

LONG ISLAND'S MISSING CHILDREN

Most children reported missing end up at home again within days, but a tragic few remain lost for weeks....months....years

Tim Bolger with Lauren Wolfe 05/19/2005 2:30 am



For any parent, the heartbreak is unimaginable. The cheerful young faces that peer out from "missing" posters online and on telephone poles represent devastated families, broken lives, children in pain.



May 25 is National Missing Children's Day, in honor of Etan Patz, a 6-year-old boy who vanished in New York City on May 25, 1979.

Wednesday, May 25 is National Missing Children's Day, so dedicated in honor of Etan Patz, a 6-year-old Manhattan boy who vanished on his way home from school on May 25, 1979. Pictures taken by his professional photographer father helped bring national attention to that case.

But it has been 26 years since Etan's disappearance, and local police say that this national day meant to call attention to the plight of missing children usually passes unremarked.

One happy part of the missing children story is this: There are fewer than you might think. Most children who go missing are back home in a matter of days.

"A vast majority of our missing or runaway children are back within 24 hours," says Detective Sgt. John Buckley of the Nassau Police Department's Juvenile Aid Section. Families in New York City's suburbs most often cancel missing child reports in a few days. Suburban counties have a 95 percent success rate at closing cases.

Law enforcement isn't always perfect. Stephanie Caruso of Southampton grabbed headlines when she disappeared in February. Southampton Town police classified the 16-year-old as a runaway, despite her parents' objections. Suffolk's district attorney got involved and eventually, Stephanie was rescued from Texas. She had been with a convicted sex offender she met online who allegedly persuaded her to elope to Mexico.

But such happy reunions are overshadowed by the agony of the unaccounted-for few. Stephanie was lucky. For all of Long Island, only a dozen or so boys and girls have been missing for a significant period of time—more than nine months. The search for these children extends nationwide, sometimes even overseas. In

commemoration of Missing Children's Day and Missing Children's Month, we share their stories.

THE LONG WAIT

Children that remain missing for longer than a few days generally fall into three categories: The greatest number have been abducted by one of their own parents. Runaways comprise another significant segment of missing children, and they are usually in danger of exploitation. Stranger abductions and unknown disappearances like Etan's are, thankfully, most rare. They are also, however, the most dangerous and most difficult to resolve.

"There's no group of people more important that we protect than children," says Chauncey Parker, director of the New York State Division of Criminal Justice Services, the state agency that administers Amber Alerts and trains cops and parents on how to find kids. "We do everything humanly possible to reunite the children with their families through law enforcement training and through outreach to the public."

The first 48 hours are most critical in finding an abducted child, which is why the Amber Alert was established. Strangers who abduct children must evade a statewide all-points bulletin (APB) describing the car, child and/or abductor to the media and police.

Sean Mullin, president of the Children's Identification and Location Database, or the CHILD Project, just launched a plan for a national biometric database. He hopes to scan irises to keep on file. It will help enormously, he believes, in cases involving runaways, who often have multiple run-ins with law enforcement but lie about their identity.

"It won't solve the problem; it's no silver bullet," he says, "but it will save a lot of children's lives." Suffolk's undersheriff, Walter Denzler, is working on acquiring the equipment.

"I think the advantage is self-evident," he says. "Whatever data can be made available to identify a missing person is an advantage."

When Francis Coleman, Kelly Morrissey or Jules Johnson went missing, however, such sophisticated technologies and systems didn't exist. Their families must still rely on persistent missing-person's detectives, public response from nationwide mailings and the media, and dogged campaigning by missing-child advocates for any hope of finding their children.

The National Center for Missing and Exploited Children (NCMEC) keeps files on its website and disseminates flyers that seek information about missing children. NCMEC also updates the information by being the liaison between the police, the family, social workers and the various outlets that post the pictures.

NCMEC says there are more than 2,000 kids reported missing daily in the U.S. White girls 13 years old and older are the single largest group of victims, 29 percent of cases. Ron Jones, a senior case manager at NCMEC, says he and about a dozen case managers nationwide work on about 400 to 500 cases per week. He worked with Etan Patz's family.

