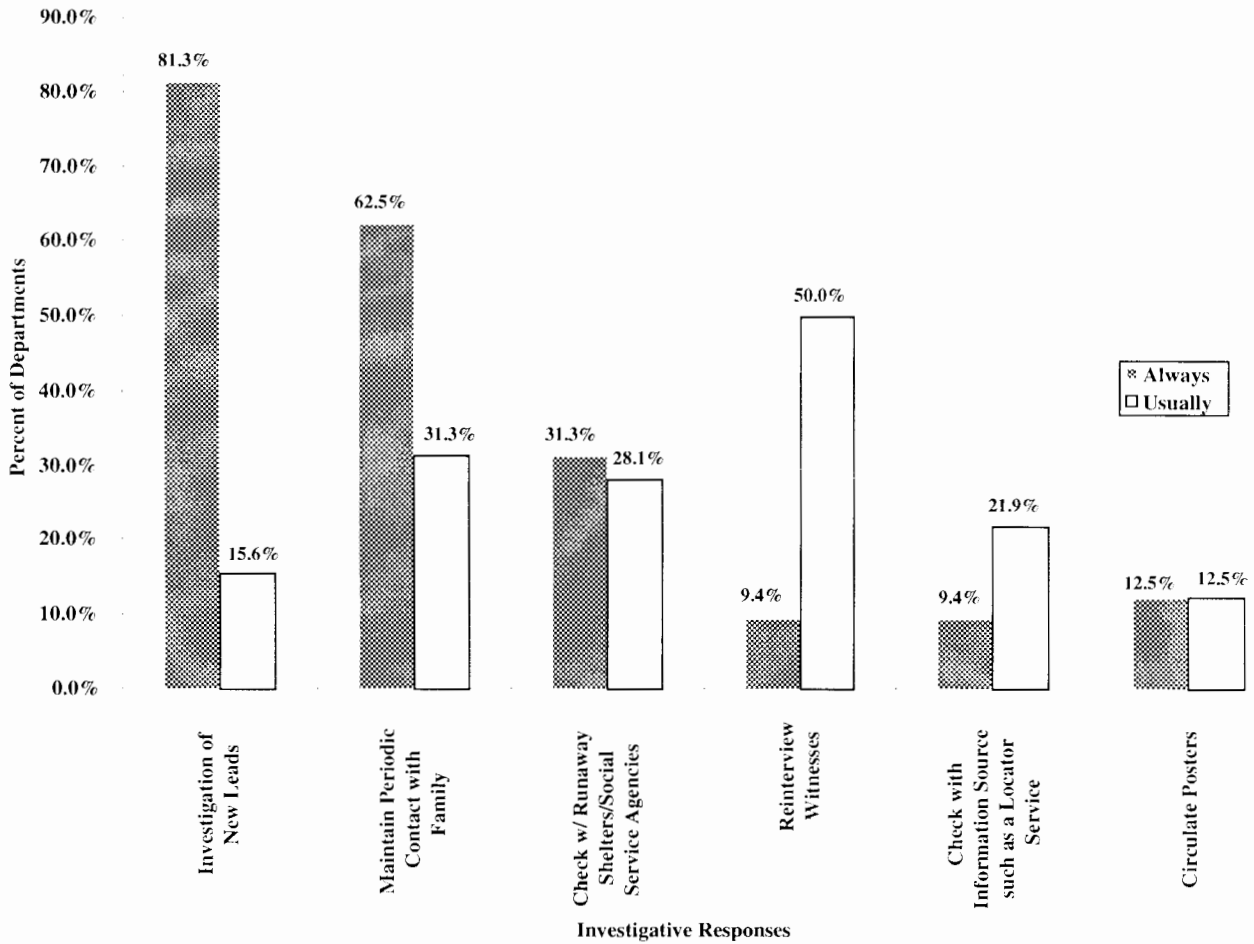


Figure 1. Investigative Responses Which Occur "Usually" or "Always" in Cases Remaining Open After Two Weeks

Resources

The investigation of missing persons may require a great deal of time and human resources. Officers within any given department may feel that there simply aren't enough officers to handle the load the way that it should be handled. Experts may be necessary to assist in special cases and searches may be so large in scope that volunteers are needed. Perhaps more than in any other area, the cooperation of departments and the co-opting of resources can be critical to an effective missing persons investigation. Many comments were made in the open section of the questionnaire about the need for additional resources.

