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Missing Persons: A Need for Initial Call Policy and Procedure

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## **Abstract**

The manner in which law enforcement agencies handle missing persons cases has and will come under a great deal of scrutiny, both from the public and the media. Law enforcement agencies have been criticized in the past for their handling of these type cases. How missing persons cases are handled from the onset will in most cases determine the outcome. The casual approach that many agencies have taken when responding to these type cases has come under fire by the general public. Law enforcement agencies will do well when policies for handling the missing person case are in place.

The purposes of this research project have been to review the justification of having initial response procedures to missing person calls, and to demonstrate how having such procedures in place will effect the outcome of these type cases. The essential elements *of* initial response procedures are presented, and an attempt is made to show how these procedures will effect the outcome.

The majority of the literature used in the research indicated a need for having initial response procedures in place and it is key that those procedures be followed. The conclusion of this research indicates that having initial response procedures in place when an agency receives a missing person call will enhance the outcome of that call greatly.

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## **Introduction**

During the period from 1976 to 1987 there was an estimated 114,600 attempted abductions each year. An estimated 3,200 to 4,600 short-term nonfamily abductions are known to law enforcement each year. An estimated 200 to 300 are stereotypical kidnappings where a child is gone overnight, is killed, and transported a distance of 50 miles or more, or where the perpetrator intends to keep the child permanently (Behrman-Lippert, 1994). Based on data, there were also an estimated 43 to 147 stranger abduction homicides of children annually (Darcy, 1976-1987). These staggering numbers alone bring up the question of not when, but how law enforcement agencies will respond to missing person's calls.

From time to time these incidents will occur and pose a threat to the welfare of the community and the safety of its citizens. Every year law enforcement agencies respond to thousands of calls for missing persons. When those calls are placed the caller will more than likely be stressed and in some cases violent toward law enforcement officers. Initial response procedures will help the officer who responds to these calls deal with the upset caller.

For the purposes of researching this study an informal phone survey was conducted. The survey included one basic question as to whether or not agencies that were surveyed had initial response procedures in handling reports of missing persons. It is anticipated that this research project will discover why initial response procedures are of utmost importance when responding to missing person's calls.

## **Review of Literature**

In 1994 the United States Justice Department recommended that law enforcement agencies respond to every report of a missing child as if the child is in immediate danger (Laney, 1994). A

Law Enforcement Guide to Case Investigation and Program Management, argues that if law enforcement officers assume that a child is lost or has run away, they may "miss the opportunity to immediately identify critical information such as a witness who...observed the child talking to someone," (Behrman-Lippert, 1994).

According to the International Association of Chiefs of Police National Law Enforcement Policy Center a large portion of the United States Department of Justice's. Manual focuses on investigative duties and case management, it makes clear that the most critical role in any missing child case is that of the first responder to the call: the patrol officer (Barton, 1995). It is the patrol officer who initially establishes the seriousness of the complaint about a missing child, safeguards the scene, gathers crucial facts and conducts preliminary interviews of witnesses. For this reason, patrol officers must learn to become as thorough as they can in responding to missing child reports. Assumptions about such cases must be avoided, or officers may overlook crucial information and evidence (Brooks, 1994).

The researchers of the literature used in this study seem to agree that the initial response to missing persons calls is key in how they are handled through the entirety of the case. The danger in assuming a child has runaway or is lost is severe. The overwhelming primary consideration in the majority of the literature was having proper action taken upon the onset of the initial call (Burgess, 1995).

The initial response to a missing child call is perhaps the most crucial component of the investigation (Cerco, 1994). The manner in which patrol officers respond to the initial call often determines whether the child is found quickly and returned home safely, remains missing for months or years, or is never found (Hartman, 1996). In most law enforcement agencies, the patrol officer is

the first responder to a missing child call. All patrol officers need to be trained to respond to such calls efficiently, compassionately and professionally- paying particular attention to safeguarding evidence, quickly obtaining as much information as possible about the child and the circumstances, interviewing witnesses, and at the same time calming and reassuring the parents or guardians of the missing child (Cimino, 1994).

Although agencies cannot plan for every conceivable situation, they can make a commitment to give officers every possible advantage by providing relevant and timely training when responding to missing persons calls. Before the patrol officer even arrives on the scene, information about the missing child should be relayed from the Emergency Operations Center (EOC) to the responding officers. EOC operators, working with a standard list of predetermined questions, should gather pertinent information from the caller and relay it to the responding officers (Hatcher, 1990). EOC operators can also provide responding officers with basic facts and information, including a brief description of the missing child and information about possible abductor(s) (McAvoy, 1995). EOC operator can to a degree, provide responding officers with an over-view of any agency records concerning the child and family, such as: (1) history of family violence or abuse call; (2) criminal activities of family members or other persons living at the address (arrest, narcotics, etc.); (3) runaway reports on the child or siblings; and (4) juvenile delinquency reports on the child or sibling (Cimino, 1994). Airing radio transmissions about information obtained to other officers was a key factor found in much of the research. According to the (IACP Model Policy), this should be part of the agencies procedures. Department policy should provide for an immediate city and county- wide radio alert to all other patrol units and neighboring law enforcement agencies. These immediate radio broadcasts often result in prompt, safe recoveries (Prentky, 1995). The officer who is trained and knows how to

respond to missing person's calls has the ability in many cases to alter the outcome of these cases. It is the police administrator's job to see that officers within their department are trained to effectively deal with the missing persons call. How police officers respond to these calls in the future may be a life or death situation.