From the start, Etan's father, a photographer, gave the press images of his son in an attempt to find him. "We try and keep their pictures in the public's eye," says Jones, a 27-year veteran of the Metropolitan Police Department in Washington, D.C., and a former homicide detective.

Jones adds that despite the fact that it's been 26 years since Patz disappeared, he and the family keep hope alive. "We've discovered kids missing for even longer," Jones says.



Jules Johnson

Jules Johnson – 14 years old

2003

Jules went missing from Bay Shore on Aug. 5, 2003. Black, with dark eyes and dark brown hair, she was last seen at home wearing a T-shirt, jeans and Timberland boots. Jules is considered a runaway, hinting that there is something troubled beneath her satisfied smile and neatly blow-dried hair in this photograph. She would now be 15. Authorities do not have leads on where Jules is.



Tiandre Thomas

Tiandre Thomas – 15 years old

2002

Her freshman yearbook reveals no photos of her with other students or teachers, and she isn't listed as having been on any team or club. Missing from Freeport since Feb. 26, 2002, Tiandre is black, 5'6" with black hair and brown eyes and a medium complexion. Tiandre is listed as an endangered runaway because she has asthma and was four months pregnant when she disappeared. Posing with her bright smile here, the trouble that awaited her is not visible, but authorities think Tiandre may have fallen in with a gang.



Kelly Morrissey



Kelly Morrissey
Digitally Aged

Kelly Morrissey – 16 years old
1984

One of LI's longest unsolved cases, Kelly has been missing from Lynbrook since June 12, 1984. She was last seen at the corner of Earl Avenue and Merrick Road heading home at about 10 p.m. In early-'80s style, she had winged brown hair and was wearing a gold chain with a charm, blue jeans, a pink sleeveless sweatshirt and white sneakers. Kelly's friend Theresa Fusco was found raped and murdered in a wooded area of Lynbrook six months later. Kelly's disappearance was re-opened in 2003, after three men convicted for the 1984 rape and murder of Theresa Fusco were freed by an overturned conviction based on DNA evidence.

Denis Dillon, Nassau's district attorney, is currently retrying one of the three men, while homicide detectives are trying to generate leads. Today, Kelly would be 36 years old.



Sabrina Beck



Sabrina Beck
Digitally Aged



Yvette Torres

Sabrena Beck – 23 months old

2000

Sabrena was taken on June 17, 2000 from Lake Ronkonkoma after a scheduled two-week visit with her mother, Yvette Torres, 41, who did not return Sabrena to her father. The child, now about 6 years old, has brown hair and eyes, pierced ears and a small birthmark in the shape of an upside-down heart on the back of her neck. She may have been given the aliases Sabrena Dawson, Sabrina Beck or Rena Dawson. Torres has brown hair and eyes, is 5'4", 110 pounds. She has bipolar disorder, and takes medications such as Depakote and Zoloft. Also, she speaks Spanish, German and French and may use the aliases Yvette Dawson, Yvette Thompson or Yvette Torres-Thompson. Authorities believe the two may be in Florida, New Jersey, California, Puerto Rico or Madrid. The FBI has issued a warrant for international parental kidnapping.



Francis Coleman



Francis Coleman
Digitally Aged



Linda McGreevy

Francis Coleman – 5 years old

1994

Nicknamed Frank or Frankie, he has been missing from Sound Beach since his birthday on Sept. 9, 1994. Photographed here on Christmas, Francis has brown hair and almond-shaped eyes. He was last seen with his non-custodial mother, Linda McGreevy, 46, of Sound Beach, who has blonde hair, brown eyes, a light complexion, 5'5" and 155 pounds. Francis would now be 14 years old. Authorities do not have leads on where he is.



Shakonyo Beckham

Shakonyo Beckham—3 years old

2004

Shakonyo went missing from Central Islip on Aug. 31, 2004. Heartbreakingly innocent, with the pudge of a baby and barrettes clipped into her brown hair, Shakonyo has brown eyes and a scar on the inside of her right arm; she is missing her front teeth and suffers from severe eczema. She was abducted by her non-custodial mother, Tami Grant, who also goes by the names Michelle Beckham or Tami Beckham. Grant is 45 years old, black, 5'9", 185 pounds with brown hair and eyes. Authorities do not have leads on where Shakonyo is.



