Evidence-Based Approach to Missing Persons Investigation

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Abstract

The police are the primary investigative agency for missing person accidents. Whilst substantial advances in policing have been made, a greater focus on crime has meant there remain significant gaps in our understanding of missing persons and, therefore, to what extent greater knowledge can or should inform policing practices. The overall contribution of the existing and future studies would be to exchange experience and knowledge in order to develop and employ a best evidence-based practice based on scientific evidence about what works best in the missing-person field of policing.

Keywords: Missing persons; Police; Investigation; Evidence-based practice

Introduction

The continual growth of the number of the reported missing persons has taken more interest of the public, as well as the police, whose work in this area is increasing. The police are the primary investigative agency for missing person accidents. The Association of Chief Police Officers (ACPO) defines a missing person as 'anyone whose whereabouts is unknown whatever the circumstances of disappearance. They will be considered missing until located and their well-being or otherwise established' ACPO, 2005, and provides a definition of 'absent' as 'a person not at place where they are expected or required to be' ACPO, 2013.

Malcolm Payne, 1995, took a different approach, and defined 'going missing' as: '…a social situation in which a person is absent from their accustomed network of social and personal relationships to the extent that people within that network define the absence as interfering with the performance by that person of expected social responsibilities, leading to a situation in which members of the network feel obliged to search for the missing person and may institute official procedures to identify the person as missing'. Missing persons are individuals who have gone missing and their location and fate are unknown [1]. The term 'missing person' has no conceptualisation of its own in any of the existing regulations within the police legislature in the Republic of Croatia, which also impacts the start of the search for a missing person. That situation is assessed in any given case by the police officer, based on his/her own experience, knowledge, opinion, prejudice, competence in observation and suspicion, but also based on the assessment of the received initial information, mostly be the person who reported the missing person.

Whilst substantial advances in policing have been made, a greater focus on crime has meant there remain significant gaps in our understanding of missing persons and, therefore, to what extent greater knowledge can or should inform policing practices. One key gap is research on missing adults all according to Stevenson & Woolnough [2]; Morewitz [1]; Butorac et al. [3], Butorac, Šuperina, Mikšaj-Todorović [4] where as research on missing children have been predominant Griffin [5], Plass [6], Morewitz [1], Thomson et al. [7]. Practitioners, law enforcement personnel, researchers, and families in many countries have expanded our knowledge of the issues surrounding missing persons and the most effective techniques for solving missing persons cases. Moreover, the police and researchers are using a range of social and natural sciences to identify missing person's risk factors. Since the authors advocate for evidence-based policing, the paper aims to provide arguments for an inevitable synergy between scientific research findings and missing persons investigation procedure.

Discussion

The Contemporary Challenges in Investigation of Missing Persons

The investigation of the missing person cases hence is a complex work. In the initial phase of recognition of disappearance of the person, the person who made a report is usually the first, the main and the most important source of information. The report is usually made by parents, relatives, friends, colleagues, acquaintances etc. That is, persons from the immediate social environment of the missing person. The police rarely finds out about the disappearance of a person (e.g. while conducting the criminal investigation, in cooperation with citizens, from the informants, by objection, by tracking the legal sources of information). Because of that, the criminalist, tactical and methodical study and the regulations on receiving the report on the missing person have a special place in the criminalist procedure of a search for a missing person. The reasons/ motifs which had impact on reporting the missing person often reflect and determine the creation of the initial picture on the possible investigative situations of the "missing person".

In order to start the search measures, the police needs the information on the missing persons and the circumstances of the disappearance (in order to be able to assess the situation, to plan and to search for the missing person based on that information). After the free-willing statement from the reporter, the police officer asks questions which aim to make the statement of the reporter more precise and updated. In order to collect notifications, the police officers are using the Protocol on Receiving the Missing Person Report. This tool is definitely very useful, because it helps the police officer to check which questions s(he) asked and which s(he) failed to ask. But there is also a catch, it often happens that the questionnaires which contain the checking questions make the procedure a routine one, and bring the risk on the non-individualised approach to every case of the missing person. For this reason, the functionality of such forms must be continuously checked in theory and in practice.

Badly received report and the lack of information not only prevent the timely search and finding of a missing person, it also creates the negative image of the police in the public. The information which the reporter has enables the initial (psychological) assessment of personality of the missing person and the specific circumstances of his/her disappearance. In most cases, they are sufficient for the initial, urgent, relevant and efficient search for the missing person. Based on the initially acquired information, the police officer accesses the situation, the levels of risk and endangerment of the missing person. The assessment of the situation is on its own a very comprehensive criminalist speculative process which requires professional knowledge and the Criminalistics experience from the police officer. As there have not mostly been any guidelines upon which to make this judgement, it could be coloured by prejudice, other commitments, time available, level of experience of the officer and many other factors [8], this fine-tuning being left to an officer's judgement.

The police officer must make right decisions in accordance to the specific situation, based on the information (s)he received. If it is not possible to make a decision based on the known information, the urgent collection of new information starts. After the collection of new information, the assessment of the situation follows again. That means that the Criminalistics speculative process is not finished by reaching the first decision, it is continued until the completion of the task, and the plan of the search for the missing person is therefore prone to continual supplements or adaptations [9].

Based on the collected information, the established indications, which are often insufficient in the initial phases of the search, the police officer sets the criminalist versions of the event. (S)he tries to explain the manner, the interconnections, relations and circumstances of disappearance of the person. The importance of the criminalist versions is based on the methodical procedure of a rational criminalist investigation, whose primary function is explanation and interpretation of the unknown facts, e.g. filling certain gaps in the cases of the missing persons. Following the respective procedure the challenge for the police is to accurately assess missing person's reports, assess the person making the report, understand the story that preceded the going missing event, and learn about the person that is missing. More recently efforts have been made to develop guidelines by various law enforcement agencies in the UK, ACPO, 2005 as well as the USA and Australia [10].

