

The Tragedy of America's Missing Children

It happens in stores, near schools, even in the family home—youngsters stolen from those who love them.

Ann Gotlib, 12, a piano virtuoso and Russian émigré, vanished without a trace last summer from a shopping center near her Louisville home.

Ricky Barnett, 2, was last seen in August, 1982, playing near a chicken coop on a farm where his grandparents work outside Grangeville, Idaho.

Angela and Jodi Fout, ages 5 and 2, were in the care of a baby-sitter when two men forced their way into the children's Ohio home and abducted them.

These children are among an alarming number of youngsters reported missing each year—kidnapped by strangers or taken by parents in bitter custody disputes. Their plight has prompted new steps by police, self-help groups and government agencies.

Experts estimate that some 1.8 million children are missing for varying periods each year. About 90 percent run away for a few days and return home. But at least 100,000 are abducted by parents in custody fights, and 20,000 to 50,000 are snatched by strangers—most never to be seen again.

"We find more stolen cars and stray animals than missing children each year," remarks Michael Agopian, a California professor who has studied the problem.

Many of these children meet a tragic fate. Roughly 10 percent are sexually abused, says John Rabun, head of the Exploited and Missing Child Unit of the Louisville Department of Human Services. Adds Rabun: "Any missing child is at risk and in danger."

Says Omaha private investigator Dennis Whalen, who has worked on thousands of child-disappearance cases: "Children have become a product. Some people are willing to pay \$20,000 for a child. Mostly, this is for illegal purposes—much of it for

reasons of sex. Children as young as 5 or 6 are being used in pornography."

Culprits in these crimes even include child-care workers, teachers, police and social-service workers. "The credentials of these people aren't checked closely enough when they are hired," says Rabun. "I get tired of arresting my colleagues."

Many stolen youngsters never see their parents again. Even in cases in which a parent takes a child from a former spouse, the child is returned only 10 percent of the time.

Deadly toll. More tragic is the fate of those kidnapped by strangers. Citing research by a center named for his son, John Walsh of Fort Lauderdale estimates that 80 percent of such youngsters are murdered within two days of their disappearance. His 6-year-old son, Adam—subject of an NBC television movie on October 10—was killed in July, 1981, soon after being snatched from a department store.

Abducted children usually are under 12, but often are up to 17, especially when strangers kidnap them, authorities say. Victims range from the very poor to the upper class, come from every race and are just as likely to be

taken in big cities as they are in small communities and rural areas.

Police and social-service workers say some locales are especially dangerous: Carnivals, fairs, shopping malls. Tots disappear from shopping carts at grocery stores or when separated from parents in the aisles.

Youngsters often are abducted from areas thought to be safe—walking to or from school, in neighborhood playgrounds, back yards or, as in one California case, a hospital delivery room.

In St. Paul, a 6-year-old disappeared after asking to go to the bathroom at church. Sarah Avon, also 6, vanished in 1981 from in front of her home in Joliet, Ill., where she had been playing with her sister and several friends.

Nyleen Marshall, who would have had her fifth birthday September 18, was reported missing in June of this year. She vanished from a mountain area while on an outing with her parents near their home in Clancy, Mont. Says her mother, Nancy: "Nyleen was trained about the woods and safety. I know she did not wander off."

In another case still being probed by the Federal Bureau of Investigation, 3-year-old Ryan Burton of Breckenridge, Tex., was snatched from her bed two years ago while a baby-sitter and older brother slept. Ryan's parents were away on an overnight trip.

No matter how a disappearance occurs, the impact on the family of a missing child is devastating. Nancy Marshall says Nyleen's 2-year-old sister has lost



Sarah Avon

On the Long List of Lost Youngsters—



Nyleen Marshall



Cinda Pallett



Ricky Barnett



Ann Gotlib

her best friend and still has trouble sleeping. Reve Walsh, mother of the murdered Adam, won't let her new daughter, Meghan, out of her sight. She repeatedly checks her crib at night.

The trauma surrounding a missing child can lead to tension and bickering in the family and sometimes to divorce. Other families grow closer because of their shared agony.

Some parents continue to display photographs of the child or leave the youngster's room undisturbed. Many would like to move away to put the painful memories behind but hesitate to do so because they want the child to be able to find them.