Gabriella Yael Guez



Patricia Mainetto

Gabriella Yael Guez – 3 years old
2000

Missing from Valley Stream since Oct. 18, 2000, little Gabriella is white with a heart-shaped face, blonde hair and brown eyes with thick eyelashes. She has a birthmark on the right side of her lower back and a gap in her front teeth. Gabriella was last seen with her mother, Patricia Mainetto, formerly of Valley Stream. Mainetto is white with brown hair and eyes and a medium complexion, 5' and 150 pounds. Authorities believe she may be living in Peru.



Nathalia Munoz



Nathalia Munoz
Digitally Aged



Patricia Echeverri

Nathalia Munoz – 3 years old

1996

Nathalia has been missing from Valley Stream since Aug. 19, 1996, and was last seen with her non-custodial mother and an adult male companion. The white/Hispanic girl has a ski-slope nose, brown hair and dark eyes, and a birthmark on her forehead. At the time, the little girl spoke both English and Spanish fluently. Nathalia was last seen with Patricia Echeverri of Franklin Square, a 38-year-old white female with a medium complexion, brown hair and eyes, 5' and 125 pounds. In 2003, at the PGA Tour, golfer Briny Baird tried to help the little girl as part of the Canon4Kids program. Just below his name on his golf bag, Baird pasted a digital photo of Nathalia in the hopes that those watching him play might recognize her. Authorities believe Echeverri may be traveling with a companion to the Netherlands, Mexico or Colombia, but have no other leads on Nathalia.



Rafael Eduardo Caneles



Rafael Eduardo Caneles
Digitally Aged



Modesta Canales

Rafael Eduardo Canales – 13 months old

1998

This plump-cheeked white/Hispanic boy has black hair, brown eyes and ears that poke out just a little. His mother was killed in an automobile accident and his grandmother, Modesta Canales, applied for custody but never appeared for the required court hearing. "These are the kinds of cases that fall between the cracks," says Laura Ahearn, director of Parents for Megan's Law, in Stony Brook. "Sometimes it's very difficult to determine what is in the best interest of a particular child." Rafael has been missing from Huntington Station since Aug. 13, 1998. He was last seen with Canales, 55, of Huntington Station. Canales is a white woman with a medium complexion and brown hair and eyes, 4'8". Rafael would now be 7 years old. Authorities believe Canales left New York with Rafael. She was last seen in Hoboken, N.J.



Tiffany Westford



Tiffany Westford
Digitally Aged



Catherine Dominique

Tiffany Westford – 2 years old

1993

Missing since Nov. 13, 1993, from Amityville, she was abducted by her non-custodial mother. Tiffany is black with a medium complexion, black hair and eyes. She has a 2- to 3-inch scar just below her navel, pierced ears and a scar on her hand and elbow. She is now a teenager, at 14 years old. Tiffany was abducted by Marie Catherine Dominique, 40, formerly of Amityville, a black female with black hair and eyes. An arrest warrant was issued for custodial interference. Dominique may use the names Catherine Dominique, Marie Westford, Marie Dominique and Catherine Sanon.



Melissa Reiter



Melissa Reiter
Digitally Aged

Melissa Reiter – 16 months old

1992

Last seen with her mother on May 23, 1992, in Little Neck, this once-little girl has brown hair and blue eyes and a light complexion. Melissa would now be 14 years old and may be using the name Melissa Shoken. Tina Alfano of Keep Our Children Safe, in Levittown, says family-abducted children are the hardest to find. "[Parents] change [the child's] name, they change their look, they hide them with family members, they hide them with people they don't know in underground places," Alfano says. Authorities believe Melissa was kidnapped by Beth Shari Reiter, who may use the name Beth Shoken. Reiter is a 44-year-old white female with blonde hair and brown eyes, 5'3" and 110 pounds.