The additional challenge for police is publicity over a missing person and subsequent community concern over the plight of missing individuals that might reduce the discretion of law enforcement personnel thus resulting in usage of more extensive resources such as the use of additional law enforcement organizations, aerial and underwater searches, and search and rescue dogs and robots. Public pressure on the police can lead to regular police conferences with the media to keep the public informed about the progress of police investigations.

The main features of Croatian Study on Missing Persons

Croatian comprehensive study [3] study has helped to establish the profile of missing persons in Croatia. Unlike other studies, only a third of the samples are children and adolescents, however without any recorded cases of abduction. Compared to the general population characterised by an almost equal proportion of men and women, in the missing person population the percentage of men in the study is somewhat higher than that of women, but women are significantly more represented at young age (children and juveniles). It was found that the overall missing person population has better than average education, with men better educated than women. Over one half lives with family or a partner, and the remaining segment of the sample, in

almost equal proportion, lives in reform institutions or on their own. However, the presence of close persons or persons who act as social support figures was not found to be a protective factor. Evidence shows that psychological or psychiatric disorders are the determinants responsible for disappearance, particularly in married participants. Missing persons living alone are likely to be suffering from depression. Manifest mental illness is highest in the segment of the missing person population over 55. Similarly, young people of juvenile age (15-20) are also afflicted by a wide range of psychological problems that are not somatic in nature. Disappearance of younger people corresponds, for the most part, to the findings of other studies, especially in females: teenage rebellion, adventurism, voluntary abandoning of home, loitering and alcohol. In older population, characteristic reasons for going missing is helplessness mainly attributed to dementia, amnesia, Alzheimer's disease.

Given that Croatia is one of the five states in the European Union with highest unemployment and poverty rates, it needs to be emphasised that 4/5 of the missing persons are not part of the working population (they are pupils, students, unemployed, retired) and are therefore financially dependent on family who should look after their welfare, or they live in care providing institutions. The quality of care that families can provide is questionable, however, as many find themselves in jeopardised situations after losing their job or if their income is too low. In the context of general deterioration of the social and economic situation, all age groups are affected and it has become apparent that their emotional and cognitive ability to cope with crises in their lives is deficient.

In most missing person situations, reporters are family members who notify the police in person within 24 hours of disappearance. They supply information required by the protocol and missing person report. These tools are quite useful because they help the police officer to check which questions s(he) has asked and which s(he) has failed to ask. In most cases the gathered information is sufficient to initiate urgent and efficient search for the missing person. Evidence shows that in about 80% cases in this study the police were able to reconstruct and identify the motives, reasons and circumstances of disappearance from the information provided by the reporter. In this respect, the study has shown that the reports predominantly establish social determinants.

However, in individual cases there is a risk of error that may be caused by preconceptions, unjustified premature judgements, stereotyping and halo effect with regard to the reporter and/or missing person, and equating or generalising a particular incident with earlier similar events. Moreover, the police in Croatia have no tools to assist in risk assessment as some other states do. Development of parameters such as these is one of the future goals of this project.

Indicators of police effectiveness in Croatia show a relatively prompt response by the police, adequacy of the spectre of measures and actions undertaken, and a satisfactory degree of partnership and cooperation with the community. Police resources are primarily directed towards active, most vulnerable and high risk cases not solved by implementing only the initial set of measures and actions. Given that the incidence of missing persons is growing (from 1247 in 2000 to more than 2000 in recent years), brought about by socio economic deprivation, it is most likely that permanent special units will need to be formed for this specialised line of work and a set of operating tools and procedures will need to be developed for these units to follow. Their work will be all the more important given that non-government organisations in Croatia as a rule do not provide any assistance in any stage of search for missing persons and neither do they offer support to families and missing persons once they have been found.

A portion of findings gathered for the purposes of this study has been analysed in hope to construct a better picture of the profile of missing persons, and to ascertain the quality of reporting and searching for missing persons. Starting from the fact that both the missing persons phenomenon and the society's response of each country are related to the socio-economic and cultural characteristics of the certain social environment, this study comprises the most important characteristics of missing persons of all ages in the respective context. It points to the most effective police search measures and actions with regard to these characteristics as well. However, there is a serious lack of similar comprehensive studies.

Conclusion

Studies of incidence, forensic studies and policy guidance manuals with special attention given to the issue of missing children in existing publications are predominant. In this regard it would be beneficial to carry out extensive comparative studies including different profiles of missing persons, a proper risk assesment tool and the evaluation of the police work in relation to the profiling results accordingly. The overall contribution of the such studies would be to exchange experience and knowledge in order to develop and employ a best evidence-based practice based on scientific evidence about what works best [11]. The acquired knowledge must be built into the curricula and training programmes of the police officers, in regular and specialist training. This general and special crime investigation and tactical and methodical knowledge, experience, rules, and when it involves the search for missing persons pertaining to diversity of geographical settings where special skills are applied. For example, the much needed interpersonal skills needed to conduct the interview and collect notices during the field checks. It is obvious that the time has come, influenced by constant life and professional needs, to implement the training

of the police officers on conducting the missing persons' search actions through the modular teaching.

The modern practice, in the current accelerating time with numerous information and communication networks does not need criminal investigators with segmented education, through individual subjects. It needs educated staff which acquired necessary multidisciplinary knowledge, competences and which acquired certain skills for solving specific practical issue, such as the case of a missing person.

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