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Communication with Parents of Missing Children

Some aspects of victim communication have been problematic for the police and particularly so with distraught parents of missing children. This bulletin examines communication between police officers and parents of missing children. Identification of both strong and weak communication policies, approaches and skills can facilitate an environment in which the parents or guardians are more cooperative (hereafter, "parents" will refer to guardians as well). Similarly, if parents are apprised of the actions that officers undertake to solve the case, they may be more patient and understanding with realistic time frames, resources and degree of contact initiated by the officer.

"Officers are often called upon to instantly assess situations of missing or exploited children and promptly render decisions with far-reaching effects for both the child and his or her family" (NCMEC, 1994:14). Thus, it is important for officers to be skilled in their actions and knowledgeable of existing laws when dealing with these cases. It is equally important for the officer to work with parents of missing children in the most appropriate manner possible, so that their satisfaction or dissatisfaction with the police does not exacerbate an already traumatic experience.

Victim-Police Relationships

Previous studies (Brandl & Horvath, 1991; Percy, 1980; Poister & McDavid, 1978) addressing the victim-police relationship tended to focus on satisfaction rates of how police officers handled cases regardless of race, income and type of crime. Although some studies have explored satisfaction with communication, there is little information on the actual dynamics of the victim-police relationship. This is surprising since one of the key tenets of American

community policing is improving communication and relationships with the communities.

Most studies indicate that overall,

- victims are satisfied with police handling of cases (Poister & McDavid, 1978);
- they rely less on the outcome of the case and more on how they are treated (Brandl & Horvath, 1991; Kennedy & Sacco, 1998; Percy, 1980, Poister & McDavid, 1978; Shapland, 1983); and,
- their satisfaction is not as affected by quick police response time *per se*, but rather if the response time was faster than expected (Poister & McDavid, 1978).

In terms of parental satisfaction with police in missing children cases, Collins et al. (1993) found that

- police agencies worked missing children cases the same regardless of age, race, gender, and socioeconomic status of the child;
- departments having written policies on how to handle the different types of cases were more vigorous in their investigations; and
- there was greater satisfaction if police made in-person visits, requested a photograph of the child, and kept in contact during the investigation.

Results

The results from this bulletin are based on 32 law enforcement agencies' responses to inquiries about satisfaction levels



between police and the populations they work with to solve missing children cases.

Almost always, initial notification of the missing child came through communications/dispatch, and an officer would be sent to the caller's home. Patrol officers were dispatched to the scene 100% of the time for apparent stranger abductions, known family abductions, and missing or otherwise lost children of all ages. Although not found to be statistically significant, officers were dispatched to a probable runaway scene only 77.4% of the time.

Stranger abductions were typified by perceived level of danger and child vulnerability as opposed to the child's history or family situation. In that respect, eyewitness accounts, a known pedophile in the neighborhood and the victim's age were most often used to distinguish a stranger abduction from a runaway or family abduction. On the other hand, both family abductions and runaways were most often distinguished by reliance on the current family situation and the child's age and history. Cases involving missing or otherwise lost children relied about equally on assessments of age, eyewitness accounts, child's history, and family situation. The identification of a missing child as a fixed type did well to determine what types of services the police performed to resolve the case (see Table 1).

Activities utilized to resolve the case. The survey inquired about activities that might be associated with the investigation of different types of missing child cases and those that might

be associated with only one or a few types of cases. For instance, if a missing child case was thought to be an apparent stranger abduction, it is unlikely that the police would search runaway shelters and local juvenile hangouts. Similarly, if the case was thought to be a probable runaway, the police would not necessarily attempt to identify possible abductors. Therefore, though there were significant differences for a number of police activities, only those applied equally to all types of missing children will be addressed. Table 2 reports the frequencies for each type of case.

