

Missing Children: A General Overview

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Abstract

The phenomenon of missing children is a serious growing concern worldwide, with alarming numbers reported in recent years. The lack of a universally common definition and response to this problem has resulted in inaccurate statistics, with a large number of cases going unreported or under-recognized. Numerous reported cases are successfully resolved, while, regrettably, others have dramatic outcomes and, unfortunately, still others remain unsolved. Identifying the psychological and social factors that contribute to the phenomenon of missing children is crucial for both intervention and prevention efforts. This article emphasizes the need for a comprehensive understanding of the psychological and social factors contributing to the phenomenon of missing children to aid in effective early intervention and prevention.

Keywords

missing children, child protection, categories of missing children, push and pull factors, risk factors, signs and indications, chronic physical and emotional implications, prevention

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Introduction

The number of children who go missing every year on a global scale is increasing, and the outcome of every search is not always positive. According to the International Centre for Missing & Exploited Children (ICMEC <https://www.icmec.org/>) reports, this phenomenon has reached an alarming level worldwide. However, due to the lack of a universally accepted definition of a “missing child” and a consistent approach to addressing this issue, there is a dearth of reliable statistics regarding its magnitude. The international community has been unable to reach a consensus on a common definition of a missing child or on how to effectively investigate cases involving missing children. ICMEC, <https://www.icmec.org/resources/terminology/> defines a “missing child” as “any person under the age of 18 whose whereabouts are unknown”. In accordance with the International Convention on the Rights of the Child <https://www.unicef.org/media/52626/file>, the term “child” refers to “every human being below the age of 18 years unless under the law applicable to the child, majority is attained earlier” Article 1, Convention on the Rights of the Child Adopted and opened for signature, ratification, and accession by General Assembly resolution 44/25 of 20 November 1989 entry into force 2 September 1990.

In many countries, there are no statistics on missing children, and, unfortunately, even the available data may be inaccurate due to underreporting or under-recognition of this issue. Additionally, incorrect entry of case details into databases, and the removal of records after a case is resolved further contribute to the inaccuracy of the available information. However, at the European level, efforts have been made to enhance operational collaboration by establishing a single telephone number for missing children - the 116000 European Hotline for Missing Children. This hotline provides a free service for reporting cases of missing minors, operating 24 hours a day. It efficiently collects reports and data sent to police forces and forwards the information to relevant law enforcement agencies. Available in: <https://missingchildreneurope.eu/hotline-116-000/>

On January 7, 2020, the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe <https://pace.coe.int/en/> adopted a resolution emphasizing the need for states to take proactive measures to prevent cases of disappearances. A study conducted by the European Commission (<https://cordis.europa.eu/article/id/429893-harnessing-collective-intelligence-to-find-missing-children>) reveals that approximately 250,000 children and adolescents go missing every year, highlighting the alarming frequency at which this occurs (equivalent to one child disappearing every two minutes). In 2018, Germany, the UK, France, and Spain were identified as the countries with the highest number of missing children, while Greece reported the lowest figures among European countries (https://home-affairs.ec.europa.eu/system/files/2020-04/inform_missing_uam_final_15042020_0.pdf). Furthermore, in 2002, the U.S.A. and certain regions of Canada adopted a national emergency alert system, known as the AMBER Alert (AMBER (an acronym for America’s Missing: Broadcast Emergency Response) stands for America’s Missing: Broadcast Emergency Response and was created as a legacy to

9-year-old Amber Hagerman, who was kidnapped while riding her bicycle in Arlington, TX, and then brutally murdered. Other states and communities soon set up their own AMBER plans as the idea was adopted across the nation. Available in: <https://amberalert.ojp.gov/about>, specifically designed to address suspected child abductions. This system has been developed to disseminate important information and actively involve the community in the search for missing children. It utilizes various communication channels, such as radio, television, cell phones, and electronic road signs to send regular alert messages. By activating this network, valuable information can be rapidly circulated to raise awareness among the public. In March 2011, the same alert system, with some variations, was also adopted by countries like Australia (Queensland) and Malaysia, which saw an increase in community participation when a missing child case involved the use of the “AMBER” tag. Between 1996 and 2009, AMBER alerts successfully helped in identifying 495 abducted children [1]. Moreover, Greece (<https://www.hamogelo.gr/gr/el/eksafanisma-paidia-amber-alert-hellas/>), along with other European countries, including Italy, Belgium, France, Portugal, and Romania, is currently implementing a common automated alert system. This joint effort is part of the ECAAS (European Child Alert Automated System <https://childhub.org/en>) Daphne Project, aimed at enhancing child safety. In Greece, the Smile of the Child (<https://childhelplineinternational.org/greece-the-smile-of-the-child/>) organization is actively involved in this initiative. The statistics regarding missing children are concerning. In the year 2018 alone, the U.S.A. reported 424,066 cases of missing children, while 26 European helplines received 91,655 calls regarding missing children, and Spain witnessed 33,467 children going missing. Annually, 25,000 children and young people go missing in Australia, more than 80,000 in the U.K. and around 40,000 in Brazil.

