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# Connecting the Dots for Missing and Runaway Children

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Connecting the Dots for Missing and Runaway Children

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### **Abstract**

With the general public's help, the amount of time a youth is missing may lessen greatly. Bringing a youth home as soon as possible would decrease the chances of a youth encountering danger or traumatic events which could lead to emotional and mental struggles in their future. Moreover, focusing on America's ability to rehabilitate youth who have run away and become subject to trauma is very important to creating safer communities; runaway or traumatized youth are at greater risk of chronic criminal involvement, so reducing this trauma may decrease mass incarceration and/or recidivism rates throughout the United States of America. Examining systems the United States currently has in place to increase publicity of missing children's information and barriers the general public may have that affect their willingness to work with law enforcement is vital toward improving these investigations. This research seeks to further understand how the general public could become involved in assisting law enforcement agencies in missing children's investigations. This research focuses on understanding how missing children investigations are conducted, identifying barriers that the general public have to working with law enforcement agencies, and how the public can become involved to expedite such investigations. Interviews with the general public, law enforcement officers, and experts who work with youth who are at risk yield recommendations for enhancing missing children investigations.

**Keywords:** missing children investigations, recovery of missing children, improving law enforcement investigations, AMBER alert investigations, public involvement in missing children investigations

### **Connecting the Dots for Missing and Runaway Children**

Youth go missing or run away from home at an alarmingly high rate. According to The National Center for Missing and Exploited Children, in 2018 there were 424,066 reports of missing children made to and filed with law enforcement in the United States. Shalev, Schaefer, and Morgan (2008) found that most runaways were missing from their homes, which is contrary to what previous research stated that most youth and adults were running away from institutions. Because the brain is not fully developed until the age of 25, it is concerning that youth are the highest age group to be missing or running away. With underdeveloped brains, youth may be subject to more harm than a person with a fully-developed brain while missing, and the long term consequences may be more severe. As such, it is imperative that we quickly recover these youth to avoid potential harm.

One of the most important aspect of a youth's early life that greatly impacts their potential for engaging in negative behaviors, such as running away from home, is their parental figures and the relationships youth have with their parental figures. Travis Hirschi's (1969) attachment theory speaks to the importance of a child connecting and sharing a bond with at least one caregiver. The connection between a caregiver and a child allows the child the possibility of gaining positive self-esteem and strong resiliency traits throughout childhood and into adulthood, as well as giving them the confidence needed to step out of their comfort zones. According to Koback (1999) and Tyler, Cauce, and Whitbeck (2003), hostile or antisocial tendencies and emotional problems may result when such bonds are absent. If positive parental bonds are not created a youth may be more likely to engage in runaway behaviors.

Numerous studies suggest that homeless youth engage in risky behaviors. Runaway youth are more likely to engage in sex, whether this engagement is seen as a necessity for their survival

or was unwarranted. With an increase in sexual victimization, a youth is understood to be more willing to participate, which opens a very dangerous door to being sexually exploited. Greene and colleagues (1999) asked that better services be offered to these youth, for both shelter and educational purposes, to teach youth the risk of potentially being traded or exploited because of the prevalence of this issue. Clearly, the consequences of missing and runaway behaviors are serious.

While understanding the characteristics of youth who go missing and the hardship these children may face is important, less is known about *how* to improve law enforcement efforts toward locating missing children and minimize the harm to these children. This study hopes to understand how specifically law enforcement, clinicians who work with youth, and the general public can unite as one to decrease the amount of time a youth is missing for, in hopes of also decreasing harmful outcomes of remaining missing for long periods of time.

### **Literature Review**

#### *Systems in Place to Assist Police in Finding Missing or Runaway Youth*

Multiple horrific incidents involving children have resulted in the creation and implementation of laws across the United States to increase child safety. For example, the “three-strikes-and-you’re-out law” was created and implemented in California in 1993 in order to prevent against previously convicted felon’s release. The Jacob Wetterling Crimes Against Children and Sexually Violent Offender Registration Act called for the creation of sex offender registries in 1994 to notify the public about potentially dangerous individuals. In 1996, Megan’s Law required all states to notify residents of sex offenders who have committed crimes against youth in their communities. Jessica’s Law, created in 2005, mandated harsh prison terms and lifetime monitoring of offenders who committed a lewd crime against a child under 12 years of

age in Florida. Like Jessica's Law, Carlie's Law was created and implemented in Florida and pushed for stiffer revocation criteria for federal probationers (Griffin & Miller, 2008). All of these laws seek to reduce child victimization and arm communities and law enforcement with the necessary information to protect themselves and their children.

Locating missing youth is often thought of to be the job of local or state police. However, because the number of the general public outweighs the number of police officers on the street, many feel that it only makes sense for the general public to assist in helping police officers locate youth and that we have a communal duty to locate youth together. Depending on the general public is hard but could be considered a necessity in locating missing youth to bring them home in a timely manner.