There was a significant difference in the types of police activities undertaken in handling probable runaway cases compared to those undertaken in other types of missing children cases. A number of the main differences found demonstrate that probable runaway cases did not always follow the pattern of investigation for other missing child types. As shown in Table 2, responding agencies did not interview available neighbors or relatives for probable runaways to the degree that they did for all other missing child type cases. Conversely, Collins et al. (1993) reported that in their analysis of two studies conducted in 1986 and 1989, runaways went to a friend's house 60% of the time and a relative's house 6% of the time. According to Collins et al., 66% of the time runaways flee to someone with whom they are familiar.

Assistance from other police personnel and investigative specialists appeared to be reserved for the more "dangerous" missing child cases. Other police personnel were enlisted to

Table 1

Distinguishing Characteristics for Missing Children Cases

N=31	Age (%)	Child's History (%)	Family Situation (%)	Eyewitness Accounts (%)	Known Pedophile in Neighborhood (%)
Apparent Stranger Abduction	83.9	71.0	77.4	93.5	83.9
Known Family Abduction	80.6	61.3	100.0	90.3	19.4
Probable Runaway	90.3	96.8	90.3	61.3	32.3
Otherwise Lost or Missing Children under 12	90.3	80.6	77.4	87.1	71.0
Otherwise Lost or Missing Children 12 and Older	90.3	83.9	77.4	83.9	61.3

Table 2

Activities Performed to Resolve Missing Children Cases

N=31 for all missing child types	Apparent Stranger (%)	Known Family (%)	Probable Runaways (%)	Missing or Otherwise Lost under 12 (%)	Missing or Otherwise Lost 12+ (%)
Interview reporting party	96.8	96.8	93.5	96.8	96.8
Interview parent(s)	96.8	96.8	96.8	96.8	96.8
Interview available neighbors*	96.8	80.6	38.7	96.8	90.3
Interview child's friends/siblings	96.8	80.6	93.5	96.8	96.8
Interview other available relatives	93.6	93.6	80.6	93.6	93.6
Interview school personnel	96.8	83.8	77.4	93.5	93.5
Contact other police personnel for assistance	96.8	90.3	67.7	93.5	93.5
Search home of youth/child*	90.4	67.7	48.4	90.3	74.2
Get description of youth/child	96.8	96.7	100.0	96.8	96.8
Get photograph of youth/child	96.8	96.8	90.3	96.8	93.5
Call for search of area*	96.8	51.6	25.8	93.6	74.2
Issue all points bulletin—within jurisdiction*	96.8	83.8	61.3	93.5	87.1
Set up command post*	83.9	25.8	8.7	87.1	45.1
Call in investigative specialists*	87.1	67.7	16.1	77.4	54.8
Gather physical evidence*	93.6	83.8	19.3	87.1	74.2
Question available suspect(s)*	96.8	90.3	45.1	77.4	70.9
Notify surrounding jurisdictions	90.4	77.4	67.7	90.3	77.5
Check hospitals*	77.5	45.1	25.8	83.8	74.2
Check runaway shelters/social service agencies	45.2	25.8	77.4	61.3	67.7
Check known juvenile hangouts*	51.7	22.6	100.0	87.1	83.8
Report to state missing person file	93.6	93.6	87.1	90.3	96.8
Enter report into NCIC missing persons file	96.8	93.5	93.5	90.3	96.8
Report case to National Center for Missing and Exploited Children*	90.4	83.8	54.8	83.8	80.6
Report case to FBI*	83.9	74.2	12.9	54.8	41.9
Circulate child/youth's photo to law enforcement agencies	96.8	87.1	45.1	90.3	70.9
Get child/youth's dental records*	83.9	38.7	22.6	64.5	58.0
Give case number to parent/guardian	87.1	87.1	87.1	83.8	83.8
Give copy of incident report to parent/guardian	25.9	22.6	22.6	22.6	22.6
Obtain search warrant/subpoena to examine suspect's record*	67.8	64.5	16.1	38.7	35.5
Maintain case as open until child/youth return	96.8	96.8	100.0	96.8	96.8

*X² = p < .01 level



help over 90% of the time for all missing child types except runaways, in which case they were requested only 67.7% of the time. Investigative specialists were enlisted most often for apparent stranger abductions (87.1%) and lost or missing children under 12 years old (77.4%). They were utilized least for probable runaways (16.1%). Runaways were also the least likely to be reported to the National Center for Missing and Exploited Children (NCMEC) (54.8%) and the FBI (12.9%).

