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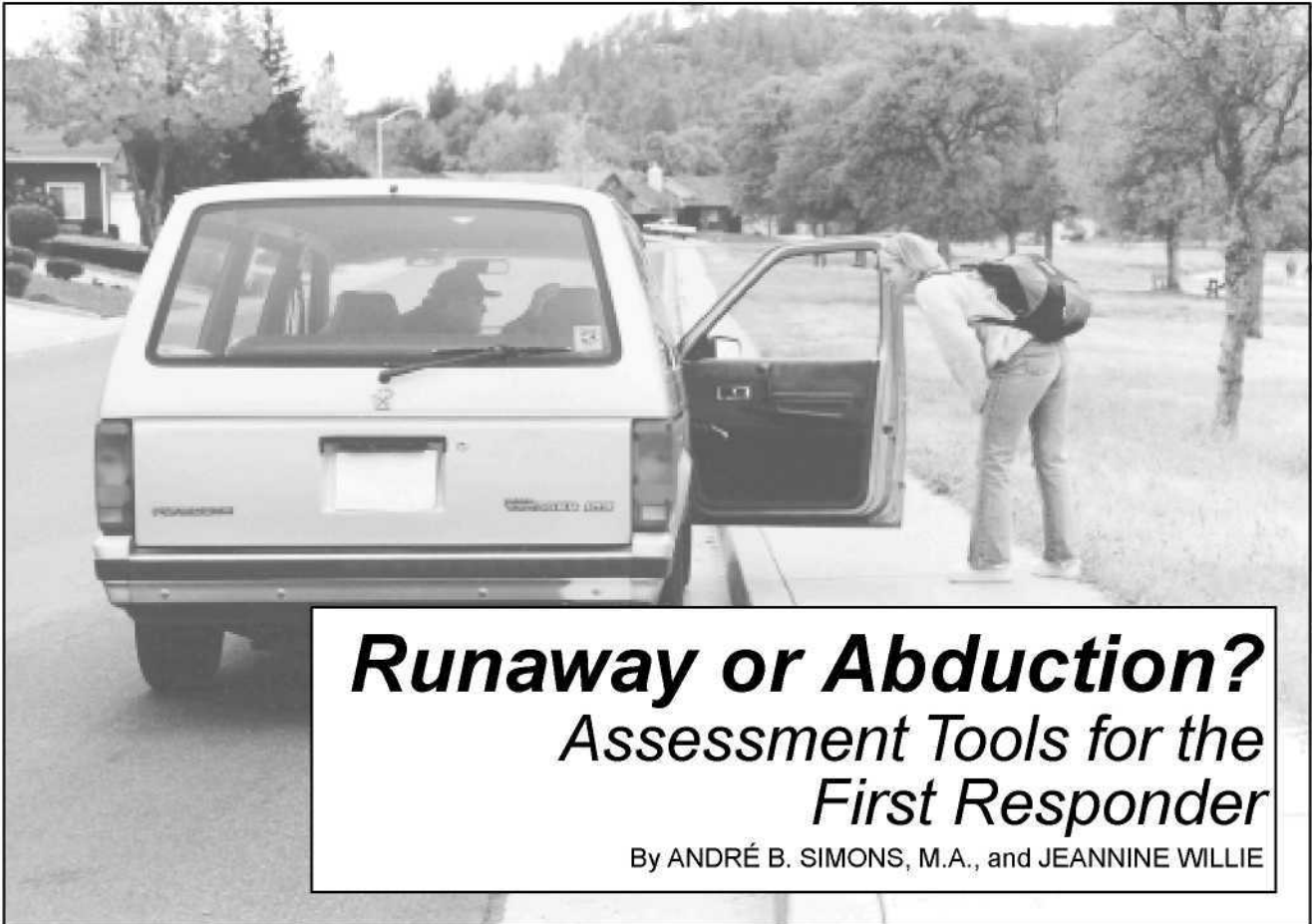
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Runaway or Abduction? Assessment Tools for the First Responder

By ANDRÉ B. SIMONS, M.A., and JEANNINE WILLIE

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A 15-year-old girl disappeared from her home in a small California coastal town. Police initially classified her as a runaway. Eight months later, her abused body was discovered. Subsequent investigation revealed that three high school-aged boys involved in a Satanic cult had abducted, raped, tortured, and murdered the girl the night of her disappearance.