No department indicated that they employ specialists from outside of their agency. To a large extent, this fact speaks well of the training and experience of missing persons

investigators within the state. Department responses, which were often given by an administrator, reflected the confidence that each department has in the ability of its investigators to handle missing persons cases effectively, making outside help unnecessary.

Internal help, however, can come from sources other than the officers themselves. In fact, almost one-half (43.8%) of departments indicated that they maintain dogs which are specially trained to search for missing persons. The utility of dogs to a department are numerous. Dogs increase search capabilities and provide a way for departments to offer assistance to surrounding agencies that may not have such a tool. Of those departments that did not maintain a missing persons dog, all of them knew of a jurisdiction from which they could borrow one or more if the need arose.

Some comments were offered which indicated that the unit which handles missing persons cases may be understaffed. One officer offered the following comments on the dynamics of unit staffing within his department: "Most missing persons and missing juvenile units are understaffed because other departmental priorities also compete for manpower and equipment. This holds true until a tragedy occurs and then because of outside pressure, the unit is built up. As the pressure subsides, because of arrests being made or for whatever reason, priorities revert to the way they were before." Agency resources as a whole can not be seen as a problem based on the responses given to the surveys. Where departments are shorthanded, they seem to have adapted by relying on experience and knowledge of their communities.

Priority

The 1989 RTI study queried departments on the issue of investigative priority. Given that resources and investigative time are often limited, departments must give priority to some cases. This priority is generally based on a judgment call by the officer who receives the initial report. Several factors affect whether priority is given to a case.

In the RTI study it was found that the most common circumstances which merited investigative priority for a given case were age (child 8 or younger), mental handicap, whether the person missing is susceptible to sexual exploitation, whether the person has been missing before, and whether there is a family history of abuse or neglect. When these or other pressing criteria are present, departments were more likely to launch a more intensive investigation immediately. Similar results were found among responding Texas agencies.

As one respondent indicated, "Our jurisdiction rarely sees a true 'missing child', most are known runaways. Our investigative techniques would be much more stringent on a 'missing child' as opposed to a runaway." Factors which indicated that a person was truly "missing" among respondents included (rank ordered) whether there is evidence of foul play (96.9%), the case involves a child (93.8%) or elderly (90.6%), the case involves an individual with a handicap or health problem (84.4%), existence of an eyewitness account (81.3%), and family history of abuse (71.9%). These data are presented in Figure 2.

