

Parents of Missing Children

Janet Colquhoun-Craig

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In writing about Parents of Missing Children, I would like to strongly advocate on behalf of the many caring parents and families who are going through the trauma of having a missing/runaway child. While I do not say that all runaways are from caring homes, we must also face the fact that not all runaways are from abusive homes. The lure of gangs, the pressure of peer support and the perceived excitement of street life can be a stronger pull than a home life that seems to offer nothing but a disciplined, caring (which teenagers may see as restrictive) environment.

The problem of runaways is one that we, as parents, should all be aware of. We can no longer sit back and say "it can't happen to us," because it can. Our organisation deals every day with parents who have thought this way, and are now in shock and fear for their child's safety.

As the following statistics show, there are a lot of families affected by this growing dilemma. The total number of missing persons in Victoria for 1989 was 6,635 (this total includes absconders, escapees, psychiatric escapees). That total can be broken down as follows:

- ◆ Ordinary missing persons,
 - 18 & over 24.4%
 - 17 and under 42.3%
 - Total male 2349
 - Total female 2084
 - Male under 18 1322
 - Female under 18 1563
- The greatest incidence occurred in the 14 year old age group -
 - Male, 14 years 281
 - Female, 14 years 413

(Statistics provided by Missing Persons Bureau in Victoria)

The view of the caring family is not often seen in today's society. We hear about runaways, street kids, incest and abusive homes - problems that unfortunately occur all too often. Today,

there is an assumption that all children run away to escape from an abusive home situation. This is not always the case, but because society has this attitude, there are many caring parents stranded out there with no support structures.



This is why the PARENTS OF MISSING CHILDREN was formed. Many parents were going through the trauma alone, hesitant to tell family and friends of their runaway child for fear of unwarranted judgement, and the inevitable question "what did you do to make this happen?" The answer was simply "nothing", but with society and media pressures, who believes that? This lack of support and added stress is something that many families cannot bear. That is why they come to us. We offer immediate emotional and practical support and understand their fears. They may remain anonymous if they wish.

Some parents and family members are totally unaware of their child's plans to run away and are taken by surprise. Some families suffer only a few days, others are still wondering and grieving after many years of no news about their children. It is like a pebble thrown into the water - the ripples touch some many including siblings, grandparents and friends.

Henk and Jill Reitmeyers, together with their whole family, searched for their missing child for nine months. During this time, they realised just how alone they were - how desperate they were to talk to other parents in similar circumstances, and so they called a public meeting to form Parents of Missing Children Inc. in 1983.

When parents have a runaway, they lose their parenting role, their child's friends - and all that remains is a stressful family situation. They crave to know if the child is alive, the alternative is their greatest fear.

The road to effective reconciliation can be very long, winding and traumatic. We offer support and extensive resources, hopefully short-circuiting the process. We prepare parents for police, help them produce missing persons posters if appropriate, and help them find the services best suited to their needs. We support parents and families for as long as they need us, even, in some cases, after the child returns as not all is necessarily magically resolved when the child comes home. This period can be just as difficult as the family tries to readjust and come to terms with the hurts and unresolved problems they may have to face - and also the lack of communication which may have led to the disappearance in the first place.

We find the most difficult emotion the parents have to acknowledge is that of grief. It has always been associated with death, a thought which the parents do not want to consider. The grief that our parents face is different. It is unable to be resolved, is continuous and will persist for as long as the child is missing, in some cases, for many years.

We have produced a pamphlet to try to address and explain some of these issues - although at this stage we lack the money to have it printed and distributed. In this pamphlet, we have used phrases that we constantly hear from parents.

Janet Colquhoun-Craig is the Co-ordinator of PARENTS OF MISSING CHILDREN Inc.

As an organisation, we are non-judgemental, supportive and give the option of anonymity. Parents feel safe. We invite parents to become involved with our organisation in whatever capacity they feel comfortable with - this is not a requirement, only an option. Most parents feel more able to join our committee rather than become a phone volunteer, and some become involved during Missing Persons Week.

We are always seeking parents and interested persons to train to be one of our highly valued volunteers as we depend on volunteers to provide our 24 hour crisis phone service. We can only be as good as our volunteers. One of the greatest difficulties in training the volunteers is preparing them for the

great range of cases we face. No two situations are the same. Examples of the types of calls are as follows:

- ◆ mostly from parents, mainly mothers
- ◆ from young teenage runaways
- ◆ from families in need of support after their child returns
- ◆ about long term missing
- ◆ about missing feared dead
- ◆ from a lady, still grieving 7 years after first reaching out for support
- ◆ from parents who know the whereabouts of their child who refuses to come home.

POMC as an organisation is aware of its limits, but fortunately consists of an enthusiastic, committed group of volunteers. We operate on a shoe-string budget, having had our funding

drastically reduced this year and not confirmed for next year. On minimum funding, we are expected to run our 24 hour crisis telephone support service, cover costs of the paging service, phone costs, volunteers reimbursements, printing of brochures, supply of kits to parents, employ a part-time coordinator and office costs.

We need to increase our resources, grow and adapt to the changing and increasing community needs. We are here to support the families of runaways, children, teenagers and young adults, not just families of long-term missing children. We provide the only support service available to these parents. Any offer of support or involvement would be welcomed.

Parents of Missing Children Inc.

- a group of voluntary men and women engaged in supporting parents traumatised by their child's disappearance.

Formed in 1983, the association strives towards parent/child reconciliation.

POMC provides a 24 hour crisis telephone service to parents of missing and runaway children.

On request, visits will be made by a parent member who has him/herself experienced the hurt associated with a missing child.

The Association maintains strong links with police, the media, community services and government bodies.

The committee and resource personnel initiate action that ultimately benefits parents.

Aims to:

- *provide immediate and long term **emotional and practical support** to parents of missing or runaway children*
- *encourage parents to utilise the services of police, government agencies and other bodies*
- *increase public awareness of missing and runaway children as a community concern*
- *encourage parents to recognise the warning signs of the pre-runaway*
- *maintain a strong parental voice amongst government bodies and agencies concerned with missing and runaway children*

PO Box 15, The Basin 3154

Office: (03) 890 4737

(Tues. Thurs. & Fri. 10am - 2pm)

24 Hour Crisis No.: (03) 883 5177



There is, as yet, no national body which provides support for parents of missing children. However, there are moves in this direction, through co-operation between this Victorian body and a similar organisation in NSW and Queensland called FAMILY AND FRIENDS OF MISSING PERSONS. It is hoped that when and if resources become available, similar initiatives will be established and supported in all states.