Missing Children Found Dead

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Conservative estimates place the yearly number of child abuse and neglect fatalities at 2,000 (Grayson, 1995). Additionally, there is general agreement that the actual incidence of child abuse deaths is poorly documented. In fact, no single health, social service, law enforcement, or judicial system exists to track and comprehensively assess the circumstances of child deaths (Durfee, Gellert, & Tilton-Durfee, 1989).

In response to his concern that child homicide victims were being missed, in 1978, physician Michael Durfee set up a system to retrieve cases from coroner's records. He was later joined in his efforts by a public health nurse with a background in child abuse cases. Together, they began to establish a protocol for review of potentially suspicious child deaths.

In many cities, multidisciplinary child fatality review teams exist. The American Academy of Pediatrics has developed guidelines and procedures for child death investigations. Two benefits of such a team review is to develop data about causes of child deaths to prevent such tragedies and to assist law enforcement in identifying suspect indicators to focus an investigation.

Law enforcement is critical in responding to a missing child report. Missing children reports are difficult case types to investigate because they are situations with minimal informa-

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tion, maximum pressure, and the need for an immediate solution. Law enforcement needs to know about available resources, especially in the area of child homicides.

These cases are special in their own right. The typology and motivations are believed to be different in the suspects and victimology from adults, thereby requiring the need for a specialized investigative approach to the case. However, the academic, clinical, and criminal justice literature are silent on the subject.

This article seeks to contribute to the quantitative and qualitative literature on child fatalities. The quantitative analysis is to provide suspect indicators or profile characteristics from analyzed cases to assist investigators of missing children in focusing their search to a suspect.

The qualitative analysis provides brief case vignettes to sensitze law enforcement and clinicians to the various motives and circumstances of child homicides. If similar circumstances appear in a case where the suspect is unknown, it is reasonable to hypothesize that some actions or circumstances may be common or identifiable in similar case types, based on knowledge obtained from prior case analysis.

National Center for Missing and Exploited Children

The National Center for Missing and Exploited Children (NCMEC) receives thousands of calls per year regarding missing children. One of the mandates of the NCMEC is to help law enforcement recover or locate the child; however, there is also a mandate to disseminate information to law enforcement. Every day, newspapers nationwide publish accounts of children being victimized: strangers who abduct and kill; the neighbor who seduces and kills; and the mother and father who kill their child. The NCMEC wanted to know the why, how, and where of deceased missing children.

Realizing that the Center’s files contained a wealth of information that, when analyzed, could be extremely useful to the investigator, this project was initiated.

The Deceased Child Project

As part of an internal review of case files, the staff of the Case Enhancement and Informational Analysis Unit conducted a 10-year record review of cases where the children were deceased when recovered. This search yielded data on 210 usable cases reported as missing and recovered deceased between April 1982 and August 1992. Within the 210 cases, accidental; suicide; and homicide using NCMEC groupings. Prior convictions were reduced to five groups: crimes against minors; violent crimes; adult sex crimes; felonies; and misdemeanors.

Using the groupings of variables, the Pearson correlation was run a second time with some correlations dropping out of significance and others becoming significant. A two-dimensional cross tabulation (Chi square) was conducted to test for statistically significant differences with variables as a function of other variables (e.g., sex of victim versus cause of death).

Some statistically significant results emerged and confirmed prior knowledge developed through law enforcement investigative experience. It is important to note that the absence of statistical significance also shows what not to identify as important indicators of potential suspects (e.g., strangers and family members are equally likely to take the victim across state borders).

Findings

Total Population

The predominant cause of death with children who have been reported missing to the NCMEC is homicide (68%). This category is far ahead of accidental (16%), unknown (12%), and suicide (4%).

Differences were noted between sex of victim and cause of death. More girls, 124 or 59%, were found dead in the missing population than boys, 86 or 41%. The number of female victims increased when looking at homicide figures: 66.4% are girls and 33.6% are boys. Caucasian girls were the largest victim group, followed by Caucasian boys, African-American boys, and African-American girls.