Perhaps the difference in attending to cases can be attributed to the suggestion of foul play. Physical evidence, hospital checks, and searches of the home and surrounding area appear to be reserved for cases other than runaways. The difference between the cases is the perceived "voluntary" nature of the child to be missing from home. Though it can be said that runaways may not fit in the "voluntary" removal from the home category, the absence is not necessarily one in which the child is perceived to be taken unwillingly by another.

Referring back to Table 2, it reveals that agencies rarely give parents copies of the incident report. For all missing child types, incident reports were given to parents only 25% of the time or less. Though this may be a procedural concern, one might assume that including the parents in the investigation might make them feel as if they are partners in resolving the case, and may legitimize parental concerns and perspectives about their missing child.

Age appeared to be a factor in a number of police activities undertaken and in determining case type. As mentioned previously, investigative specialists were called upon more often for cases with young potential victims of either stranger abductions or unknown case type. This pattern can be seen by examining Table 2 and focusing on the following activities: (a) search of area, (b) set up of command post, (c) checking of hospitals, and (d) acquisition of youth's dental records. The data appear to suggest that younger victims may be perceived as being in a more dangerous situation or more likely to be taken by an unknown individual.

Conversely, it is possible that parents of children who are missing may be unable to aid police officers because of their lack of knowledge about the child. The Houston Police Department indicated that it was important for parents to always have a current photograph, know what the child is wearing, where dental records are kept, scars or marks, blood type, and their child's friends.

Agency satisfaction with cooperation. Table 3 illustrates the level of satisfaction experienced by police with cooperation from parents and other assistance.

Agencies reported greater satisfaction with the amount of information and level of contact they gave to parents as

opposed to that received or initiated by parents. Though agencies reported an overall satisfaction for communication 74.2% of the time, the level of information expected from parents was satisfactory only 61.3% of the time.

As shown in Table 4, parents' expectations for police handling of cases were listed as "realistic" most often. Although runaway cases were principally "realistic," they had the highest percentage of parents whose expectations were "too high" (35.5%), followed closely by known family abductions (32.3%).

The Dallas Police Department indicated the importance to acknowledge that parents' expectations may be influenced by how missing children cases are portrayed in the media. Because television may portray the case as the only one the officer has to focus on or that clues are more readily available than perhaps is the case, could be harmful to the relationship between the police officer and parents. It may also appear that the officer is always available to give parents an update on a regular basis. This, however, may not be possible, and closure on some missing children cases may not develop for weeks, months or even years.

Each agency reported that all missing children cases were entered into the NCIC database maintained by the FBI. On average, stranger abductions, family abductions and all missing or otherwise lost children cases were recorded within approximately 30 minutes of a missing child report and did not exceed two hours. Runaway cases took longer with an average of under two hours and the longest period being a day and a half.

Policies on how to handle missing child cases existed in 77.4% of the responding agencies for apparent stranger abductions, known family abductions and probable runaways with a slight increase for missing or otherwise lost children (80.6%). The Greenville Police Department indicated that although they did not have written guidelines, they did utilize missing children policies and procedures from state and federal agencies.

Direct contact with parents. Self-reports of actual police practices revealed that 83% of the agencies sit down with families of missing or otherwise lost children either "always" or "most of the time" in cases of stranger abduction, family abduction and missing or otherwise lost children. Sitting down with parents of runaways was reported only 41.9% of the time.