Other systems are in place to collect data and notify the public about missing and runaway youth so that they can assist law enforcement in the recovery of these children. The National Incidence Studies of Missing, Abducted, Runaway, and Thrownaway Children, also known as NISMART, is a study that is periodically produced to report real-life and real-time numbers of reports of missing children and recoveries over a year's span. Sedlak, Finkelhor, Hammer, and Schultz (2002) identified the outrageously high number of missing and runaway children reports that are due to missing benign explanation. These researchers speak to the necessity of understanding why a youth is missing or has run away to accurately locate the youth in a timely manner. NISMART is publicly available and serves to inform the general public about missing children.

AMBER alert is an emergency response system created to produce information about a missing person by broadcasting across media systems and posting on electronic roadway signs on state highways. The AMBER alert system also includes the make, model, and license plate

of the suspected abductor's car or reports the suspected person's name and photo. The goal is to inform the public of the missing child and potential abductor such that the public can alert law enforcement of any sightings or information to expedite the investigation.

Although this information is important in locating missing youth, Griffin and Miller (2008) worry about the excessive use of the AMBER alert system. Their study finds that 50% of AMBER alerts in 2008 were non-serious familial involved abductions based on miscommunications during custody disputes and 20% were hoaxes or simple misunderstandings. Not only do these researchers believe that the AMBER alert system is overused, specifically for non-serious incidents, they believe it relies too heavily on the public. Furthermore, Sedlak, and colleagues (2002) also find that NISMART proves that AMBER alerts are overused for youth who are viewed as missing or runaways due to minor miscommunications between youth and caretakers. In order for the AMBER alert system to work, reports must be legitimate and law enforcement agencies must expect the public to pay attention to these alerts and be confident and willing to report.

In addition to NISMART and AMBER alert, law enforcement seek help from the public in locating missing children through missing child posters and advertisements. However, Lampinen, Arnal and Hicks (2009) conducted research that provided evidence to suggest that Americans pay little attention to missing and runaway youth reports. In their study, Lampinen and colleagues (2009) chose eight missing children from The National Center of Missing and Exploited Children's webpage for analysis. These eight children's black and white photos with descriptions including their age, gender, weight, ethnicity, date of birth, name, hair color, eye color, information about where the youth went missing from, and other identifying information were posted on a bulletin board at the exit of a supermarket. After shoppers exited the store,

researchers asked them to participate in a study. The study revealed that despite most people believing it was extremely or very important to find missing children, 20% reported they had looked briefly at the posters and 70% reported they did not look at the posters at all. Among these 70%, Caucasian participants admitted to not looking at the posters at all, out of all involved races. Ninety percent of participants reported that they had no intention or had vague intention of looking for the missing youths posted (Lampinen et al., 2009). These findings question the extent to which the public may aid law enforcement in missing child investigations. Lampinen and colleagues (2009) suggest better methods of informing people in a way that is viewable and more easily accessible to them.

Although, the picture of a youth is the most vital part of a missing youth's poster, Brigham, Malpass, Chiroro, and Valentine (1995) found that the majority of people struggled to identify youth who were outside of the race that they are mostly in the presence of; a phenomenon which they named the "other-race effect." Other studies also found evidence for the "other-age-effect", wherein individuals have difficulty identifying people outside of the age group that they identified with (Sporer, 2001). However, people who worked with age groups, outside of their own were more dependable in identifying people of other ages (Kuefner, Cassia, Picozzi, & Bricolo, 2008), suggesting that those who work with youth may be useful in identifying missing children. Grier, Kreiner, and Hudnell's work (2011) suggested that photos portraying youth emotion and cleanliness can help individuals identify youth if the youth is observed with the same emotion and cleanliness as portrayed in the photo. For example, a photo of a child who is clean and smiling for a school portrait is less likely to be identified by the public if that child is dirty and sad or not smiling while missing. This information is important for both police departments and the general public because it ties the knot between what is



lacking in missing children's posters according to the public and also suggests why the general public may not be useful in identifying missing youth.

### *Police Roles in Missing Persons Cases*

Police departments receive reports of missing and runaway youth and are primarily responsible for locating these youth. The role police play in following the policies and procedures for locating and recovering missing and runaway children is very important. One could assume this role is as equally important as the public being made aware of their investigations, policies and procedures, and as the public's role in assisting police. According to Buckley (2012), in order for police departments to become more successful in locating missing persons, they must foster relationships with the victim's family, the community in which they work, and the media.

For police to gather any and all information from a missing person's family, it is essential that members of the community who interact or have interacted with the missing person are comfortable sharing information of the missing person with the police. Police rely on the public to share information about missing youth when conducting these investigations. Research conducted by Sampson and Barusch (1998) about policing suggests that many communities are cynical about police ability to solve crime or act fairly, making them unwilling to cooperate with police or assist in investigations. Tyler and Fagan (2008) suggest that without confidence or trust in the police, community members may not assist law enforcement in locating missing youth. This is especially problematic because the communities with low trust in police are most likely to have children go missing. Low income, inner-city, primarily minority neighborhoods may not have relationships with police that promote collaboration in investigations (Tyler & Fagan 2008). Police departments work to decipher important information from communities to begin their

investigation and foster bonds with community members to jointly solve missing person investigations.