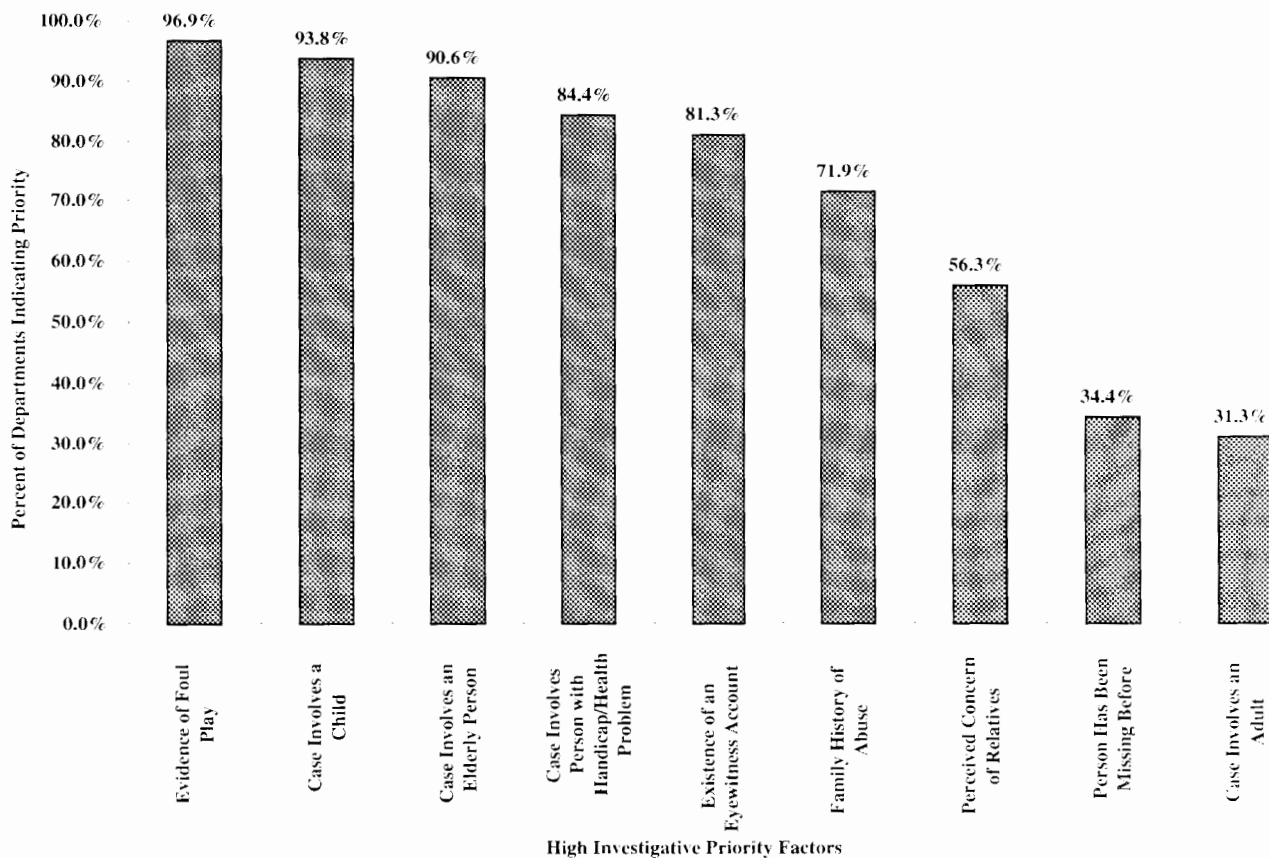


Figure 2. Factors Affecting Whether A Case Receives High Investigative Priority

Obstacles

Numerous factors can hinder the investigation of missing persons reports. From a list of 19 specified choices, agencies were asked to pick what they perceived to be the five greatest obstacles to the effective investigation of missing persons. Choices included factors such as "being missed is not a criminal offense," "lack of cooperation from prosecutor" and "NCIC information not adequate." One agency did not respond to the question, resulting in a valid n of 31 for this response. Departments were not asked to assign rankings to their responses. Instead, the frequency of an item being considered to be an obstacle across all departments was used to assign rankings.

Without question, the most frequently mentioned obstacle was "inadequate information/leads." A full 90 percent of all respondents indicated that this was a problem. "Lack of family cooperation" was the second most frequently mentioned obstacle, with 61 percent of departments indicating that this is a problem. Rounding out the top three was "difficulty of knowing whether the person is voluntarily absent—difficulty in classifying the case," with 52 percent of agencies marking this option. Other serious problems

include that other priorities compete for personnel or resources (45%), difficulty in securing witnesses (42%), that being missed is not a criminal offense (35%), and difficulty in obtaining evidence (35%). Several other obstacles were also indicated, with less frequency. These data are presented in Figure 3.

The Fear Factor/Safety Programs

According to a 1985 article by Best, the most commonly cited figure for the average number of children abducted by strangers is 50,000 per year. Even the NCMC has quoted figures in the range of 4,000-20,000 each year. Higher numbers are available and are not hard to find. Best points to one safety guide which reported the number of abductions to be 400,000 per year.