As reported by Missing Children Europe (<https://missing-childreneurope.eu/>), a staggering number of 18.000 migrant and refugee children went missing in Europe between 2018 and 2020, an equivalent of nearly 17 children disappearing every day. However, it is important to acknowledge that data on missing migrant and refugee children are underestimated because children in migration are underreported.

Categories of Missing Children

According to the International Center for Missing and Exploited Children (<https://www.icmec.org/resources/terminology/>), the classification of “missing children” encompasses various categories, including but not limited to:

Family abduction. This refers to the act of taking or hiding one or more children from a parent, other family member, guardian, or representative in violation of the custody and/or visitation rights of another parent or family member. Family abductions occur frequently and have also been observed in Greece.

Non-family abduction. This category entails the forcible and unauthorized taking of a child by someone who is not a family member.

Lost, injured, or otherwise missing/worrying disappearance. This category refers to a child who has gone missing under unknown and difficult-to-determine circumstances, such as when a young child becomes disoriented or encounters an accident.

Abandoned or unaccompanied minor (<https://www.amnesty.org/en/documents/mde14/2759/2020/en/>). An abandoned or unaccompanied minor refers to a situation where a child or an adolescent is not accompanied by an adult who is legally responsible for them. This includes scenarios where a child is travelling alone without custody permission, situations where children are separated from their parents or their caregivers due to emergencies, cases involving immigrant or refugee children, and instances where children have been abandoned or otherwise left without adult care.

Apart from the aforementioned classifications, another category that should be considered is *runaways*. Over time, teenage runaways constitute the largest category of disappearances in Greece. According to the “European Federation for Missing and Sexually Exploited Children” (Missing Children Europe, MCE), the term “runaway” is used to describe any minor who voluntarily separates themselves from the individual or individuals who have legal responsibility for their care, the child protection agency that has taken them into custody, or the person appointed as their guardian.

Reasons of Children’s Disappearance

Children and adolescents can go missing for a variety of reasons and it is important for countries to further clarify this phenomenon by classifying disappearances according to risk and circumstances [2]. When we discuss child disappearance on a global scale, we are referring to a heterogeneous group of individuals, whose vulnerability may be exacerbated by factors related to their age, neglect, exploitation and abuse, mental illness, or the risk of suicide.

The reasons why children and adolescents go missing are usually divided into *push* and *pull* factors, which may be combined (e.g., Oxfordshire Safeguarding Children Board, n.d.; Safeguarding Network, 2023) [e.g., 3, 4]. (<https://www.state.gov/reports/2023-trafficking-in-persons-report/>, <https://www.oscb.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2019/04/Push-and-pull-factors-poster.pdf>, https://www.for-families.co.uk/?gclid=C-jwKCAiAq4KuBhA6EiwArMAw1lwgg0qxOvv69_hPWuss7X-bGyUI30MY_tgHINPz-9PZPPLCLpR0PSRoCwQ4QAvD_BwE).

Push factors refer to the circumstances that compel children and adolescents to leave their homes or other safe environments. These factors can include instances of parental abuse and mistreatment (physical, emotional, or sexual), parental rejection and neglect, along with cruel or violent punishments. The absence of parental bonding and emotional care, as well as the lack of positive parental role models, can also play a significant role. Inadequate parent-child communication, an unstable family environment, tensions within the family, and changes in family structure, such as parental divorce, are further factors that can push children and adolescents away. Domestic violence, parental alcohol and substance misuse, parental

mental health issues, and financial problems within the family can also contribute to this push. Moreover, problems related to school and/or peers, bullying, social rejection or isolation, and physical or learning impairments can be additional push factors. Experiencing bereavement or loss, efforts to escape forced marriage and female genital mutilation, or issues related to childcare placement are also among the factors that can contribute to children and adolescents leaving their homes or safe environments.