In missing person cases, there are several strains the relationship between police departments and victims' families which present difficulty in solving these cases. These issues include: poor treatment of missing person's family members, poor communication skills with missing person's family members especially in regards to the police department's policies and procedures, low alignment with providing support for family members, discouragement of making and keeping the public aware of the missing person's case providing a further barrier between community engagement, and complicating the media's role in publicizing the missing person's case (Buckley, 2012). Any or all of these challenges obstruct investigations and may increase the time of recovering youth. Tyler and Fagan (2008) similarly found that cooperation with the police is directly correlated with police department's procedures feeling justified by the community and these procedures being communicated with the community. Without a relationship between police officers and their community, not only will the process of investigation and locating missing persons be elongated, but the general public's willingness to assist the police with any police matters decreases. It must also be noted that time is of the essence with missing person's cases and if a family is unaware of the policies and procedures of their local or state police department, they may be less likely to report a person missing in a timely manner, which can ultimately threaten the safety of the missing person. The police must share information that pertains to locating a missing person with the public to create community-based "on-the-look-out" efforts, which may increase the likelihood of a person being located. Given the harms potentially facing missing children, longer investigations or communication issues between the police, public, and media are problematic.

Bridging the gap between police and missing person's families, their community, and the media will be no easy task. However, if police departments build positive relationships with their communities, they may be able to utilize the public as outlets and partners, thus decrease investigation time and harm to youth (Buckley, 2012). Scholars recommend that if police officers receive training on fair treatment of people, this includes creating and implementing communication tactics, informing families on how they can utilize support services (Mazerolle et al., 2013). Police can also increase the communities awareness of prevention techniques, increase the public's knowledge of web pages, increase their skill and knowledge of the responsibilities they have as a community, and producing guidelines for social media sharing in missing persons cases, in order to bridge the gap.

### **The Present Study**

The presents study explores ways to bridge the gap between the public, clinicians who work with youth, and the police in missing children investigations. The recommendations made by Buckley (2012) are examined to see which are feasible, and to identify challenges toward collaboration between the relevant parties. The ultimate goal is to understand law enforcement perceptions of public assistance and public willingness to engage with and cooperate with missing children investigations, toward improving investigations and reducing harm to missing and runaway children.

Understanding the systems that the United States has in place to help inform the public about missing children and barriers the general public face to interact with the police are vital parts of engaging the general public to assist law enforcement agencies in missing children cases. However, it is also important to see what the general public knows about missing children and

their ability to use information that is publicly available to determine how helpful the general public can be in missing children investigations. Answering these questions can identify problems that need to be solved and/or break barriers to allow the public to utilize the systems we have in place and to create a comfortable and informative environment that the general public is happy to assist their law enforcement agencies. The goal of this research is make recommendations as to how investigations of missing children can be improved such that youth are located in a timely matter, thus decreasing their chances of encountering danger and traumatic events that could contribute to emotional and mental shortcomings in their future.

### **Methodology**

The purpose of the current study is to understand what law enforcement, clinicians who work with youth, and the general public believe will help them retain information about missing children investigations, to increase their efforts in helping locate missing children. Volunteered participants within the general public and practitioners in the field were asked questions about how much knowledge does the public have regarding missing children investigations, how willing are the public to assist the police in recovering missing children, and what kind of help can the public provide to police and experts in terms of identifying and recovering missing children. Ultimately, the goal is to determine how can missing children investigations be improved. It was expected that the general public are not likely to assist law enforcement in helping to locate missing children due to the lack of exposure or access to posters and information of missing children.

### *Measures*

The current study measures several concepts related to knowledge of at-risk youth, knowledge of law enforcement investigations, use of social media and sources of information,

and knowledge of runaways and missing children investigations. Each measure is operationalized as semi-structured interview question(s). Conceptual and operational definitions are provided below. For a full list of interview questions, see *Appendix A*.

*At-risk youth* are defined as youth with behavioral, emotional, mental instabilities that could potentially put them at risk of not obtaining skills to become a fully functioning adult. These youth are more likely than others to run away from home, be involved in juvenile delinquency, and fail at school. To assess *Knowledge of At-Risk Youth*, volunteered participants were first asked if they had ever worked with youth or youth who are at risk. If so, the investigator would request the volunteered participant explain their role and experiences. If participants had not had experience with at-risk youth directly, they would be asked if they would consider a position in that field, and why or why not.

The general public and practitioners in the field's *Use of Social Media* is important because social media can be used as a mainstream way of receiving public service announcements. *Social media* is defined as websites and applications that enable users to create and share content or to participate in social networking. To capture usage of social media, interviewees were asked questions such as, do you use social media and if so, which application/s. Additional questions involve how often volunteered participants watch the news and if they were looking for information on a particular topic, how would they find the information you are searching for.