Gender was significant in deaths by accident and suicide. Of the non-homicide cases, accidental deaths were predominantly boys (82%) and by drowning. Additionally more males committed suicide than females. Of the eight suicides, five were boys and two were

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143 cases were identified as homicides. The remaining cases were either death as the result of accident or suicide.

Methodology

Key variables were determined by the staff at NCMEC. The data were first checked as to total population and then as homicides only. Data were entered on a code sheet and a Pearson correlation was run on all variables. The initial correlation analysis indicated areas for further investigation or changes. Variables such as suspect’s relationship to victim, and original caller, were reduced to six groupings: natural family; step family; foster family; extended family; close friends; and strangers. Cause of death was reduced to four groups: unknown;
under age 12. No girls under 12 committed suicide.

Girls were victimized more often by members of the opposite sex; boys were victimized more often by the same sex. Children between the ages of 6 and 17 comprised the largest victim group, with the majority of missing children in this study abducted by people they knew.

**Homicide**

Girls were more likely to be murdered by males than by females, with strangulation (manual or by ligature) being a frequent cause of death. Of the cases where molestation occurred, girls were the largest victim group by a wide margin. In those cases where a parent killed the child, when the father was the perpetrator, the average distance from the site of reported abduction to site of disposal or recovery was 350 miles. In those cases where the mother was the perpetrator, the average distance was 5.6 miles.

Children younger than 4 were equally likely to have suspects of either sex. Although boys ages 5 to 12 had some female suspects, the majority were male; however, all male victims older than 12 had male suspects. Girls younger than 5 and ages 5 to 12 had either females or males as suspects, but for girls older than 12, the majority of suspects were males.

**Weapons and Homicide**

For all ages, more girls than boys are murdered without weapons. Older boys are more likely to be murdered using a weapon than by physical means. Children of both sexes younger than 5 are more likely murdered through physical means than by weapons. As children increase in age, boys age 5 to 12 are murdered with weapons, although the majority of girls are physically murdered. The majority of boys older than 12 are killed with weapons, although the majority of girls are killed by other means.

Female suspects in this sample did not use a gun or knife to kill and did not kill children older than 12. Of the 13 male victims older than 12, 11 or 85% were killed with a gun or knife. Of the 30 girls older than 12, 13 or 43% were killed with a gun or knife. Of the 24 victims younger than 5, only boys were killed by male suspects using a gun or a knife. Of the 24 victims younger than 5, more girls are molested than boys; however, the percentage of boys molested in the homicide population is higher than the percentage of boys molested in the total population.

The majority of molested girls are killed by physical means (32 of the 43). The remaining 11 die by gun or knife. More girls killed by weapon are molested than not (11 yes, four probable versus two not). More boys killed with weapons are listed as not molested than being molested.

The largest age group for molested children is between 5 and 12. No victim younger than 5 was reported molested. The majority of molested children between the ages of 5 and 12 were killed by physical means (46 out of 66), and 24 of these were molested. This compared with seven molested and three probable molestations out of 20 victims killed with a weapon.

**Suspect Relationship, Victim Age, and Gender**

The largest category of victims (19) are girls between the ages of 5 and 12 who are killed by strangers. The second largest number of girls killed (15) are also aged 5 to 12 and are killed by close friends. These two groups are more than twice the size as the comparable boy group (four and eight, respectively). The largest boy group are those younger than 5 who are killed by family members (10). The second largest group of boy victims (those ages 5 to 12) are those killed by suspects in the close friend category (eight). The 5-to-12 age group is also killed by strangers and family members (four and three, respectively).

**Case Examples and Suspect Indicators**

**Case 1**

Case 1 was called in to NCMEC by the mother, who reported that she had car trouble while driving along the highway with her sons. The mother reported that while she was looking
under the hood of the car to see what was wrong, a van pulled up, and someone came up from behind and put a cloth over her head. She claimed that she did not get a good look at the van and did not hear it pull up. After she managed to free herself from the cloth placed on her head, she returned to the car to find that her children were gone. The NCMEC hotline operator who took the initial report commented that "the mother seemed too calm" while she was describing the events that had occurred that day. When the case manager called the mother the following day to gather further information, he made a notation in his report that "mom seems too calm." That same evening, the mother confessed to authorities that she had killed her two sons.