Those who work closely with missing persons issues are generally critical of these numbers. Activists, they claim, inflate the numbers to gain attention from Congress. The ancillary effect of quoting extraordinary numbers has been to create a great deal of fear among American parents and children. Best reports that one study revealed that "eighty-nine percent of Illinois parents viewed stranger abductions

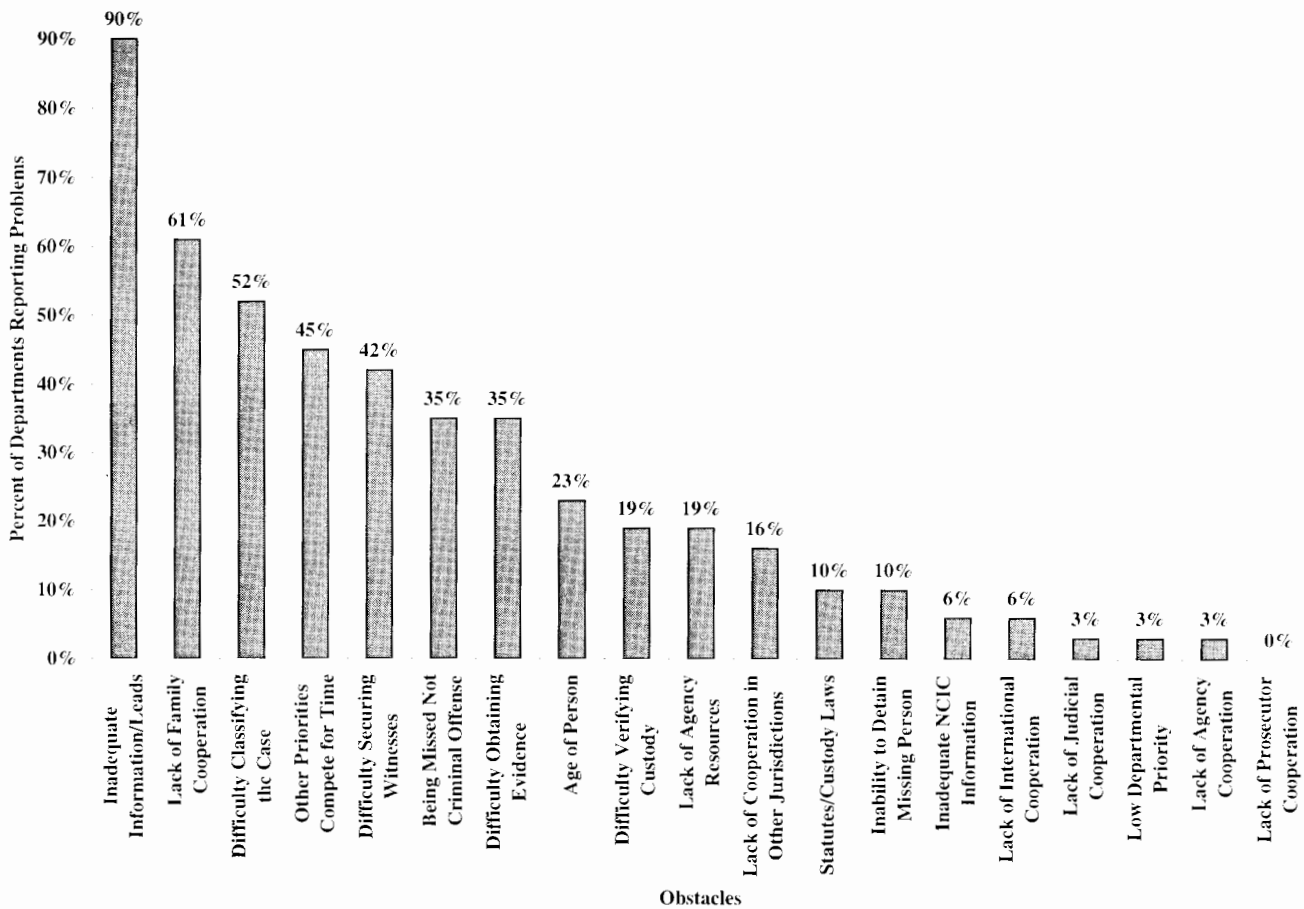


Figure 3. Obstacles to Successful Investigation

COLLEGE STATION POLICE DEPARTMENT
Revision to Chapter 29—Patrol Procedures

Chapter 29, PATROL PROCEDURES, Sub-Paragraph 14.i. is added to read as indicated below.