Assessing the general public and practitioners' *Knowledge of Missing Children and Runaways* is also vital to this study. This is because it will shed light on what information is missing and what information is needed to help the public to be drawn into missing children. Volunteered participant's knowledge of runaways is defined through asking questions such as

how often do you think children run away or go missing in the US, how often do you see missing children reports, have you ever sought out this information, what makes a missing child's poster memorable, do you think that increasing the number of visual posters and overall increasing awareness of missing children is important to help locate them.

Discovering how the general public and practitioners in the field believe they could assist law enforcement in missing children investigations is important because this information conveys how willing they are to engage with law enforcement to accompany them in finding missing children. The study plans to capture these details with questions such as do they know the procedures of police departments in locating missing children, would they be willing to assist in the procedure of locating missing children, if they had information about runaway and missing children more readily available, how would they use it.

Some interview questions are unique to the volunteered participant's field of work, and therefore were asked of certain groups. For instance, police officers were not asked: Do you know the procedures of police departments in locating missing children. Police officers will be asked: Do you think the public's efforts in assisting with locating missing children, as opposed to, do you think police departments would like the public's help in assisting with locating missing children and would you be willing to help police or law enforcement locate missing children?

### *Sampling*

A quota sample was used to obtain interview participants. A quota sample is a non-probability sampling strategy wherein the researcher identifies groups of research participants with specific features (e.g., age, gender, occupation) and convenience samples subjects from within each group until a target number is reached (Given, 2008). The targeted volunteered

participants for the current study are people who are typically involved in missing persons cases (e.g., police), people who work in specialized fields with children and their families (therapists, social workers, teachers, correctional officers, residential treatment workers, etc.) and members of the general public who may assist in or know about missing children cases. These volunteered participants were targeted because the overall goal of the current study is to further understand how these groups can work together and how the public can become more involved with law enforcement to have better results in locating missing children, with the ultimate goal of decreasing the chances that the child encounters traumatic events. Police and people who work in specialized fields have general knowledge about policies and procedures, and what works and what does not for the system of the field they work within. To obtain these different perspectives and variation in responses, the quota sample was specified to include six practitioners who work with at-risk youth, three law enforcement agents, and three members of the general public. The total number of interview participants was 12. Each target group is described below.

Practitioner Sample: Individuals employed at a private, non-profit company called Adolescent Homes, Inc.<sup>1</sup> in the northeast of Massachusetts were asked to voluntarily participate in interviews for this research. Adolescent Homes, Inc. is a company that provides community-based services for children and adolescents between the ages of 0 and 22 and their families in the comfort of their homes. Clients are referred to Adolescent Homes, Inc. by the Department of Children and Families or the Department of Mental Health and are referred with numerous behaviors and treatment goals. Consent for conducting interviews (*see Appendix C*) from volunteered participants from Adolescent Homes, Inc. was obtained from Adolescent Homes,

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<sup>1</sup> To protect the confidentiality of research subjects, a pseudonym is used to mask the employment location of these interview participants.

Inc's director by the investigator (*see Appendix B*). Volunteered participation was requested from clinicians at Adolescent Home, Inc. All volunteered participants from Adolescent Homes, Inc. have had a minimum of two years' experience and a bachelor's degree in criminology, psychology, social work, or human development.

Law Enforcement Sample: A convenience sample of law enforcement officers was used to meet the quota sample. Police officers were interviewed from three police departments that were local to Adolescent Homes, Inc. Direct contact was made with the police officers to ask for their participation and to obtain consent for participation. All police officers were current graduate level students enrolled in a Criminology and Criminal Justice degree program.

General Public Sample: Volunteered participants from the general public were the third target group of this study. To obtain interview participants, the researcher sat in a public coffee shop, Dunkins', located in the same city as Adolescent Homes, Inc. and asked customers to participate in interviews. The location of this interview was chosen as it is a public place that multiple people visit daily for coffee, donuts, bagels, etc. Potential volunteer participants were approached as they waited for their items to be given to them by Dunkins' staff. If the potential volunteered participant was inclined to partake in the interview, the age of the volunteered participant was ensured to be over the age of 21 by asking them their birthdate and year. Only individuals over the age of 21 were allowed to participate in this study. This investigator sat in the same, public Dunkins' for two hours on two separate days of the same week. In total, 3 interviews were conducted.

*Interview Protocol:*

This study consisted of twelve interviews. Six interviews were conducted with volunteered participants from Adolescent Homes, Inc., three interviews were conducted with a



volunteered participants from the police department of the same city that Adolescent Homes, Inc. stands, and three interviews were conducted with volunteered participants from the general public at a public Dunkins' in the same city that Adolescent Homes, Inc. stands.

Practitioner interviews: Once volunteers were obtained for this research, a date/time that worked for both the interviewer and clinician was scheduled. Individual, 25-35-minute, semi-structured interviews were conducted in a quiet, closed-door conference room within the Adolescent Homes, Inc. work office. The researcher sat directly across from volunteered participants and recorded notes on a laptop using a Word document to ensure organization. If back-to-back interviews with clinicians were scheduled, the interviewer allowed a 30-minute time gap for an independent debrief to reflect, process, and to add additional notes specifically about volunteered participants body language.