In another case, a jury ordered a town to pay a family \$3.8 million because police failed to respond adequately to the father's plea for help when he reported his daughter missing. The father stated later that the verdict presented "a clear warning

to third parties who assist in a child abduction,¹ even through inaction."²

Such inaction may often result when law enforcement erroneously categorizes a child abduction as a voluntary disappearance, or a runaway. When someone reports a child missing, traditionally, law enforcement quickly confirms or eliminates evidence of an abduction. Police agencies decide easily how to respond to cases with clear indicators about what happened, such as dealing with a witnessed stranger abduction, a runaway who packs a bag and leaves a note, or a very young missing child, which police generally investigate

whatever the circumstances. Between the extremes, however, decision making often proves difficult.³ When a child simply vanishes, no clear indicators may exist to suggest a voluntary or an involuntary disappearance. When responding police officers navigate through a situation with no witnesses, obvious crime scene, nor clues to what happened, they might find it difficult to distinguish an abducted child from a runaway initially. A recent survey requested law enforcement agencies to identify common obstacles to a successful investigation in a missing child case.⁴ Fifty-eight percent of the agencies responded that the highest ranking concern involved



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the difficulty of knowing whether a child has disappeared voluntarily.

The fact that hundreds of thousands of children leave their homes voluntarily each year compounds the difficulty in accurately classifying a missing child as a runaway or a victim of abduction. National averages indicate approximately 450,000 runaways in the United States at any given time.⁵ In California in 1999, nearly 101,000 children left their homes voluntarily. Comparatively, only 64 witnessed abductions of children by a stranger or nonfamily member occurred. Not surprisingly, law enforcement officers may believe initially that a missing child between 13 and 17 years of age has run away. Without obvious indicators of an abduction, such as witnesses who observed the actual kidnapping event, signs of forced entry, or a ransom note, statistics indicate that the missing child most likely has run away. This philosophy often may cause the

responding law enforcement officers to overlook evidence of an abduction. Such predispositions can become particularly hazardous in light of research indicating that in cases where individuals abduct and murder children, the population at highest risk for victimization consists of teenage girls ages 13 to 17.⁶

ASSESSING THE SITUATION

The responding police officers' initial assessment will have a great impact on the outcome of the missing child case. The attitude or approach that officers take in the initial response to a missing child call actually may determine whether the child is recovered and returned home safely, remains missing, or, worse yet, is found dead.⁷ No other criminal investigation is as time-sensitive as this type of case, where the very life of the victim often may depend on the swift and effective mobilization of investigative resources. The police agency's

administrative and investigative branches must rely on the patrol officer's assessment to determine the most appropriate course of action. Police agencies may jeopardize crucial investigative opportunities if they classify an abduction case erroneously. Almost no other crime investigation will stretch resources and generate public criticism as a missing child case. A law enforcement agency may find itself in the unenviable position of having to make up for precious lost hours or days if they mistakenly classify the missing child as a runaway. However, the large amount of voluntary missing reports each year makes a full-scale law enforcement response unreasonable and inappropriate for all incidents.

To assess a missing child report accurately, responding officers must explore the missing child's lifestyle and behaviors. Officers must have the motivation and availability of resources necessary to take the extra time needed for such an evaluation and to form an assessment as to whether a voluntary departure proves consistent with the child's behavior patterns.

The Parental Interview

The need to interview parents separately from other family members and reporting parties remains critical. Responding officers may feel reluctant to conduct separate interviews of the parents because of their emotionally escalated state. Conversely, if the parents do not appear particularly concerned about the child's absence, the officers may not view separate interviews as necessary. While they cannot

determine what a parent's "normal" reaction to a missing child would be, officers must remain objective and realize that a family member may later become a suspect if the child has been abducted. Officers must balance this objectivity with empathy and support if the parents are in a state of emotional crisis. Most important, officers must ensure that they interview parents individually and preserve potential evidence while remaining alert to document each parent's demeanor and attitude throughout the interview.

During the parental interview, officers quickly should compile accurate physical characteristics, such as the child's appearance, age, clothing, and obtain recent photographs and videotapes. Officers should attempt to include a full criminal and psychiatric history check of all family members with access to the child, as well as acquire local agency history of prior abuse or neglect calls to the house.

Through separate interviews of family members, responding officers should question if the child's absence shows a significant deviation from established patterns of behavior.⁸ Only a further exploration into the victimology of the missing child can answer this question.