The mother took the police to the location where she had placed the bodies, which was about 10 miles from her home. They were found behind a hill, located in a ditch, hidden from view. The mother indicated she killed the children by smashing their skulls with a sledge hammer. Her reason: she didn't have enough food to feed them. According to the authorities, this mother had a history of violent criminal behavior (she had tried to kill someone by burning down a house).

**Case 2**

Case 2 involved a grievance over a custody dispute. When the father realized he had lost custody of his two sons, aged 4 and 6, he quickly tricked his ex-wife into letting him take the children for a visit. He then took the children 1,200 miles away to hide with some of his relatives in another state. The father finally killed both boys by shooting them in the head with a 12-gauge shotgun. During his confession, he told authorities that his "ex-wife was a horrible person, and [his] sons asked [him] to kill them rather than go back to their mother."

The bodies of the two brothers were located more than 1,200 miles from the site of the abduction. The father was described as having an explosive personality with a previous criminal history that included family violence charges and attempted assault on his ex-wife (the mother of the two victims).

**Case 3**

Case 3 involved an 11-year-old girl who was reported missing on Halloween night. Within several days the police received a handwritten map from the abductor showing them where they could find the child's body, as well as a statement to "please give the girl a decent burial." It took the police several days to find the body because many of the landmarks on the map were not accurately placed. Every detailed item on the map, however, was found by the police. The body was eventually found in the root system of a large overturned tree.

After the body was located, the police began receiving anonymous letters through the mail, in the form of riddles to be answered. The riddles were based on ancient Egyptian and Greek mythological figures and had to be answered within a set period of time "or another victim would be taken by Christmas." The answers to the riddles had to be placed on the front page of the local newspaper.

After conferring with a friend about the difficult riddles, the police officer realized that the riddles were coming from "Sesame Street." The television show was running a week-long special on mythology. At that point, the police realized they were dealing with "an organized killer operating at the level of a child."

The letters were traced to a post office box and finally led the police to Fred, a 16-year-old adolescent who knew the victim from seeing her in the neighborhood and was preparing to kill
her younger sister. The police described Fred as “having an abnormal childhood and being a ‘Ted-Bundy type,’ ready to explode.” He had no previous criminal history, but did have some behavioral problems in school.

**Case 4**

Case 4 involved Fran, a 15-year-old girl, who was the third in a series of four victims by the same abductor, a white male in his late 20s. He claimed that he “has kidnapped and sexually abused other children in the past.”

The victim was abducted from her home. She was found shot to death in an area 20 to 30 miles northwest of the abduction site and had been sexually molested.

This abductor’s method of operation (M.O.) consisted of answering furniture advertisements in the local trade papers to search for people with children in the home. When he found his victim, he would stop by the home again after he knew the parents had gone out and abduct the child. The abductions took place whenever his wife went away on business, because he liked to take his victims to his home and “play with them” before returning them to the location of their abductions.

Fran was kept hidden in a closet in the abductor’s house for his sexual gratification. The abductor claimed that they “were in love,” but when he caught her trying to escape, he shot her in the back.

According to the authorities, the truth was that his wife was returning home sooner than he had anticipated and he had to get rid of his victim as quickly as possible.

His last victim, Susan, was the individual who finally led the police to the abductor. She too was abducted and kept in his closet; authorities believe that she also would have been killed if she had not escaped. The victim asked her abductor if she could “go outside to play for awhile.” He agreed, and Susan escaped by running to the nearby inter-state and flagging down a motorist.

Susan’s story linked the abductor with the abduction and rape of two other female victims, and with the abduction and murder of Fran.

**Case 5**

Case 5 is of Michael, age 13. Witnesses claimed they had seen a driver “stop his car, get out, and follow the victim,” who was on a bicycle. The man was then seen “dragging the child back to his car, kicking and screaming.” By the time the witnesses doubled back to the area, the car and victim were gone.

Michael’s decomposed body was the boy go after tying his hands and molesting him. Brian was placed in a treatment center; the case never went to trial.