Law enforcement interviews: Law enforcement interviewees engaged in 25-35-minute, semi-structured interviews at a local, public park within the same city that Adolescent Homes, Inc. stands. The location of these interviews was chosen because it was in a public space outside of the police officer's department. The location allowed for only minor distractions and light noise. This interviewer sat on the ground, directly across from the volunteered participant and recorded notes on a laptop using a Word document to ensure organization. The investigator allowed a 30-minute break after the interview for an independent debrief to reflect, process, and to add additional notes specifically about volunteered participants body language.

General public interviews: Twenty-five to thirty-five minute, semi-structured interviews were conducted with the general public participants at a Dunkins' located within the same city that Adolescent Homes, Inc. stands. The location was not private and at times, did become rowdy as increases of crowds arrived. The interviewer sat directly across from the volunteered

participant at a table on the window side of the Dunkins'. No other individuals sat at the table with the interviewer and interviewee and efforts were made to find a table away from large crowds to ensure privacy. During the interview, the researcher recorded notes on a laptop using a Word document to ensure organization. The investigator allowed a 30-minute break after each interview for an independent debrief to reflect, process, and to add additional notes specifically about volunteered participants body language.

### Analysis

After all interviews were completed, an iterative process of both open coding and selective coding was used to analyze the data. Specifically, each interview was read and open-coded to identify the general themes in responses and most important information from each interviewee. This process produced a list of codes for each interview. The list codes were then used to search for these themes in the remaining interviews via selective coding. This procedure was completed for each interview, such that responses were compared across all interviews.

## **Results**

The semi-structured interviews yielded interesting and important findings. In some cases, there was agreement across participants. The results of the interviews were organized according to the similarities and differences between the volunteered participants within each target groups and then compared between target groups.

Practitioner interviews: Clinicians had a tired or distressed affect towards being interviewed about missing children. They were able to discuss that it is a growing issue, which they are happy to partake a role in helping to decrease the number of missing children. Though they were ready to help in this epidemic, they acknowledged that many youth run away or go missing more than once and struggled to identify how the cycle of runaway behaviors is broken.

Clinicians often mentioned Adolescent Homes Inc.'s policies and procedures for handling missing and runaway youth. They reported that creating safety plans about run away behaviors sometimes feels reactive, and not proactive. They suggested that police departments be more delightful in their approach to dealing with families and practitioners working with families of runaway children, often recalling an unfriendly run-in with a police officer involved with their missing youth and naming specific towns. They claimed that such attitudes do not lead to productive working relationships or encourage family members to assist in the recovery process.

Clinicians were aware of websites and alerts that alert the media about runaway children and where they could find more information about runaway children. A high number of clinicians reported their Facebook application is where they see missing children posters often and believe this is because they are Facebook friends with many people who work with youth who are at-risk/people who are most likely to repost or share missing children posters, often times naming this investigator. Clinicians believed the spring/summer time will increase the number of runaway children.

Clinicians had varying thoughts on if social media could increase or decrease the amount of time runaway children are missing for. Younger clinicians (25 years of age and under) had two or more social media applications on their cell phones (snapchat, Instagram, Facebook) and did not watch the news on a regular basis. Older clinicians (26 years of age and over) had less than 2 social media applications (Facebook) and did watch the news on a regular basis. Some clinicians believed the location on a missing child's poster being the same location of where they live or the same location of youth they work with made them memorable and others believed the photograph made them memorable. They believed having posters in the public eye/public assistance would be beneficial, but some were doubtful of the skill level the public could have in

assisting and were doubtful that the public would like to be involved. However, it was identified that it would not be their responsibility to follow-up on any of the general public's tips but rather that they would be called after-the-fact, if the child was located.

Law enforcement interviews: The police officers interviewed for this research had a tired or distressed affect towards being interviewed about missing children, similar to the clinicians interviewed. They were able to discuss that it is a growing issue and they are happy to partake a role in helping to decrease the number of missing children. However, the officers reported struggling to identify how the cycle of runaway behaviors is broken. They suggested that sectioning/keeping children off of the streets is their solution to attempting to break the cycle, often blaming others whom work with youth to be "too soft" on youth with such impactful negative behaviors and suggesting a more direct approach. As opposed to the clinicians suggesting that the police officer's approach is often too harsh and causes families to disengage.

Police officers understood the policies and procedures of the family of runaway children and in their departments. They specifically stated that the difference between a youth who is well-known to engage in runaway behaviors and youth who may be gang-involved or involved in commercial exploitation being marked as high-risk. They reported that their investigative approach differs for high and low-risk youth. Law enforcement agents seemed collectively agitated by outside parties' attitudes towards runaway children and suggested that others be tougher/more direct with their approach. Often times, police officers insisted having a direct talk with a youth is a more appreciated and effective way to receive answers in a timely manner, as opposed to a collaborative conversation gaining each party's concerns independently.