- i. Missing Persons—The following procedures apply to incidents of missing persons (adults or children),
- (1) Initial Investigation
 - (a) In reports of missing persons, the initial report taking officer should make an effort to gather as much information as possible to determine if:
 - [1] The person is actually missing.
 - [2] Foul play is involved, or suspected.
 - (b) The initial report should include:
 - [1] The name, age, (date of birth if possible), race, and sex of the missing person.
 - [2] A complete physical description, including any distinguishing marks or features, and clothing worn by the missing person when last seen (if appropriate).
 - (c) The initial officer should make efforts to locate the missing person, and to obtain names, addresses and phone numbers of relatives, acquaintances, co-workers, or other persons who might have knowledge of the missing person's whereabouts. If possible, these persons should be contacted to determine if any further information is available.
 - (d) If appropriate to the individual case, a broadcast of the missing person information should be made to all local law enforcement agencies.
 - (e) In order to enter the missing person into NCIC, a signed affidavit or statement from the reporting person, (NOT THE INVESTIGATING OFFICER) is required.
 - [1] The person completing the statement must be the parent, next of kin, legal guardian, physician, or other authoritative source for the missing person. In unusual circumstances, a friend or neighbor may sign the affidavit or give the statement.
 - [2] The statement must include the name of the "missing person" and that the relationship of the person giving the statement to the missing person, and that the person giving the statement authorizes entry of the missing person into the NCIC computer system.
 - [3] The officer should request that communications enter the missing person into NCIC.
 - (f) In cases involving missing small children or others, who because of physical or mental concerns may be unable to care for themselves, whether or not foul play is suspected, all resources necessary for locating the missing person should be employed as soon as possible.
 - (g) The officer should instruct the reporting party to contact the police department as soon as possible if the missing person should return or be located. If the missing person is located, the officer taking the supplemental information should contact communications and have the entry removed from TCIC/NCIC, and attach a confirmation of the removal to the supplement.
 - (2) Follow-up Investigation
 - (a) When a missing person report is received, and the missing person is not located during the initial investigation, it will be assigned to an investigator for follow-up.
 - (b) The investigator should make contact with the reporting party as soon as possible after assignment to determine if the person is still missing.
 - [1] The investigator should contact family members and acquaintances of the missing person to determine if anyone knows the whereabouts of the person.
 - [2] The investigator should obtain an NCIC Missing Person Packet (available from the Communications Division) and have the appropriate forms completed by a parent/legal guardian/next of kin of the missing person.
 - [3] Once the Missing Person Packet information has been obtained to authorize release of medical/dental records, the investigator should forward those forms to the missing person's physical physician/optician/dentist to be completed.
 - [4] Once the forms in the Missing Person Packet have been completed and returned, the investigator should have communications add the information to the missing person record on file in NCIC.
 - (c) Should the missing person be located after assignment to an investigator, the investigator shall contact communications and have the entry removed from NCIC, and attach a copy of the confirmation of that record removal attached to a supplemental report indicating that the missing person has been located and that the entry has been removed.

as a 'very' or 'quite' serious national problem." Additionally, 37 percent of California adults believed that there was a very serious chance that children today will be abducted. Lastly, Best reports that 76 percent of American youths are very concerned about being kidnapped. As a basis for comparison, he reports that only 65 percent of these same children are as concerned about the possibility of nuclear war (Best 1985).

The parental response to their belief that their child is in great danger of being kidnapped can be extreme. Those willing to profit from the enormous fear of citizens have gone beyond simple identification cards, which have been quite useful in some cases, and are now marketing high-tech safety. These programs are generally directed toward the protection of children. One firm established a central information repository into which parents could register their children for \$50-\$250 a year. Among the services provided by the firm in the event that a covered family has a child abducted are immediate transfer of personal information, including everything from photographs to blood information, to law enforcement agencies across the country. Further, the firm promises to mobilize up to 1000 detectives on the case immediately and to have various high-tech search tools ready to assist in any search (Levine 1995). While this is an extreme example of privatization of protection, that a business such as this exists is testament to the level of fear related to abductions.