For Info, Contact:

*National Center for Missing & Exploited Children
1-800-The-Lost (1-800-843-5678)
www.missingkids.org*

*New York State Division of Criminal Justice Services
Missing & Exploited Children Clearinghouse
1-800Find-Kid (1-800-346-3543)
<http://criminaljustice.state.ny.us>*

*Nassau County Police Department
Juvenile Aid Section
(516) 573-5336*

*Suffolk County Police Department
Juveniles & Missing Persons Section
(631) 852-6194, 24-Hour Hotline: (631) 852-6040*

*To receive free Amber Alert text messages on your cell phone,
register at www.wirelessamberalerts.org.*

Taking Pawns

When Parents Nab Their Own

Of the thousands of kids across the U.S. who go missing each year, the vast majority are runaways. Of those kidnapped, most are actually taken by a member of their own family—about 9 percent according to the U.S. Department of Justice's Second National Incidence Studies of Missing, Abducted, Runaway, and Thrownaway Children (NISMART-2).

Generally, these abductions happen in the shadow of divorce, when one parent is dissatisfied with a custody arrangement. Even though reported instances of physical and sexual abuse are low in such scenarios, emotional trauma with this kind of abduction can be intense. Nearly half of the kids taken are under age 6.

"There are two or three basic elements to family-abduction trauma," says David Finkelhor, director of the Crimes Against Children Research Center at the University of New Hampshire. "One is being involved in a situation where there is high degree of family conflict. That takes a great toll on kids. Being pawns and having various allegations made to them about the other parent also does. There are guilt feelings, insecurity. There is the trauma of being deprived of one of their secure residences and all the loss that may be involved in that."

In New York in 2003, the Missing Children Register received 128 reports of family abductions, out of 22,040 children reported missing. These are also the cases that tend to last the longest, says Finkelhor, an advisor on the study. This could explain why almost half of Long Island's long-term missing kids were family abducted.

Kids are taken by a parent from their own home or yard about a third of the time, or from someone else's home or yard another third of the time. Rarely are kids taken from school or daycare, according to NISMART-2. Two-thirds of the time children are abducted while they are with their abductor under lawful circumstances—during a visitation, for example.

Use of force is rare. So is fleeing the state. But parents who take their kids unlawfully often attempt to change the custodial arrangement and prevent contact with the other parent.

"We've dealt with many cases where parents felt their child was in an environment where the custodial parent was felt to be abusive, and they considered leaving the area with the child for that reason," says Laura Ahearn, director of Parents for Megan's Law, a national child-advocacy group based in Stony Brook.

In the past few years, all 50 states have enacted criminal statutes pertaining to parental kidnapping. Federally, the government put in place the Parental Kidnapping Prevention Act in 1980. The statute mandates that state authorities fully enforce other states' custody determinations.

The good news is that more often than not, kids abducted by a parent are eventually returned. Almost half of kids abducted in these instances are returned within a week, says the NISMART-2 study. Most are returned within a month. Only 6 percent of all the cases the study examined remained unresolved by the time of the report.

—Lauren Wolfe

New York State 2004

21,753 children reported missing

91 percent suspected runaways

1 percent abducted by a relative

94 percent 13 or older

61 percent female
52 percent white
35 percent voluntarily returned home
20 percent brought home by law enforcement
5 percent found dead

L.I. Missing Child Stats

Nassau Cases Reported in 2004

930 total missing
806 runaways
6 acquaintance abductions
13 family abductions
2 stranger abductions
93 lost or unknown

Cases Closed in 2004

952 total cases
524 returned voluntarily
174 returned by police
45 arrested
24 victimized
2 found dead
183 unknown
61 active cases at the end of the year

Suffolk Cases Reported in 2004

2,204 total missing kids

1,998 runaways

16 family abductions

190 lost or unknown

Cases Closed in 2004

2,210 total cases

1,542 returned voluntarily

329 returned by police

156 arrested

13 victimized

2 dead

168 unknown

86 active cases at the end of the year

http://www.longislandpress.com/index.php?cp=40&show=article&a_id=3978