All law enforcement agents interviewed were aware of websites and alerts that alert the media about runaway children and knew where they could find more information about runaway

children, outside of their access through the police department. Police officers reported having 1 social media application and that they never witness runaway children's posters being shared, equally they watch news less than 3 days a week. They appeared happy about this, explaining that they prefer to work at work and do not often let work issue seep into their outside lives. Police officers believed the spring/summer time will increase the number of runaway children both due to the weather and not having the daily structure of attending school.

The police officers interviewed had varying thoughts on if social media could increase or decrease the amount of time runaway children are missing for. Some police officers believed the location on a missing child's poster being the same location of where they live made them memorable and some police officers believed repeated names/photographs of notoriously known runaway or delinquent children made them memorable. Two officers stated being able to name at least six high-risk children who engage in runaway behaviors often during this interview. Some police officers believed having posters in the public eye/public assistance would be beneficial due to decreasing the amount of movement a runaway child can make because of fear of being caught, but most police officers were doubtful of the skill level the public could have in assisting and were doubtful that the public would like to be involved.

General public interviews: Members of the general public were confused about or hesitant towards being interviewed about missing children. They were unsure of how the public could help and had little to no knowledge that children run away or go missing close to them. This prospect seemed to make them uncomfortable. The general public seemed curious and asked many questions throughout the interview process, such as "how many youth are missing from here?, why would they run away?, where or who are they running away from?"

The general public did not understand the policies and procedures of social workers involved with runaway children, the family of runaway children, or the local police departments. All stated that they would not know how many hours after a youth is missing to inform the police. They suggested feeling unsure about their ability to report about runaway/missing children due to not wanting to lead police, social workers, families on a “wild goose chase.” The general public assumed there were websites about runaway and missing children but were unable to name them and could only name AMBER alert system as somewhat familiar to them. During this conversation, individuals of the general public became increasingly nervous about their lack of information about this topic. A high number had 2-3 social media applications and reported they never or rarely saw missing children posters being reposted or shared and that they watched the news regularly. The general public shared concerns about not knowing the background stories of missing/runaway children and questioned if they did assist in locating missing/runaway children, that they could put themselves in harm’s way. This idea speculated from the idea that youth who engage in runaway behaviors are understood to be dangerous, involved with negative influences, or come from rough backgrounds. Although during all of these interviews, their concern about themselves came up, it was also evident that they were unsure of if this was a shameful thought. This was identified by their facial expressions after stating they would be worried about their safety.

Members of the general public had varying thoughts on if social media could increase or decrease the amount of time runaway children are missing. Some reported being worried for the safety of runaway children if posters were made public. They expressed concern that public posters may lead to the child’s victimization by predators and others reported that the public may be able to assist by being an extra set of eyes and ears for law enforcement. The general public

did appear to be very aware of predators and because of this, insisted the idea that the general public believed that if a child or youth were in trouble, it was because they were sought out by a predator. As opposed to running away from home and encountering a predator in an attempt to find shelter, clothing, money, etc. Some believed the age of a missing child would make them more memorable and some believed the location of where the missing child went missing from being where they are from, where their friends/family/etc. are from would make them more memorable.

### **Discussion**

Areas of similarity were found between clinicians and law enforcement were that they would like the other's policies and procedures to be collaborated and vocalized better with one another. Because there is a lack of knowledge between parties involved in missing children's investigations, improving the quality of both clinicians and law enforcements policies and procedures and sharing those protocol with one another may increase relationships and collaboration. This will also allow clinicians and law enforcement to know one another's roles in missing children's investigations and decrease the need for such roles to be reiterated.

All interview participants agreed that the placement of missing children's posters, frequency at which missing children's posters and information are being shared, and the content included on the missing children's posters matter. The more chances the general public has to notice missing children's posters could decrease their false understanding that children are always safe in their location. Acknowledging the scope of the problem may increase their willingness to learn about the missing child/runaway child epidemic and how they can help.

The general public's reticence to involve themselves in missing child investigations was not overly surprising. Multiple reasons why the general public may hesitate to assist law

enforcement in missing children's investigations were found. These reasons included 1. Discomfort and incredulity of the general public, 2. Lack of confidence in identification abilities, 3. The general public not wanting to waste police resources, 4. Potential danger, 5. The role of social media being unknown creates an unlikely avenue for improvement in breaking the behavior of running away. Discussing missing children with the general public created an overwhelming uncomfortable feeling. The general public struggled to think children may runaway or go missing in their location and when pushed to discuss the topic, the general public created heinous depictions of why a child may run away, where they may run away to, and what they could potentially encounter while running away. They suggested that runaway or missing youth were dangerous and worried for their own safety if they were to encounter these youth. This misconception regarding missing youth create a barrier for the investigator to engage them in a discussion about their willingness to assist due to their discomfort and incredulity towards the topic. The public also displayed a lack of confidence in their ability to identify a missing child despite viewing the missing child's poster. Their lack of confidence also spilled over into becoming worrisome for police and not wanting to waste police resources due to the general public not having the knowledge or training needed to positively identify a missing child. The concern recurred during law enforcement interviews, as they too identified they do not wish their time to be wasted in people not trained in their field assisting in their investigations.