Factors that *pull* children or adolescents to leave their homes or another safe environment, usually in the belief that their life will be improved, can include the inclination to follow a family member, the pressure to follow peers or a romantic partner, the emergence of runaway tendencies during adolescence, the need for freedom, independence and exploration, the susceptibility to criminal exploitation, sexual seduction and exploitation, the involvement of negative peer relationships, the engagement in antisocial and delinquent behavior, the misuse of alcohol and substances, the manipulation by extremist organizations, the desire to participate in or join a gang, and the urge to visit family or a familiar area when in foster care or residing in an institution situated in a remote location.

Certain locations and settings may also increase the likelihood of children getting lost, such as bustling and crowded areas, like concerts, festivals, and cultural and sporting events. Additionally, places with many entrances/exits and many hiding spots, like shopping centers and airports, can also increase the risk. Outdoor exploration areas where there is no supervision, such as theme parks, and open spaces where orientation is easily lost, like forests and long beaches, are also danger zones. Moreover, public places where one parent supervises more than one child simultaneously can pose a higher risk of children getting lost (Laws.com, 2023; MissingKids.ca., n.d.). <https://children-laws.laws.com/child-abduction/child-abduction-prevention> <https://missingkids.ca/en/how-can-we-help-lost-child/risk-indicators/>

Risks Factors

Children or teenagers who go missing are exposed to various risks and dangers:

Child trafficking. Child trafficking involves the abduction of children for enslavement, forced labor, and exploitation. This includes “the recruitment, transportation, transfer, harboring, and/or receipt” of children [5]. Children are forced to leave their homes using persuasion, threats, violence, and abuse of power. In many cases, these children are sold and often they are not sold just once but multiple times, even online [6]. (<https://missingchildreneurope.eu/> <https://humantraffickingfront.org/human-trafficking-front-news-and-updates/>)

Full report available at: <https://www.weprotect.org/global-threat-assessment-23/>.

To avoid detection and arrest, trafficking rings now prefer to entice children and adolescents through the internet, using platforms like chatrooms or social media to establish contact. Next, they arrange meetings at specific locations indicated by

them and then they erase their electronic traces (e.g., Human Trafficking Front). According to UNICEF [7], 1.2 million children are illegally trafficked worldwide each year, accounting for one-third of all human trafficking victims. Of these victims, 66% are girls (Save the Children, Annual Report, <https://www.savethechildren.org/content/dam/usa/reports/annual-report/annual-report/save-the-children-annual-report-2020.pdf>).

Shockingly, 40% of child trafficking cases begin with the voluntary involvement of children's relatives (International Organization for Migration <https://www.iom.int/>). At the hands of the traffickers' children encounter physical or severe aggression nearly twice as frequently as adults [8].

Sexual abuse and exploitation. Sexual abuse and exploitation refer to the act of coercing individuals, particularly those who have not yet reached the age of consent, into engaging in any unlawful sexual acts or observing such acts. This also includes the distribution or viewing of sexual depictions or videos (Council of Europe <https://rm.coe.int/16800d3832>). Any form of unwanted sexual activity, including photography or videography, consumption of pornographic material, exhibition of genitals, physical contact, or sexual intercourse, is considered sexual abuse under all circumstances. Coercion can take various forms, such as physical force, manipulation, harassment, threats, intimidation, or the use of alcohol and drugs [9]. Often, this despicable behavior is practiced within the context of child sex trafficking and includes the sexual exploitation of children and adolescents, such as prostitution, in exchange for basic needs like food, shelter, money, drugs, or protection (National Center for Missing and Exploited Children <https://www.missingkids.org/home>). According to recent data from the U.S. National Center for Missing and Exploited Children, child trafficking for sexual purposes accounted for 19% of reported cases of missing children in 2021 (National Center for Missing and Exploited Children).