The (IACP Model Policy) also provides guidance on the matter of when a person should be declared "missing" and, when a missing person report can be filed. The model. policy recommends there should be no mandatory waiting period for filing a missing person report and that such reports may be filed either personally or by telephone (Hagmaier, 1995). Police agencies that take missing persons calls by telephone should use caution and follow up on the call in person as soon as possible.

The National Center for Missing and Exploited Children has prepared a detailed checklist for first responders in missing child cases. Depending on the complexity of the case, the exigency of circumstances and the size of the law enforcement agency, first responders may perform many of the tasks that supervisors and investigators would otherwise perform (Lent, 1994). Officers must blend NCMEC's generic checklist into their own agency's policies and procedural guidelines for responding to missing/abducted child cases.

## **Methodology**

Police officers who work at the street level will at some point in their career respond to a call for a missing person. It is possible that some officers will respond to hundreds of these calls in their career and never have an actual abduction case, however the likelihood of this happening has increased over the last decade. How they react to that call will depend largely on the training they have received, and what the agency they are employed with dictates through policy and procedures. In the case of the missing person call, what the officer perceives as the problem upon their arrival may

dictate the outcome of the entire situation. The officer who is well equipped and properly trained to handle these calls is already at an advantage by knowing where to start and what to look for. Initial response procedures are critical when responding to the missing person call. Information obtained for this research study was collected largely from three sources, the International Association of Chiefs of Police National Enforcement Policy Center, the Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention, and the National Center for Missing and Exploited Children. The latest available material was used in this study.

The informal phone survey that was conducted during the study indicated that all the agencies contacted did indeed have an initial procedure in place for handling missing persons calls. A variety of agencies were contacted, ranging in size from upwards of a million people in their jurisdiction to agencies with a jurisdiction population of 400 people.

## **Findings**

Over and over again the reference material used made reference to the importance of what the first responder should do when responding to a missing person call. It was generally stated that the single most important act that the first responder could do would be having knowledge through proper initial response procedures, as to what action must be taken.

In order to determine if initial response procedures were necessary when responding to missing person calls there was an attempt made to reference recorded cases where agencies had responded to incidents of missing children and did not have initial response procedures in place. During the research process none could be found.



It was found during the phone survey that all of the agencies contacted did indeed have procedures in place to deal with the missing person call. Most of the agencies contacted stated they have had their policy in place for several years, while some indicated having such a policy in place for only a short time.

Over the past several years, many high profile cases of missing children have changed the way law enforcement agencies must respond to missing persons calls. With the media only one step behind, or in some instances ahead of what law enforcement is doing, officers must be ready to meet the challenges of a true missing person call. Agencies that fail to train and have effective procedures in place will more than likely fail in their efforts to locate and return the missing person to their families.

If the first responder, (usually the patrol officer), assumes that the child is lost or has run away, mistakes can be made. Establishing the seriousness of the call is a must, and the patrol officer must act accordingly with the information given him upon arrival at the scene. It was found that having properly trained officers and procedures in place number one factor as to whether or not the call can be brought to a swift and successful ending.

## **Discussion/Conclusion**

A law enforcement officer is more likely to respond to a call for a missing person today, more than any other time in history. Law enforcement agencies must not respond to these calls with a haphazard approach. The enormous increase in missing person calls, and the outcome of some of these cases has put law enforcement agencies and the general public on the alert for the predator who will abduct the next child. If law enforcement officials are to succeed and overcome the obstacles posed by the missing persons case they must be ready to respond with knowledge and skill. This knowledgeable and skillful response to missing persons calls is mandated by public concerns and the law enforcement officers own will to succeed.

While the study did not delve into the legal and liability issues concerning missing persons cases, history speaks for itself that improper training and failure to respond in the proper manner could lead to issues pertaining to negligence on the officer and agency alike.

Accomplishing the successful end to a missing person case is a multifaceted response, requiring coordination and cooperation of patrol, investigative personnel, tactical response teams, and department supervisors. The response and search will more than likely also involve volunteer rescuers, fire personnel, and other law enforcement agencies that work on inter agency agreements. The mere coordination involving so many different agencies and volunteers can be staggering to any size agency. The specialized functions of some of the agencies responding must be known by law enforcement officers in order to best utilize their skills.

Although the study focused on initial response procedures for the patrol officer, supervisory personnel must know their part in dealing with the missing person case. Coordination of all the different agencies mentioned is an enormous task. Supervisory personnel that are trained in initial response procedures know that using the media to their advantage from the onset of these cases is of paramount importance. Good media relations is of utmost importance in the missing person case. Law enforcement agencies that are able to use the media to put information in the hands of the public have a high likelihood of success. Law enforcement supervisory personnel must be up to the task through proper training and experience. The key to the police agencies response is prior planning, preparation, and training.

Since the primary objective of the missing person case is to bring the case to a successful closure by returning the victim back to their family, the fundamental benefit of training is to accomplish this purpose. When the law enforcement officer responds with proper knowledge and skills already in tact, there is a greater likelihood that a life can be saved.

Many current training policies are continuously revised to better account for a more comprehensive range of crisis situations encountered by law enforcement personnel. Formal training for the missing person case should include exercises that include all the agencies that may have a part in the response of a missing person case. Training exercises such as these can help reduce or eliminate areas where law enforcement agencies may be the most vulnerable. Training exercises can also help law enforcement agencies eliminate mistakes that might be made without such training. The relevancy of the issue of training when a law enforcement agency fails to train and have initial response procedures in place may pose tremendous disadvantages to the agency when a call for the missing

person does occur. Professionally trained and experienced personnel, working as a team, can be one of the greatest assets to a law enforcement agency in missing person cases.

In conclusion, a competent, well-trained agency with initial response procedures in place for officers and supervisory personnel poses the greatest chance for a successful ending to a missing person call.

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