Victimology

To understand if the child's absence is consistent with established patterns of behavior, officers first must understand the child's normal actions prior to the disappearance. Officers should use the following guidelines for assessing the missing child's personality.⁹

- Develop and verify a detailed timeline of the child's last known activities up to the time the child was last seen or reported missing.
- Determine habits, hobbies, interests, and favorite activities.
- Identify normal activity patterns, and determine the victim's known comfort zone. Officers should assess the child's survival skills and ability to adapt to new or strange circumstances, which include an examination of the child's intellectual maturity. Did the child travel alone frequently? Did the child have a routine where independent travel occurred on a regular basis (e.g., riding a bike to school)? What fears and phobias did the child exhibit? For example, if the child was afraid of the dark,

the probability of leaving voluntarily at night is low. Similarly, if the missing child was afraid to travel without a favorite item, such as a toy or security blanket, and the item remains in the house after the disappearance, the child possibly did not leave voluntarily.

- Note any recent changes in behavior or activity patterns and unusual events and stressors. Officers should explore any motivations for leaving. How does the child normally deal with stressful situations? Have any recent traumatic or stressful events caused such a prompt departure? Do abuse issues occur within the residence or family? Officers also should determine any recent changes in sleeping and eating patterns that would indicate stress.

Guidelines to Clarify Procedures for Categorizing the Missing Child Case

- The parental interview: separation of parents, family members, and reporting parties during interviews.
- Victimology: examination of the missing child's family dynamics, comfort zones, and school and peer group associates.
- Scene assessment: assessment of the child's residence for evidence, or lack of, predeparture preparation.
- Resources: evaluation of resources available to the child that would enable or inhibit a voluntary departure.
- Time factors: consideration of the amount of time that has passed since the child was last seen.

Resources

To successfully sustain a voluntary long-term absence, the runaway child must have access to resources that will satisfy basic needs, such as food, shelter, and transportation.

Money

- Does the child have access to money or credit cards? Officers should verify if the child recently has accessed bank accounts through ATM withdrawals or other means. Is money missing from parents or siblings? Officers also should determine if the child possesses adequate skills to obtain employment and, therefore, additional money.

Transportation

- Does the missing child have access to a vehicle, and if so, is that vehicle present or absent? Officers should determine if the child is familiar with public transportation, such as a public bus or train system, and conduct appropriate follow-up contacts with local transportation providers. Friends or family members unwittingly may have helped the child run away by providing some form of transportation.

Clothing/toiletries

- Does evidence suggest that the child has packed any clothing or toiletries? Remembering the possibility that a crime scene may exist within the child's residence, officers should attempt to verify what items, if any, are no longer present in the child's room. Missing clothes, toiletries, makeup, medications, or other items of personal significance often may indicate predeparture preparations.

existing conditions still present in the house? The presence of medications that the child needs may indicate an involuntary departure.

- Identify and interview boy-friends/girlfriends; determine normal dating patterns, including sexual activity. If the missing child is a postpubescent female, are there pregnancy and abortion issues? If so, officers should consider contacting local pregnancy health and abortion clinics. Also, officers should familiarize themselves with department policy and legal issues concerning confidentiality if they find the missing child at such a clinic.
- Obtain and review any personal writings, diaries, drawings, and schoolwork, including any entries into a personal computer or interaction with on-line computer systems or services. A critical item often overlooked in the missing child call is the presence or absence of journals/diaries. Besides the obvious insights that diaries may provide into the child's state of mind, the presence or absence of any written communication can prove relevant. A child who consistently and regularly has memorialized thoughts and feelings in writing might not depart voluntarily without leaving some form of written communication for people left behind.¹¹ Similarly, calendars or schedules indicating planned events may provide

- Identify and separately interview close friends, school-mates, teachers, coworkers, and other significant individuals. Again, although responding officers reluctantly may conduct separate interviews of distraught friends and family members, they must obtain independent statements not influenced by other witnesses. The FBI's National Center for the Analysis of Violent Crime

(NCAVC) created a general assessment form to distribute to family members and associates to assist in police officers' efforts to understand the child's personality.¹⁰

- Determine any history of alcohol and other drug use. Does the child have any particular medical conditions or allergies? If so, are the child's medications to treat the

insight into the child's possible motivation for staying or leaving.