Practitioners and the general public were commonly unsure whether locating a missing child would prevent him or her from continuing to engage in runaway behaviors, as well. The general public insisted on knowing more about why the child had run away as a requisite for collaborating with law enforcement. The practitioners were aware of the many reasons a child



may run away from home, however, were unsure how their policies and procedures protected the children from creating a cycle of behaviors. Future research should explore this issue.

### *Policy Recommendations*

Each target group identified in this study (practitioners, law enforcement, and the general public) are a piece to the puzzle in solving missing children's investigations to decrease the likelihood of traumatic experiences that children can encounter, embrace, and change because of while on the run. With this being said, work from all angles of the puzzle needs to be completed in order for the puzzle pieces to collaborate and execute the mission to bring children home safely. This research suggests that the general public should be provided general and important information to recognize what is happening in their locations regarding missing youth to dispel misconceptions about the scope of the problem. This information should be made public through commercials on television, billboards present between cities, and information sessions held regularly for parents, adults who interact with youth often, coaches, etc. This knowledge may potentially increase the general public's willingness to become more involved to help solve the problem. Law enforcement agencies should share their policies and procedures with the general public and practitioners who work hand-in-hand with them to keep children safe.

Law enforcement should also strategize ways in which they can become friendly faces to their communities, as the general public were sure they did not want to bother police officers with potential tips about missing children. The general public may be more likely to become involved if they are not worried about utilizing the police and have existing relationships with the police officers. Practitioners should also make themselves aware of the policies and procedures of law enforcement agencies in the towns/cities they work in. This familiarity will

increase their ability to work towards the same goals as law enforcement without the two parties repeating frequent steps to one another.

When considering the policy implications of this work, it is important to also acknowledge the study's limitations. Particularly, though both the practitioners in the field, law enforcement agents and the general public were interviewed, the subjects do not comprise a generalizable sample. The investigator was familiar with both the clinicians and law enforcement agents interviewed because they work with missing children. Not all police officers may be as knowledgeable about missing children investigations. The study could also include more interviews per each target group, or a larger sample in general. In order for this study to apply across the state and/or nation, more participants from each target group would be needed and their locations would have to differ greatly. As such, this study's findings should be interpreted as generalizable to the Merrimack Valley area.

In conclusion, asking the general public to become more involved with and assist in missing children's investigations may be an important strategy in bringing children home more promptly and safely. Barriers will present as the general public become more involved, as well. Further research should address how we can safely utilize social media in missing children investigations. Moreover, future research should explore how practitioners, law enforcement, and the general public can not only assist in locating missing children but also focusing on identifying next steps for a child who is found and how to break the cycle of children engaging in runaway behaviors.

## Appendix A

### Interview Instrument

#### Questions regarding at-risk youth

1. Have you ever worked with youth or youth who are at risk? (meaning youth with behavioral, emotional, mental instabilities that could potentially put them at risk of not obtaining skills to become a fully functioning adult)
  - a. If they do not work with youth who are at risk, would they ever consider a position in that field? Why? Or why not?

#### Questions regarding use of social media/media

2. Do you use social media? If so, which applications?
3. How often do you watch the news?
4. If you are looking for information on a particular topic, how might you find it? Where would you look?

#### Questions regarding knowledge of runaways

5. How often do you think children run away or go missing in the US?
6. How often do you see missing children's reports?
7. Where do you see missing children reports? (social media, on the news, applications on phone, flyers in public places)
8. Have you ever sought out this information purposefully?
9. If you were to seek out this information, how would you do so?
10. Do you know of any applications or web pages that are specifically for missing children?
11. What makes seeing a missing child's poster memorable? (the photograph, identifying information, age, how long they've been missing, their location, locations they may travel to, closeness of these locations to their home)
12. In your opinion, would you be more likely to recall a missing child's poster or an advertisement from your favorite store or a store you visit often?
13. What makes it easier for you to remember a poster or advertisement that is not a missing child's poster? (the physical appearance of the poster? The location of the poster? Their interest in the poster's topic? Boredom during the time of viewing? Time of day they are viewing the poster at? Relation that the poster has to their life?)
14. Do you think there has been an increase in missing children or missing children's posters recently?
15. Do you think that increasing the number of visual posters and overall increasing awareness of missing children is important to helping find them?

#### Questions regarding assisting law enforcement in missing children investigation

16. Do you know the procedure of police departments in locating missing children? If you had to guess, what do you think these investigations involve?
17. Do you think police departments would like the public's help in assisting with locating missing children?