NCMEC's CyberTipline is the nation's centralized reporting system for the online exploitation of children, including child sexual abuse material, child sex trafficking and online enticement. In 2021, the CyberTipline received more than 29.3 million reports. 29.1 million of these reports were from Electronic Service Providers that report instances of apparent child sexual abuse material that they become aware of on their systems. Higher numbers of reports can be indicative of a variety of things including larger numbers of users on a platform or how robust an ESP's efforts are to identify and remove abusive content. NCMEC applauds ESPs that make identifying and reporting this content a priority and encourages all companies to increase their reporting to NCMEC. These reports are critical to helping remove children from harmful situations and to stopping further victimization. Available in: <https://www.missingkids.org/content/dam/missingkids/pdfs/2021-reports-by-esp.pdf>

Criminal exploitation. Criminal exploitation refers to the manipulation, coercion, and control of minors to engage in illegal activities for the benefit of adults and/or their peers. This includes the exploitation of children and adolescents for forced labor in cannabis factories, involvement in the sale, storage, and trafficking of drugs, the illegal transfer of money and counterfeit money and goods, possession and trafficking

of weapons, and engagement in theft, robbery, burglary, and financial fraud, such as benefit fraud. For further information on the use of child soldiers worldwide, see the website of the Coalition to Stop the Use of Child Soldiers. Available in: www.child-soldiers.org. Amnesty International is a member of the Coalition to Stop the Use of Child Soldiers. Also, it encompasses the recruitment of minors into gangs and criminal organizations. Through these illegal acts, children and adolescents are persuaded that they will gain elevated social status and respect, being placed at high risk of abuse. Furthermore, many of these young individuals become addicted to drug use from an early age (e.g., Berkshire West Safeguarding Children Partnership <https://www.berkshirewestsafeguardingchildren-partnership.org.uk/scp>). Unfortunately, authorities often perceive children and adolescents coerced into criminal activity as criminals themselves rather than recognizing them as victims of exploitation (The Children's Society <https://www.childrensociety.org.uk/information/professionals/resources/good-childhood-report-2021>). This approach fails to acknowledge the underlying manipulation and control these vulnerable individuals endure. The United Nations (UN) Convention on the Rights of the Child states that arrest, detention or imprisonment of a child must be "in accordance with the law and shall be used only as a measure of last resort and for the shortest appropriate period of time. Article 37(b) of the Convention on the Rights of the Child *Organ trafficking.* The shortage of available human organs for transplantation falls significantly short of the demand, creating thus a profitable opportunity that criminal organizations have identified. Consequently, there has been a surge in the illegal trade and trafficking of organs, including those harvested from children. Regrettably, the trafficking of children's organs is now a sad reality. Although the issue of organ trafficking is currently not of serious concern in Europe according to existing estimates, the potential for medical advancements to continue increasing the gap between organ supply and demand is a pressing issue that raises significant alarm (Social, Health and Family Affairs Committee). This issue of when a person under 18 can be said to have joined an army or armed group "voluntarily" should be assessed critically. The Optional Protocol to the Convention on the Rights of the Child (Annex 1 to General Assembly Resolution A/RES/54/263 of 25 May 2000) includes safeguards to ensure that recruitment is genuinely voluntary, for example, recruitment should take place with the informed consent of the young person's parents or guardians, the young person should be fully informed of the duties involved in military service, and should supply proof of his or her age.

Illegal adoption. According to the United Nations, the illegal adoption of children refers to adoptions resulting from criminal acts, such as abduction, sale, and trafficking. Adoptions resulting from crimes such as abduction and sale of and trafficking in children, fraud in the declaration of adoptability, falsification of official documents or coercion, and any illicit activity or practice such as lack of proper consent by biological parents, improper financial gain by intermediaries and ... Available in: <https://www.ohchr.org/en/special-procedures/sr-sale-of-children/illegal-adoptions>. Additionally, illegal adop-

tions include instances where official documents are falsified, intermediaries benefit financially unfairly, and birth parents do not provide proper consent.

Slavery. Child slavery remains a grave issue in today's world, with a distressing statistic revealing that more than a quarter of the world's slaves are children (End Slavery Now, National Underground Railroad Freedom Center <https://www.endslaverynow.org/>). Modern forms of child slavery include domestic servitude and forced labor, such as in armed conflicts where children are forced to work as cooks, porters, and messengers. Another form is debt bondage, wherein impoverished families may hand over their children to someone to settle outstanding debts, subjecting them to years of labor until the debt is paid off. In 1921 the ILO passed the first convention on child labor setting the minimum age for employment in industry at 14 years. More recently, increased attention has focused on eradicating the worst forms of child labor that are likely to harm "the child's health or physical, mental, spiritual, moral or social development" including child soldering, participation in the sex trade and other work that exposes children to the risk of physical or psychological harm. In 1992 the ILO ratified Convention 182 on the Worst Forms of Child Labor. However, many countries have not ratified these conventions, and as of 2008, 115 million children worldwide were engaged in hazardous work (ILO, 2010).