- Determine any history of running away, discontent with home life, or suicidal ideations. Has the child disappeared voluntarily on prior occasions? Officers should note the last time the child ran

away and the length of time spent away. Did the child go to friends, other family members, or a runaway shelter? Officers should determine what enabled the child to run away successfully, or conversely, what prevented the child from sustaining a long-term absence. What happened that

prompted the child's departure in prior absences? Officers should determine if the child exhibited any runaway gestures, such as staying out all night, threats to leave, or other behaviors that violated clear expectations from parents or caregivers. Officers should determine the existence of any

Case Example

In June 1997, 16-year-old Mary Roberts (name has been changed) disappeared from a small mountain skiing community in northern California. The town's crime rate is low, and residents generally leave their doors and windows open in the summer to take advantage of the cool mountain breeze. After living in the town for only 1 year, Mary reportedly was yearning for the bustling activity of Los Angeles, her hometown.

At approximately 10 p.m. one night, Mary was walking home alone through the quiet streets. She had just broken up with her boyfriend and was upset. Mary walked around the neighborhood, talked with a friend, then started to head home. Her walk was only a few blocks, and most of the dark streets were empty. Without a sound, without a witness, and without a trace, Mary disappeared. She has never been found.

Local law enforcement officials initially classified Mary as a runaway. She had, in recent weeks, spoke of leaving town and returning to Los Angeles where family members still lived.

Her friends knew she was heartbroken over troubles with her boyfriend. Final exams at school were looming as Mary struggled with her studies. It seemed reasonable to think that, perhaps, Mary had just decided to leave.

After 2 weeks had passed with no contact from Mary, investigators developed a sense that Mary had not disappeared voluntarily. An

assessment of Mary's residence failed to yield evidence of any preparation or packing. Investigators examining Mary's bedroom discovered her favorite purse, which family members identified as an item Mary never left home without. After looking at Mary's available resources, investigators discovered that she did not have access to a vehicle, nor did she have access to any money to fund a departure from the area. In creating a victimology for Mary, officers realized that she probably did not have the survival skills or psychological stamina to engineer a long-term absence successfully. People knew Mary was afraid of the dark, so it seemed unreasonable that she would choose the nighttime for an exit. Interviews with family members and friends revealed that Mary had never attempted a voluntary departure before. The investigation began to focus on Mary's disappearance as an abduction. As investigators quickly discovered, 2 weeks of lost time created substantial investigative problems: witnesses' recollections were dulled, no trail existed for scent-tracking dogs to follow, and any potential crime scenes had been contaminated. Even more frustrating, the investigators realized that Mary's initial runaway classification possibly had provided additional time for her abductors to further conceal evidence of the crime. This case remains open and unsolved.

Investigative Resources

- The FBI's National Center for the Analysis of Violent Crime has published a manual entitled *Child Abduction Response Plan*—an investigative tool for first responders and investigators. Law enforcement agencies can request a copy by contacting the NCAVC coordinator at their local FBI field office.
- Additionally, the National Center for Missing and Exploited Children (NCMEC) has published an investigative resource guide entitled *Investigator's Guide to Missing Child Cases*. Agencies can contact NCMEC at 1-800-THE-LOST.

prior suicide attempts or gestures by the child and consider the possibility that the child has disappeared as a result of a self-inflicted injury.

These observations will assist officers in crafting the child's victimology, which will indicate whether the child had the motivation and capability of leaving voluntarily. If the victim assessment suggests that these two factors do not exist, officers seriously must consider the possibility that an abduction has occurred.

Scene Assessment

In a survey of police agencies, approximately 93 percent of law enforcement officers responding to a missing child call state that they usually interview the parents or guardian in person. However, only 41 percent routinely would search the child's home.¹² A search of the missing child's residence can provide a preliminary assessment with useful information to officers. Upon arriving at the child's residence or last known location, officers must remember that the entire house may prove a potential crime

scene and they should take all necessary steps to prevent the destruction of evidence. Officers can make some important observations. They can note the presence or absence of obvious signs of disruption, such as forced entry. How did the offender and the victim enter and exit the house? If the house appears disorderly or in disarray, officers should compare this with the child's personal living space and determine if this remains consistent with the way the room appears now. Officers should note any dramatic changes in the child's room that coincide with the departure, which may indicate predeparture preparation or an attempt by an abductor to conceal evidence. Officers should attempt to verify if any of the child's clothing or toiletries are missing that would indicate packing or preparation. If officers or family members cannot find any such items missing nor evidence of packing, officers must consider the possibility that the child may have been abducted.

Has the child left any communication for discovery by parents or guardians? This may include

written letters, voice mail messages, and computer messages. Law enforcement officers should consider all modes of communication available to the missing child, including their access to on-line chat rooms and communication with others via the Internet.

