

Cause Undue Fears and Avoid Real Issue Misconceptions About Missing Children

By Aaron Derfel

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In the brightly-lit fast-food joint in downtown Montreal, Sylvie gathers enough money from her friends to buy a hot-dog.

It's four o'clock on a cold March morning. Outside the Casanova restaurant, cars drive slowly by prostitutes who shiver on street corners. Inside the Casanova, Sylvie walks back through a haze of cigarette smoke to where her girlfriend play pool. She sits down at the back of the restaurant and munches down the hot-dog.

Sylvie is a runaway. Her alcoholic father used to beat her, throwing her against walls. Since she was 16, she has run away four times from her home in Ville d'Anjou, a Montreal suburb. She left her parents in December and says she'll never return home.

"I was no good with my father," she says calmly, swaying in her chair. "My mother is okay, my father is a fucker. He didn't care for me."

Had Sylvie's parents reported to police that she ran away, her name and description would have been entered in a national registry for missing children established by the RCMP in 1987.

She would have been listed as a "missing child" even though she chose to leave home because she was physically abused. But Sylvie's situation is far from unique.

THE MYTH EXPOSED

The computerized national registry records 40,000 children as missing every year in Canada. But the Solicitor General's Office in Ottawa estimates that 86 per cent of these children are actually runaways, many of them escaping from physical and sexual abuse at home.

Missing children researcher Ruth Heron, who works in Ottawa for the Solicitor General, says that only 0.1 per cent of missing children are kidnapped or abducted by strangers.

Despite these statistics, detective agencies and volunteer groups continue to display photos of missing children on milk cartons and posters in supermarkets. In pinball arcades, video games flash the images of children who have disappeared. Child Find, a national non-profit organization, shows photos of missing children on television and publishes them in newspapers.

In the United States, the FBI has revealed that 95 per cent of missing children are runaways. Yet, in 1986 in Denver, a soft-drink company convinced 35,000 children to press their hands on stamp pads so their fingerprints would be on file in case of kidnapping.

Heron says the news media have caused a panic by creating a kidnapped children myth.

"It's the press that's created the hysteria as far as I can see. They picked up on a few bizarre stranger abduction cases but when you look at the data, the number of abduction cases is very small."

According to James Clark, an inspector for the Toronto Metro police morality squad, the missing children myth is perpetuated by organizations like Child Find.

"The misunderstanding that really annoys me is the abduction myth," says Clark. "Child Find and some other people tend to leave the feeling that there's a lot of people being dragged off the streets into cars and taken away. That's really misleading."

In 1987 for example, Metro Police only had one such case, says Clark.

"The scary part is that you get people wanting to sell automatic locators to be sewn on children's clothes and fingerprinting and photographing every kid - I think that's just a joke."

Susan Armstrong, an executive director for Child Find Quebec, denies that her organization spreads the missing children myth, saying that American groups have done so to receive larger donations from the private sector.

She blames instead profit-making companies that manufacture child identification kits and beeper devices such as "Kid Alert."

"Profit-making companies have seen a way to make money by playing off people's fear of the man in the trench coat who doesn't really exist," Armstrong says.

While Child Find admits that stranger abductions are extremely rare, the organization has not publicized this fact in any awareness campaign.

According to Armstrong, private companies such as Canadian Missing Children Systems (CMCS) have profited immensely off the abduction myth.

CMCS sells \$50 contracts door-to-door. The contracts guarantee that the firm will spare no expenses looking for a client's child if he or she ever goes missing. The company has been investigated several times by Ontario and Quebec police.

In response to increasing demands by police and social services to obtain more accurate information about missing children, the federal government commissioned a national research project overseen by Heron in 1986.

Initial findings of the report, collected from police forces in Surrey, B.C., Edmonton, Toronto and Montreal show that parental abductions is the largest category of missing children after runaways.

Heron says these abductions, accounting for 2.27 per cent of missing children, are usually the result of divorced parents feuding over custody of the child.