All individuals assigned to the juvenile unit in the Wichita Falls Police Department attend the National Center for Missing and Exploited Children's training on how to treat missing children cases. The Tarrant County Sheriff's Office reported that they established a specialized unit for missing



Table 3

Police Satisfaction with Cooperation from Parents and Other Agencies

N=31	Missing Child Type (%)	Very Satisfied or Satisfied (%)	Neither (%)	Very Dissatisfied or Dissatisfied (%)
Other Jurisdictions	Apparent stranger	87.1	3.2	
	Known family	87.1	3.2	3.2
	Runaway	80.7	9.7	9.7
	Missing or otherwise lost	93.6	3.2	
Social Service Agencies	Apparent stranger	83.8	3.2	3.2
	Known family	83.9	6.5	6.5
	Runaway	67.8	22.6	9.7
	Missing or otherwise lost	74.2	16.1	6.5
District Attorneys	Apparent stranger	80.6	12.9	
	Known family	73.2	19.4	3.2
Parents	Apparent stranger	87.1	3.2	
	Known family	77.4	9.7	3.2
	Runaway	74.2	16.1	9.7
	Missing or otherwise lost	83.9	6.5	3.2

Table 4

Reasonableness of Parental Expectation for Level of Police Work

	Too Low (%)	Realistic (%)	Too High (%)	Unrealistic (%)
Apparent Stranger Abduction (N=29)		67.7	16.1	9.7
Known Family Abduction (N=30)		58.1	32.3	6.5
Probable Runaway (N=31)	3.2	45.2	35.5	16.1
Missing or Otherwise Lost Children under 12 (N=30)		80.6	12.9	3.2
Missing or Otherwise Lost Children 12 and Older (N=30)	77.4	16.1	3.2	

and exploited children. They conducted a two-day child abduction training exercise with 22 other local police agencies and community groups. The county's sheriff's office also instituted a policy similar to "the Amber Plan" which utilizes television and radio to inform the community of a child abduction immediately after notification.

Table 5 shows that the majority of agencies reported that they would never suggest hiring an outside investigator. However, the Deer Park Police Department stated, "though we would never encourage the hiring of outside investigators, we would never discourage it either."

This bulletin suggests that the police are generally satisfied with the contact and quality of communications they have with parents of missing children. Runaways, and in some

cases, older child victims, were investigated less intensively than cases involving more dangerous situations or younger victims. Irving and Arlington Police departments, however, responded that they would pursue runaway cases as aggressively as others if they had the resources to do so. They further stated that missing children involving strangers and unknown circumstances were attended to expediently, and officers did not suspend their investigations until the children were found.

Some respondents included suggestions for aiding the police in finding a missing child. For example, parents should always have up-to-date information on the child, such as photographs, physical attributes, and medical records, and they should always know their child's friends. It was also suggested that the public should be forewarned that expectations and resolutions evidenced in the media skew the actualities of missing children cases and may be atypical of actual case handling.

Table 5

Agency Advocacy of Hiring an Outside Investigator

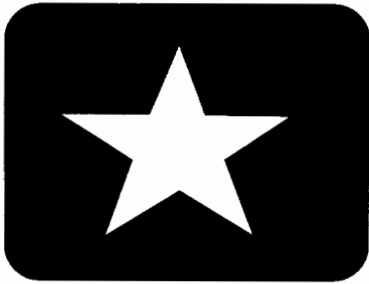
N=31	Never Suggest (%)	Rarely Suggest (%)	Suggest at Some Point (%)	Suggest Immediately (%)
Apparent Stranger Abduction	54.8	12.9	22.6	3.2
Known Family Abduction	45.2	16.1	32.3	3.2
Probable Runaway	54.8	29.0	16.1	
Missing or Otherwise Lost Children under 12	54.8	16.1	19.4	3.2
Missing or Otherwise Lost Children 12 and Older	48.4	25.8	16.1	3.2

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