Lasting effects. For children who survive such abductions, the psychological wounds can take years to heal. A young man who was abducted at age 12 and sexually abused is still getting psychiatric help at age 22. A 3-year-old Colorado girl stolen and sexually assaulted gets psychiatric counseling three times a week. Her attacker is out on bond.

Children taken in custody disputes also can suffer. Although some are taken by loving parents disappointed at having to give them up, others are forced to live with parents who are spiteful or abusive, notes New York attorney Doris Jonas Freed.

Researcher Agopian found that children stolen in custody battles often are forced to live a fugitive lifestyle. Frequently, they are told lies—that the other parent does not care for them any more or, worse, that the parent has

An NBC movie on missing children helped reunite Justin Clark with his mother.



Carnivals and other crowded events pose special dangers.

Ways to Protect Your Children

Experts say it is far easier to prevent a child from being taken than to find missing youngsters. Their advice to parents:

- Never leave a small child alone in a grocery cart or car—even for a minute.
- Be sure your child's day-care center or school will not release the youngster to anyone but you or someone you designate.
- Warn children never to go anywhere with anyone—even a friend—without your permission.
- Have the child tell you when any adult asks

him or her to keep a "secret," asks too many questions or wants to give a gift.

- Teach children to call out or to flee from anyone who bothers them.

- Warn youngsters not to let anyone know they are home alone.

- Teach a young child his or her full name, address and phone number. Show how to place a long-distance call.

- Know your child's blood type and have on hand a set of the child's fingerprints, current photograph, dental records and hair sample.

died. Even when they are found and returned to the parent with legal custody, they are likely to be distrustful, suffer from nightmares and have difficulty mixing with other boys and girls.

Whether children are taken by parents or strangers, finding them can be an arduous process. Parents normally turn first to local police, who sometimes delay their search—especially for teens—figuring the children are runaways.

Typical was Cinda Pallett, 13, who disappeared while at the Oklahoma State Fair in September, 1981. Despite initial doubts by police, her mother insists that her daughter did not run away. "Cinda was a good student who had a lot to look forward to," says Norma Pallett.

Parents and officials agree that more is being done now to solve the problem. The year-old federal Missing Children's Act requires the FBI to list missing children in a national computer, accessible to most police departments.

Following Senate hearings earlier this year, the Justice Department stepped up searches, and the White House set up a task force.

Several communities have started programs urging parents to fingerprint children as an aid to police, should a youngster ever be missing. Critics of

this practice, citing privacy considerations, argue that parents, rather than police, should keep these records.

Police also are beginning to address the problem of abductions by parents at a faster rate than they did in the past. In addition, states are cooperating more in honoring each other's child-custody orders.

Florida has become a leader in enacting a model law that, among other things, establishes a computer bank listing missing children, provides posters of youngsters and offers a toll-free number for those providing information.

Many efforts to find missing children are spearheaded by parents. After his daughter, Nyleen, disappeared, Kim Marshall founded a nonprofit group to train search-and-rescue dog teams. Says Kim: "If we can spare one family the anguish we have, it will be worth it."

Perhaps the best-known group seeking missing children is Child Find, founded by Gloria Yerkovich in New Paltz, N.Y. For a small fee,

Child Find serves as a central registry for pictures and information about missing children. Missing youngsters or people with leads on them are encouraged to call Child Find's toll-free number, (800) 431-5005. Posters of the children are sent to police departments. The group lists some 2,000 children.

Encouraging results. Authorities say publicity is a key factor both in locating lost children and in making the public aware of the seriousness of the problem. When NBC aired the "Adam" film, the Florida center named after him was flooded with 6,000 calls in the first three days from people pledging more than \$60,000. A missing Arkansas teenager called Child Find with a self-identification after seeing her picture in an article related to the TV movie. Also reunited with his mother was Justin Clark, 3, reported missing a year ago.

This response proves to Child Find's Yerkovich that, with greater awareness, the public can do far more about the problem. "There are people who know where these children are," she says, "but they have to come forward and give us, with full confidentiality, the information they have." □

By JEANNIE THORNTON

"I Think Somebody Has My Child"

SHORT OF DEATH ITSELF, what could be more shocking to a family than having to report a child missing? Yet it happens—to tens of thousands of parents every year.