While the initial response logically may include an examination of the child's room, responding officers also should consider an examination of the parents' room or other areas of the house. If no items appear missing from the child's room, are items missing from other areas of the house that may provide additional resources?

Officers should attempt to compile and examine a list of known associates or family members that the child most likely would seek assistance from. Should those associates or family members be unaware of the child's whereabouts, officers must consider this as part of the child's lack of available resources and once again contemplate the possibility that someone has abducted the child.

Time Factors

How long does a runaway child typically stay away from home, and how does the passage of time influence the classification of a missing child case? The California Department of Justice's Missing/Unidentified Persons Unit has reported the following trends in runaway returns:

<u>Time Frame</u>	<u>Percent Returned</u>
within 7 days.....	50 percent
7-14 days.....	30 percent
14-30 days.....	17 percent
30+ days.....	3 percent

These statistics indicate that the majority of runaway children cannot sustain an absence for more than 2 weeks. In general, the longer the absence, the greater the likelihood that an individual has abducted the child or that the child has fallen victim to a violent crime. If the child has a history of running away, officers should determine the length of time the child remained missing during previous absences. If the length of time in the current absence grossly exceeds previous absences, officers should consider the current disappearance a deviation from normal behavior patterns.

Responding officers also should note the amount of time that transpired between the last known sighting of the missing child and when the parents or guardian alerted authorities. While 24 hours or more may indicate apathy or neglect, this time frame also can perpetuate the common misconception that an individual must be missing for 24 hours before law enforcement can respond. The responding officers should construct a time line identifying the parents' activities during this window. This time line highlights family dynamics and clarifies the parents' potential role in the child's disappearance.¹³

CONCLUSION

Given the extraordinary amount of time and resources an abducted child case can drain from a police department, law enforcement agencies should take measures to ensure that they do not label an abduction as a runaway—an error that can cripple the subsequent investigation. This mistaken labeling

often may occur during the initial response, where the patrol officer struggles to assess the circumstances of a missing child report appropriately. While the statistics suggest that a majority of missing children have run away, overlooking indicators of an abduction can jeopardize attempts to locate the missing child and expose law enforcement agencies to civil liability. Although the large number of runaway cases makes a large-scale response impractical in every circumstance, police officers have the responsibility of examining each individual case with a critical, informed eye, and as the evidence indicates, they should always err on the side of caution.

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Finally, law enforcement agencies must provide their patrol officers with adequate resources and training that will allow for a thorough assessment of the facts. Research indicates that when police agencies pursue missing child cases with vigor, child recovery outcomes improve.¹⁴ In spite of the often ambiguous nature of the missing child report, law enforcement officers

should make every attempt to assess the situation accurately in an effort to classify the missing child appropriately. •

Endnotes

¹ For purposes of this article, the term child is used when referring to anyone under 18 years of age.

² *Guidelines and Curriculum for Handling Missing Person and Runaway Cases*, Sacramento, CA: California Commission on Peace Officer Standards and Training, 1989.

³ U.S. Department of Justice, Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention, *National Incidence Studies of Missing, Abducted, Runaway, and Thrownaway Children in America* (Washington, DC, 1990), 97.

⁴ J.J. Collins, M.E. McCalla, L.L. Powers, and E.S. Stutts, *The Police and Missing Children: Findings from a National Survey*, (Research Triangle Park, NC: Research Triangle Institute, 1989), 11.

⁵ National Center for Missing and Exploited Children, *Missing and Abducted Children: A Law Enforcement Guide to Case Investigation and Program Management* (Alexandria, VA, 1994), 93.

⁶ K. Hanfland, R. Keppel, and J. Weis, *Case Management for Missing Children: Homicide Investigation*, Washington State Attorney General's Office, 1997.

⁷ National Center for Missing and Exploited Children, *Investigator's Guide to Missing Child Cases* (Alexandria, VA, 1987), 2.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 6.

⁹ Adopted from the Federal Bureau of Investigation, Critical Incident Response Group, National Center for the Analysis of Violent Crime, *Child Abduction Response Plan*, (Quantico, VA), 15-16.

¹⁰ For more information, agencies can contact the NCAVC coordinator at their local FBI field office.

¹¹ Interview with Supervisory Special Agent Mark Hilts, Federal Bureau of Investigation, NCAVC, March 2, 1999.

¹² *Supra* note 3, 63. Law enforcement officers should consult with their departments' legal advisors to ensure that any search of a residence is legal.

¹³ *Supra* note 9, 17.

¹⁴ *Supra* note 4, 137.