In reality, the number of abductions that take place each year is far less than most estimates that are publicized. Best estimates that only about 550 serious cases of abduction occur each year, though his methodology for reaching this figure has been questioned. Additionally, the RTI study reported that 95 percent of the departments surveyed had not investigated a single case of stranger abduction. Still, parents and children alike have a real fear of this possibility. To some extent, this fear has had positive effects. Many municipal agencies and local businesses have developed safety programs which offer various services to the public, from education to fingerprinting.

Responding departments were queried as to whether they have any types of safety programs provided either solely by the department or in conjunction with local businesses that have the intention of educating the public about or reducing the incidence of missing persons cases. "Stranger Danger" and similar programs can be quite common and well received by the public. Reporting agencies indicated a high level of involvement with the public on the issue of missing persons programs. Overall, 46.8 percent (15) of all reporting agencies had department sponsored programs. An even greater percentage of departments reported having business sponsored programs (53.1%). Because not all communities which have a department sponsored program also have a business program, a total of 18 departments (56%) indicated

that some type of safety program is offered within their community. Somewhat significant is that, rated by size, cities with 1000+ officers were the least likely group to offer a safety program, such as "Stranger Danger," to the public. Departments with 150 to 249 officers indicated the highest ratio of safety programs. These data are shown in Table 2.

Among department sponsored safety programs, the most common feature was fingerprinting. Of those departments offering safety programs, 100 percent indicated that these programs included fingerprinting. These fingerprint cards can then be kept by parents in the event they are needed for identification purposes later. The second most common feature is child abuse prevention education, with 76.5 percent of departments indicating that this is offered. Other features offered included kidnapping prevention education (64.7%), photographs (58.8%), and elderly abuse education (41.2%).

Table 2
Communities with Department-Sponsored Safety Programs

Agency Size	Number with Program	Percent of Category
1000+ officers	2	40
250 to 999 officers	3	50
150 to 249 officers	5	63
Less than 150 officers	5	28
Total (32 agencies)	15	47

Fingerprinting was also the most common feature of business sponsored safety programs, with 94.1 percent of departments indicating that the business sponsored programs in their communities offered this feature. Child abuse prevention was the second most common at 64.7 percent, while kidnapping prevention and photographs took third at 52.9 percent. Elderly abuse prevention education again was the least popular feature offered, with 29.4 percent of all programs offering this feature (see Table 3).

Table 3
Communities with Business-Sponsored Safety Programs

Agency Size	Number with Program	Percent of Category
1000+ officers	1	20
250 to 999 officers	3	50
150 to 249 officers	5	63
Less than 150 officers	7	54
Total (32 agencies)	16	50

Interagency Cooperation

Perhaps the most common suggestion in the literature on missing persons is that agencies communicate more effectively. Once an individual leaves or is taken out of the reporting jurisdiction, it is much harder for law enforcement to locate that individual, though no data are available to indicate just how much more difficult such a scenario makes a case. To some extent, agencies are bound by technology which does not enable them to effectively share information. Perhaps to a greater extent, agencies often feel no need to enter many of the reports they receive into national databases. Among those that are reported, differences can be seen between cases involving juveniles, adults, and the elderly (see Table 4).

Local departments are generally asked to report all cases which they receive to both state and federal agencies. Data collected on reporting to state agencies indicates that 78.1 percent of departments *always* report juvenile cases to TCIC. In contrast, 68.8 percent of departments indicated that they always report missing elderly cases and only 53.1 percent of responding departments always report adult cases. An additional 9.4 percent of departments indicated that they *usually* report child cases to TCIC. For elderly, this figure is 15.6 percent and for adults an additional 25 percent of cases are reported *usually*. Based on these figures, it is easy to see why official statistics, even at the state level, are inaccurate. There is simply little incentive to have 100 percent compliance on the part of the agency, and there are no penalties for not complying (Table 4).

Numbers are significantly higher for the percentage of departments that either always or usually report cases to NCIC. Respondents indicated that they report 100 percent of juvenile cases to NCIC either always (93.8%) or usually (6.2%). Elderly and adult rates of reporting also increased to NCIC. For elderly, 81.3 percent of departments always report these cases to NCIC and an additional 15.6 percent usually report these to NCIC. One agency indicated that they rarely report elderly cases to NCIC. For adults, 62.5 percent of departments always report to NCIC and an additional 25 percent usually report adult cases (Table 4).