18. Would you be willing to help police or law enforcement locate missing children?  
How do you think you could do this?
19. Why do you think the public, in general, may not want to become involved with missing children's cases?
20. If you had information on runaways and missing children more readily available (e.g. on your phone) how would you use it?
21. What do you think the outcomes of not locating missing children could be?

**Appendix B  
Authorization Forms**



MERRIMACK COLLEGE

February 8, 2019

Institutional Review Board  
Merrimack College  
315 Turnpike Street  
North Andover, MA 01845

Dear IRB Members,

After reviewing the proposed study, “Connecting the Dots for Missing Children”, presented by Tayla Moore, Masters of Criminology and Criminal Justice at Merrimack College, I am granting permission for the study to be conducted at [REDACTED]

I understand the purpose of the project is to determine what will help practitioners in the field be drawn to information about missing children and what will help their efforts to help find missing children. The primary activity at [REDACTED] will be in-person interviews.

I understand that in-person interviews with one [REDACTED] staff from [REDACTED], will occur for one week. I expect that this project will end no later than 3/29/2019.

I understand that Tayla Moore will obtain consent for all participants in the study. Tayla Moore has agreed to provide to my office a copy of all IRB approved study protocol materials including the approved consent documents. Any data collected by Tayla Moore will be kept confidential and will be stored in a secure location per the approved protocol.

Sincerely,

## Appendix C Interviewee Consent Forms



MERRIMACK COLLEGE

315 Turnpike Street, North Andover, MA 01845 | www.merrimack.edu

### Consent to Participate in Research Study

**Title of Study:** Connecting the Dots for Missing Children

**Investigators:** Tayla Moore, Merrimack College

**IRB Number:** IRB-FY18-19-171

#### **KEY INFORMATION:**

This is a research project and participation is voluntary. The purpose of this research project is to understand how participants are accessing information about missing children to determine what law enforcement and missing children's agencies can do to have a greater impact on the public to increase their efforts to help locate missing children. This research project will ask practitioners and the general public whom volunteer to participate in in-person verbal interviews that will take thirty to forty-five minutes to complete. The investigator will take written notes during the interviews. No audio/video recordings of interviews will exist. There are no reasonable foreseeable or expected risks. There may be unknown risks. The study may be of no benefit to the participant individually. However, with the information gathered the scientific community and society at large may benefit with the efforts to locate missing children at a faster speed and decrease the likelihood of traumatic events occurring for missing children.

#### **Description of the Study Procedures**

- If you agree to be in this study, you will be asked to do the following things: partake in an in-person verbal interview that will consist of twenty-five interview questions. This interview will take approximately thirty to forty-five minutes.

#### **Risks/Discomforts of Being in this Study**

- There are no reasonable foreseeable or expected risks. There may be unknown risks.

#### **Benefits of Being in the Study**

- The study may be of no benefit to the participant individually. However, with the information gathered the scientific community and society at large may benefit with the efforts to locate missing children at a faster speed and decrease the likelihood of traumatic events occurring for missing children.

#### **Confidentiality**

- **Information is identifiable when provided to the investigator, but the investigator masks the identifiers:** The subject's information includes identifiers when initially provided

to the investigator, but the identifiers are masked through coding, the assignment of project-specific identifiers, or other means. Only the investigator and others directly involved in data collection or analysis can subsequently link subject information with subject identity.

### **Payments or Compensation**

- There will be no payment or reimbursement for the participant.

### **Right to Refuse or Withdraw**

- The decision to participate in this study is entirely up to you. You may refuse to take part in the study *at any time* without affecting your relationship with the investigators of this study, Merrimack College or any study partners. Your decision will not result in any loss or benefits to which you are otherwise entitled. You have the right not to answer any single question, as well as to withdraw completely from the interview or survey at any point during the process; additionally, you have the right to request that the interviewer not use any of your interview material.

### **Right to Ask Questions and Report Concerns**

- You have the right to ask questions about this research study and to have those questions answered by me before, during or after the research. If you have any further questions about the study, at any time feel free to contact me, Tayla Moore at mooret@merrimack.edu or by telephone at 781-572-9445. You may also contact the Merrimack College faculty supervisor of this research Dr. Nicole Frisch at frischn@merrimack.edu. If you like, a summary of the results of the study will be sent to you. If you have any other concerns about your rights as a research participant that have not been answered by the investigators, you may contact the Chair of the Merrimack Institutional Review Board at 978-837-5280 or by email at [irb@merrimack.edu](mailto:irb@merrimack.edu).
- If you have any problems or concerns that occur as a result of your participation, you can report them to the Chair of the IRB at the contact information above.

### **Informed Consent**

- Your signature below indicates that you have decided to volunteer as a research participant for this study, and that you have read and understood the information provided above. You will be given a signed and dated copy of this form to keep, along with any other printed materials deemed necessary by the study investigators.

Subject's Name (print): \_\_\_\_\_

Subject's Signature: \_\_\_\_\_ Date: \_\_\_\_\_

Investigator's Signature: \_\_\_\_\_ Date: \_\_\_\_\_

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