At 16, Brian forced a 12-year-old male onto his bicycle. He took the boy to a field and forced him to ingest pills, fondled and choked him, leaving him for dead. For this crime, he was tried as an adult and placed in a county youth home.

At 23, after finishing his time in the youth home, he was working and arrested again. He pled guilty to “contributing to the delinquency of minors,” by offering 13- and 15-year-old boys money to pose nude for photographs. At 25, a man believed to be Brian picked up a 13-year-old boy, got him drunk, and fondled him before driving the boy home. When Brian’s roommate was questioned about the incident, he said that “Brian was scared because he had been fooling around with boys again.”

At 26, Brian was back in his home state, driving a gold station wagon. At about this time, a 14-year-old boy was forced into a brown station wagon while riding his bicycle, in an area about 2 miles from Brian’s residence. His body was found and Brian is currently a suspect in this homicide.

Later the same year, Michael, age 13, was taken from his bicycle and forced into a light-colored Jeep, which Brian had bought after trading in his station wagon. It is believed that he then took the victim up to the hunting camp, where he molested and killed the victim. The body was found 2 weeks later, naked and bound with rope, so badly decomposed that the cause of death could not be determined, although strangulation is suspected.

Law enforcement officers noted that when Brian, as an adolescent, would be questioned about a crime, he would vehemently deny all accusations. Later, he would pedal his bike back to the police station, sit down, and “lay it all out.” Police officers said he did not brag.
about the crimes or appear embarrassed, rather, just stated the facts about what happened. When police began question-
ing local citizens living near the hunting lodge where Michael was found, one woman claimed that a man matching Brian’s description “knocked on the door and asked to use [their] .22 to ‘shoot some bats he found in his cabin.’ ” The neighbors refused to give him the gun.

Police began a manhunt for Brian when he fled the state. An FBI agent followed him to a trailer park where he was staying with friends. As soon as police were able to have a warrant issued for him, they returned to find an empty trailer. Upon entering the trailer they found several short-wave radios, all of which were tuned to the various police bands in the area. Brian knew they were coming and was one step ahead of them. He remains at large.

Discussion
The analysis of the 210 missing children found deceased has forensic, motive, and educational implications.

Forensics
Many cases lacked forensic testing and resulted in a high number of “probably molested” cases. Forensic testing for sexual abuse and molestation is indicated in all cases. If the victim is a girl, she will have even a higher chance of being molested. Additional suggested forensic tests are: DNA tracing; HIV, pregnancy for female victims; and use of drugs or alcohol.

Motive
Knowing the motive of a homicide assists in classifying the crime (Douglas, Burgess, Burgess, & Ressler, 1992). When molestation is a motive, law enforcement can review suspect files for sex offenders of children. Whatever method caused the child’s death, molestation was probably the main reason for the child’s abduction. Motive in

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1. Forensic evidence in child homicide cases is critical to determine sexual abuse.

2. Forensic evidence can help focus an investigation on a suspect through DNA results.

3. Of 210 missing children found deceased, 68% were homicides, 16% had accidental causes, 12% were unknown, and 4% were suicides.

other than molested cases needs to be studied, such as argument, conflict, anger, and domestic violence.

Suspect Indicators or Profile Characteristics
When there is an unsolved homicide and only victim data, the following suspect indicators or profile characteristics may assist in focusing an investigation toward possible suspects.

For children missing and found deceased younger than 5, check family members. As the child enters the 5-to-12-age group, the stranger and acquaintance becomes the leading suspect category. When the child is older than 12, the leading suspect comes from the group called close friends, which is closely followed by strangers.

Parent and Community Education
For parent education, the fact that more boys die by accident suggests either that boys probably take more chances in the water (boating, swimming) than do girls, or caretakers are less vigilant and instructive about safety with boys. The number of child suicides also has implications for parents and mental health professionals to be aware of early signs of depression in children, especially boys.

Education is important in instances of child exploitation and abuse. Establish a community hotline (through the police department) for persons noted to be following or watching children. Educate people to look for strangers as well as people in the close friend category around areas where kids congregate, such as paper routes, playgrounds, and shopping malls. Law enforcement needs to pay careful attention to children who report that they think they have been watched or followed.

References