That painful experience is especially sharp for Ruth Mort, 35. Told by doctors that she couldn't have children, she finally gave birth to a son, Russell, only to lose him on May 4, 1982, when the 2-year-old vanished from the back yard of her mobile home. Below, she tells of the anguish she shares with her husband Robert—and how they keep hope alive.

NIAGARA FALLS, N.Y.

It started as a normal Wednesday. My husband had gone off to work, and little Russell went outside to play, as he often did, in the sandbox of our fenced-in back yard.

He hadn't been gone more than 5 minutes when I went out to check on him. My heart stopped. He was gone! The toys he had taken out were right at the edge of the sand pile. Nothing had been disturbed or played with.

Fear hit me immediately because of the hazardous Niagara River about 150 yards from the rear of our home. But Russell was too tiny to climb the fence, and I don't even think he realized the river was there since other homes blocked his view. Still, I raced down to the riverbank. No sight of him.

I ran back to search among the other trailers in our project. No one had seen Russell. Within minutes, 30 people were roaming the area frantically calling for him.

I notified the sheriff's department, and my sister-in-law called my husband at work. Russell had been gone less than an hour.

Dashed hopes. It was the beginning of what for us has become a nightmare that has no end—a year and a half in which our hopes have been raised and dashed again and again.

Needless to say, we were—and are—obsessed with finding our boy. In the first few days, we had to sit back and let others handle the search because bloodhounds were brought in, and our participation would throw off the scent.

Soon, more than 500 people were looking for Russell—in the fields, under the mobile homes, in utility shacks, in every hole and trash can. They tipped over things you wouldn't think a little boy could get under.

The police dragged the river but it yielded nothing. Not then, and not in the months since. But they refused to go into the homes in our development. They told us that would take dozens of search warrants. Yet I couldn't help thinking, "Someone has him in their trailer."

"Find our boy." My anger and frustration grew because of something else: The police were investigating us. I know now that this is routine because of fears of child abuse, but it was upsetting to have them questioning relatives and friends. We wanted to shout: "We didn't do anything. Just find our boy. Look for him."

Somehow, though, we had to go on. After the first week, my husband had to go back to work. He wasn't going to get paid if he didn't, and I thought at least work would keep his mind off things.

My full-time job became looking for Russell. I circulated posters of him, searched for him in schools, went on talk shows. Friends set up a fund to raise money to help me find him. I wrote letters and made countless calls, looking for any lead.

People would call. Just 10 or 20 minutes ago they had seen a little boy who

looked just like Russell—tiny, blond hair, big brown eyes. He was boarding a bus with a lady in Niagara Falls 4 miles away. Or they saw him at a shopping mall in Buffalo 10 miles away.

My mother-in-law and I would jump in her car and drive wherever this or that sighting was, hoping that "this is the one this time."

Frustrating events. At least six times, we've thought we were getting close. One lady told police of seeing a boy who looked like Russell with a couple in a white Corvette. "Look what we have here," they told her. But the Corvette was never found.

I became suspicious of friends and other people who had admired Russell. I wondered if people who had already raised their kids had taken him for their own or given him to their children. I'd see total strangers on the street and if they smiled at me, I wondered: "Does he or she know something?" I wondered about kindly strangers who were being too nice to me or who called too often wanting to offer help.

Our hearts still jump each time there is a piece of mail, a knock on the door or the telephone rings. With each disappointment, I cry or pray or start smoking again—pack after pack.

I don't know how our marriage has survived it all. We were told at the start to seek counseling, and we have been visited by a minister. Mainly, it's been Robert and I helping each other. I feared he would blame me, but he hasn't and has encouraged me in all my efforts. Still, he has become withdrawn and refuses to talk about Russell with anyone but me. It's as if no one else could possibly understand what we are going through.

I'm told there's a black market for babies—that healthy white males go for \$30,000 or more. If someone does have Russell, our only hope is that it is someone who loves him, but that doesn't stop us from wanting him back. Not even the birth of our daughter in September has changed that. Not knowing where he is, whether he is alive or dead, leaves a terrible hollowness inside that will never be filled.

We've been told we only have a 10 percent chance of finding our child, but I'd be looking if they said it was only 1 percent. Russell, now 4, is a little boy who would come up and say, "I love you, Daddy." Nobody will ever be able to say that just the way he did. We want to hear it again.