Figures reported to NCIC are an improvement over reporting rates to TCIC, but a closer look reveals that although these reports are being made, they are generally not as good as they could be. For example, in reports sent to NCIC for juveniles, 50 percent of departments indicated that they never or rarely include dental information with these reports. Another 31.3 percent indicated that they only include this information sometimes. Only six departments included this information always or usually (18.8%) (Table 4).

Table 4

Mean Frequency of Investigative Responses*

Investigative Action	Children	Adult	Elderly
Get description of person	5.00	5.00	5.00
Maintain cases as open until person is returned	4.90	4.84	4.91
Question available suspect(s)	4.72	4.66	4.69
Report to state missing persons files	4.59	4.22	4.44
Enter report into NCIC missing persons files	4.59	4.22	4.44
Interview parents or guardian in person	4.53	4.00	4.27
Send a car to the scene	4.38	3.81	4.38
Get photograph of person	4.34	4.09	4.25
Notify surrounding jurisdictions	4.31	4.00	4.22
Interview child's friends/siblings (if any)	4.31	—	—
Issue all points bulletin	4.25	3.66	4.22
Interview other available relatives	4.07	3.77	3.97
Interview available neighbors	4.06	3.77	4.06
Gather physical evidence	3.87	3.71	3.77
Interview school personnel	3.81	—	—
Check known juvenile haunts	3.81	—	—
Call for search of area	3.81	3.09	3.94
Report case to National Center for Missing and Exploited Children (NCMEC)	3.71	—	—
Search home of person	3.66	2.91	3.53
Check runaway shelter	3.57	—	—
Check hospitals	3.41	3.62	3.84
Circulate missing persons phototo other agencies	3.13	2.86	2.96
Call in investigative specialists	3.00	2.41	2.76
Report to FBI	2.90	2.57	2.54
Set up command post	2.77	2.26	2.55
List dental records with NCIC	2.69	2.55	2.53
Obtain missing person's dental records	2.61	2.57	2.60
Take report only on the phone	2.06	2.58	2.16
Give copy of incident report to legal guardian	1.97	1.93	1.93

*1=Never; 2=Rarely; 3=Sometimes; 4=Usually; 5=Always

Rates of reporting dental information to NCIC for adults and elderly were almost identical. For both, 50 percent of departments included dental records with the report either rarely or never. Another 37.5 percent of agencies sent records for adults sometimes. For elderly this figure was 34.4 percent. Nine agencies left this question blank for adults and elderly only (Table 4).

The capacity for NCIC to serve as a repository for dental records is a key feature of the database that should allow it to be an effective tool in identifying missing persons. The large number of cases that are reported without this information is most likely a symptom of several larger problems. The sheer number of reports makes including these records somewhat unfeasible, especially for those cases which receive a low priority. Further, limited human resources may limit an agency's ability to list dental records in cases where tragedy is thought to be a remote possibility. Survey responses indicate that interagency cooperation is less of a problem than interagency communication and human resources (Table 4).

Conclusion

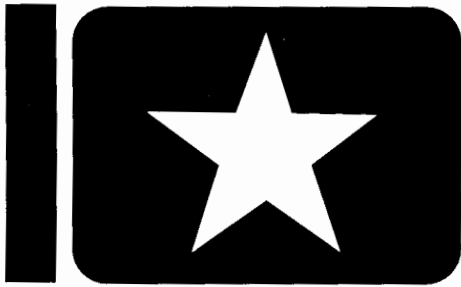
The problem of missing persons is of great concern to both police and citizens. Citizens may take individual actions toward a solution to the problem, but the police response must be much broader. Given limited resources and human resources, however, this response is often limited. As the number of reports continues to increase, investigators may have to prioritize their cases to an even greater extent. And while differential treatment of cases may not be what the public wants, there is no evidence that this has presented any serious problems. Future advancements in the police response to missing persons may have less to do with prioritization and much more to do with technology. In the meantime, police must handle these cases in the most thorough and professional manner possible.

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 Odessa Police Department
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