Additionally, child slavery can take the form of serfdom, where children are forced into begging on the streets, exposing them not only to many obvious dangers every day but also to the risk of getting involved in petty crime and prostitution. Moreover, early forced marriages pose a severe threat to children's rights, depriving them of their childhood and their right to education. This practice significantly hinders their potential for normal growth and development, placing them at risk of sexual abuse, rape, physical and psychological violence, early pregnancy, maternal morbidity, and maternal mortality (e.g., Plan International <https://plan-international.org/>; United Nations Statement to the 43rd session of the United Nations Sub-Commission on the Prevention of Discrimination and Protection of Minorities, delivered on 20 August 1991. AI Index IOR 41/06/91).

Female genital mutilation. Female genital mutilation (FGM) is an act of gender-based violence rooted in the foundations of gender inequality. It is commonly referred to as female circumcision or cutting and is also known by various other terms including sunna, gudniin, halalays, tahur, megrez, and khitan (<https://www.nhs.uk/>). This abhorrent practice not only violates the fundamental rights of girls but also severely limits their prospects in terms of health, education, and employment, creating, consequently, great uncertainty about their future and putting their lives at risk (EduCare <https://www.educare.co.uk/>).

Recruitment and radicalization. The term radicalization refers to the adoption of extremist ideologies, predominately of a religious nature, which could subsequently lead to the commission of extremist and terrorist acts, directly or indirectly. Nowadays, this phenomenon is mainly instigated by the internet and social media. Missing children are at high risk of recruitment and

radicalization. As their absence persists, they spend more time with individuals who may involve them in radical or extremist activities, while lacking the protective factors of family security and care. Furthermore, the recruitment and exploitation of children in combat is commonly observed during times of war (e.g., United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime). (ILO Convention No.182 of June 1999 on the Prohibition and Immediate Action for the Elimination of the Worst Form of Child Labour includes the prohibition of forced or compulsory recruitment of children under 18 for use in armed conflict).

Murder. Based on data provided by the Criminal Division of the Washington State Attorney General's Office, an analysis of missing murder cases revealed that females accounted for 74% of the victims, and the mean age of these victims was estimated to be 11 years [10]. It is deeply troubling to observe that in many instances, the main intention of the abductor is initially to commit sexual assault.

Sings and Indications

There are certain signs and indications that serve as warnings, signaling the potential disappearance of children and teenagers: they show changes in their typical mood and behavior, such as feeling anxious, experiencing depression, becoming irritable, withdrawing from social interactions, and isolating themselves. They may also exhibit self-injurious behaviors, like cutting or scratching, substance abuse, or dangerous sexual behavior. Moreover, they appear excessively fatigued throughout the day. Additionally, they tend to be secretive, telling lies, avoiding conversations, and seeking attention. They may make threats or talk about leaving their house, frequently skip school or have unexcused absences, avoid meeting their friends, and fail to attend scheduled appointments. They spend significant amounts of time online and communicate with strangers, taking precautions to hide their mobile phone or computer screen when approached by their parents. They like to wander on their own, displaying risky behaviors in search of adventure, and staying out late at night, particularly on school days. Furthermore, they do not inform their parents or guardians of their whereabouts and visit unfamiliar places or areas.

On the other hand, younger children often enjoy playing hide and seek. In instances of family abduction, the motivations behind such actions taken by parents towards their children, especially when they are very young, are diverse and multifaceted. Such parents may express intentions of disappearing with the minor or may exhibit a history of hiding the child's location. They may also be devoid of monetary or emotional ties to the local area, or nurture doubts or beliefs regarding previous episodes of maltreatment of their offspring, and their apprehensions may be endorsed by their social circle, including friends and family. Moreover, they could potentially exhibit traits of narcissism or sociopathy and might have had past encounters with legal issues. Additionally, they could potentially be unmarried, may have a restricted level of education, be economically underprivileged, and be part of ethnically diverse groups [11].

Implications

Long-term implications arise when children and adolescents are separated from their parents or guardians and familiar surroundings. Their disappearance leads to the development of chronic physical conditions and potentially permanent disabilities. For example, they may suffer from pityriasis, a respiratory disease caused by exposure to toxic substances, like lead and mercury, during forced labor in mines or industries. Additionally, sitting in cramped positions in factories or crawling in confined spaces in mines can result in spinal deformities [12] (e.g., North Yorkshire Safeguarding Children Partnership <https://www.safeguardingchildren.co.uk/>). Apart from these physical consequences, missing children and adolescents also face other significant challenges. They may develop dependencies on alcohol and various substances, leading to addiction, struggle to form secure attachments and healthy relationships, and show stunted psycho-emotional, cognitive, social, and moral development.