The remaining 11 per cent of disappearances are miscellaneous cases such as a child getting lost or a teenager eloping with a lover, she says.

TRACKING DOWN REAL RUNNERS

Six years ago, Montreal police discovered that many dancers in strip clubs were runaway teenagers. Youth squad officers reacted by checking strippers' i.d. cards every week, a routine they still practice today.

But according to police director Guy Lavoie, most runaways don't get involved in crime, drugs or prostitution, noting that 60 per cent of them return home after a day or two.

"For most of the cases, as soon as we write a report, the child is back home. A child is away for one or two hours and when we search for him, we find him in a park not far away or he comes back home by himself."

Still, every year, there remain about 1,500 open cases in Canada. Lavoie calls these missing children the real runners because many hitchhike across the country or down to Florida or California.

Clark says Toronto Metro police regularly send Montreal teenage runaways back home.

Two years ago, Toronto police investigated a child prostitution ring based in Montreal, Ottawa and Toronto. Although the girls travelled between the cities

often, police were able to arrest six pimps and six girls between the ages of 13 to 18.

Clark says he is alarmed by a trend in escort services - often a disguised form of prostitution - to use 12 or 13-year-old girls. He adds that Toronto morality squad officers are cracking down on the system by phoning for escorts to see whether the girls are runaways.

Lavoie says the 150-member Montreal youth squad tracks down runaways when their names appear on a driver's license or when they have been arrested by police.

If they are under 18, police officers are obliged by the Federal Youth Offenders Act to reunite the runaways with their children.

"If we realize that there's a problem at home - and most cases of runaways start with family problems ... sometimes it's a beaten child - then we refer them to social services," Lavoie says.

For the majority of cases, youth squad officers visit the home of the runaway and ask parents where the child hung out, then search in pinball arcades or transit stations. Officers also check with friends of the runaway because, sometimes, the child stays over at a buddy's house.

Lavoie says teenage prostitutes work inside pinball arcades on Montreal's downtown streets and are surveyed everyday by plainclothes police officers who watch out for new faces of kids loitering around.

The youth squad receives about 10 calls a day reporting missing children and more during the summer.

Child Find accepts missing child cases only after parents register the disappearance with police. The organization then gives the parents one of three forms to fill out depending on whether the child ran away, was abducted by a parent or grabbed by a stranger.

Child Find immediately distributes a photograph of the child to similar groups across North America, and always notifies police of the progress of the case.

"If we feel that by giving news coverage immediately is going to help then we encourage parents to get the child's photo in newspapers as soon as possible," says Armstrong.

HOME SWEET HOME

Yet, Lavoie says police can never be sure that once a child is returned home, sexual or physical abuse will stop.

Jay Howell, director of the U.S. National Center for Missing and Exploited Children said in 1986: "The most dangerous place for a child in this country is in his or her home."

A survey conducted by Jesuit Father Janus last summer of 170 Toronto street kids supports Howell's claim.

The survey revealed that 60 per cent of the children were runaways who had been severely abused at home. Some were classified as throwaways because their parents forced them to leave home. According to Father Janus, the children were in no more danger on the streets than they were in their own homes.

Julie Northrup, a social worker for Montreal's Ville Marie social services, says the missing children myth draws attention away from family problems which drive children to escape from home initially.

"It's sort of like sexual abuse where everybody prefers to think that it's the pervert stranger in the park rather than uncle George next door," she says.

"It's easier to tolerate that it's sweet children abducted into the white slave trade rather than addressing the issue of family problems which will lead kids to run away."

If runaways report sexual abuse, Ville Marie asks police to get involved and charges may be laid against a parent. These children may be placed in a shelter but chances are they will escape from there as well.

Clark says police form part of a vicious circle that always leave children as victims.

"If this kid is being sexually assaulted at home, then I, as a police officer, all I'm doing is taking him back to be assaulted again."

According to Heron's report, 27 per cent of runaways have fled from home more than once and 38 per cent from detention homes or youth centres. These children are between 14 to 18 years of age and the report states that girls run away slightly more often than boys.

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