As a result, they frequently experience emotions of shame, guilt, worthlessness, and a sense of helplessness, often accompanied by a greater risk of developing post-traumatic stress, anxiety, depression, and suicidal behavior. Forming a sense of identity becomes problematic, as does receiving proper schooling and education. Moreover, missing children and adolescents often exhibit aggressive behavior, participate in acts of violence and dangerous activities, and engage in unsafe sexual practices. As long as they remain missing, they are more susceptible to becoming themselves perpetrators of child abduction, abuse, exploitation, and even mistreatment of their own children in the future, perpetuating this way the vicious cycle of abuse and exploitation. Additionally, their circumstances may lead them to homelessness, poverty, and a lack of legitimate sources of income [13].

Impact

Regarding the psychological impact, apart from a few studies [14, 15], there is little knowledge about the coping strategies employed by parents of victims to deal effectively with the pain of abduction. Research [16] has indicated that any form of criminal victimization can have a severe psychological and emotional impact, particularly if it involves a violation of a personal relationship or deprives victims of their sense of personal control. Commonly reported psychological reactions among relatives of missing persons include depression, anxiety, post-traumatic stress, and prolonged grief [17, 18]. Although not as severe as physical torture, the trauma of disappearance can induce similar effects, leading to what is known as the “torture syndrome” in family members [19]. The negative impacts of disappearance are also particularly evident in children and adolescents found after being missing, as they are the main victims, especially if they have experienced abuse. Several supportive interventions can be provided to victims, either as initial intervention or as long-term support, to help them cope with the pain and strive for healing and progress.

Article 39 of the CRC 1989 states that “... parties shall take all appropriate measures to promote physical and psychological recovery and social reintegration of a child victim of: any form of neglect, exploitation and abuse; torture or any form of cruel, inhuman and degrading treatment or punishment; or armed conflicts. Such recovery and reintegration shall take place in an environment which fosters the health, self-respect and dignity of the child....”

Prevention Strategies

Researchers have not adequately studied the phenomenon of missing children despite a strong focus on studies related to child abuse. As the latter is associated with a high proportion of disappearances, strategies to combat the phenomenon should also consider research on child abuse. Doesum [20] and McTavish [21] both highlight the importance of successful recruitment strategies and the identification of children at risk, respectively. Doesum [20] suggests that successful recruitment strategies for prevention programs aimed at children of parents facing mental health challenges can be achieved through building relationships, providing diverse information, and involving families. McTavish [21] emphasizes the need for accurate identification strategies, particularly concerning child maltreatment.

Offender management and school-based educational programs are the primary strategies for preventing childhood sexual abuse, with the latter focusing on teaching children skills to identify and respond to dangerous situations [22]. Diverse strategies can be employed in child abuse prevention programs to identify, screen, and engage high-risk families. The characteristics of staff members and the relationships within the program play a vital role in achieving success [23]. The top priority recommendation of the United States Advisory Board on Child Abuse and Neglect was to develop programs that facilitated the development and safety of neighborhoods by establishing Prevention Zones to improve social and physical environments with high rates of child maltreatment [24].

Understanding the characteristics of children who go missing on a regular basis may allow services to better protect and meet their needs [12]. Keri et al. [25] researchers suggest that several factors act as predictors of safe child recovery after a child goes missing, such as multiple victim incidents, last appearance at school, the victim's relationship with the perpetrator, and the initial recording of the incident as an abduction and not just missing. Age and the presence of autism spectrum disorder (ASD) are factors that do not favor safe recovery.

Conclusion

The phenomenon of missing children extends far beyond mere statistics, encompassing a complicated and alarming issue. The psychological and social aspects of this crisis delve into the profound repercussions experienced by both the families left behind and the missing children themselves. As we have

witnessed, it is impossible to measure the immense emotional burden that trauma imposes on parents, siblings, and communities. Moreover, this burden can leave a lasting negative impact on mental well-being throughout one's lifetime. Society must acknowledge the complexity of this problem and actively strive to establish comprehensive support systems. This entails improving the effectiveness of law enforcement organizations in promptly reacting to and handling crimes, as well as supporting preventative initiatives like education and awareness campaigns. Furthermore, fostering an environment of open and empathetic dialogue is crucial.

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