



Source: NMPH

# Without a trace

**Supermarket Iceland milk cartons featuring National Missing Persons Helpline appeals**

**Peter Riley reports on how law enforcement agencies in the US and police in the UK have employed innovative ideas to help trace those who go missing.**

In recent years, because of the growth in the number of children going missing, many supermarket chains and other large companies have become involved in an attempt to help. Milk cartons and lorries are used to display the faces of missing children, keeping their image fresh in the public consciousness and aiding the police to track them down.

Statistics from various law enforcement and privately run agencies in America show just how serious the problem is, with the United States showing enormous numbers of children going missing each year. The latest available figures from the offices of the National Centre for Missing and Exploited Children (NCMEC), reveals that in the USA around 800,000 young people go missing from home each year.

Of this huge number almost 60,000 were abducted by non-family members while 204,000

children were taken by members of their family.

According to the Centre: 'The largest number of missing children is runaways; followed by family abductions; then lost, injured, or otherwise missing children; and finally, the smallest category, non-family abductions.

'Many times the question, "Aren't most missing kids a result of custodial disagreements?" is asked under the assumption that family abductions are not a serious matter; however this is not true. In most cases children are told the left behind parent does not want or love them. These children may live the life of a fugitive, always on the run with the non-custodial parent and stripped away from their home, friends and family.'

According to a 1997 study by the office of the Attorney General for Washington State there is an estimated 100 murders a year in the USA of abducted children, or

less than half a percent of the total number of murders committed in the States each year. However, the study pointed out "74 percent of abducted children who are murdered are dead within three hours of the abduction."

It is this time factor that is seen as so vitally important by law-enforcement agencies, with police and FBI officials stressing time and again that the first three hours is the most important in the investigation of a missing or abducted child.

### **Milk cartons as a police tool**

In the States, and in more recent years in Britain too, children have had their photographs featured on the side of milk cartons in the hope that this would inspire identification of missing children, but in the past year or so the number of pictures featured has dropped in many states because it was

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## MISSING CHILDREN

considered too upsetting to read about at breakfast time.

According to the National Centre for Missing and Exploited Children, more than 8,000 pictures have been released on milk cartons, postcards, posters and by other means, including postage stamps since the programme started in 1985, with almost 1,500 children being found as a result.

It is an impressive percentage, but exploitation of young people, particularly on the internet, continues to grow worldwide, with sexual exploitation the basis for many such crimes. According to a US Department of Justice publication *Highlights of the Youth Internet Safety Survey*: "One in five children 10 to 17 years old, receive unwanted sexual solicitations online."

The report is backed by a statement from NCMEC who reports: 'The sexual victimisation of children is overwhelming in magnitude, yet largely unrecognised and under reported. Statistics show that one in five girls, and one in 10 boys are sexually exploited before they reach adulthood, yet less than 35 per cent of those child sexual assaults are reported to authorities.'

Many parents will be surprised to find that NCMEC, whose statistics are forwarded to the US Justice Department, does not go along with the age old adage to 'stay away from strangers'.

A survey carried out by the group reports: "The National Centre for Missing and Exploited Children does not subscribe to the 'stranger-danger' message. We have learned that children do not have the same understanding of who a stranger is as an adult might; therefore, it is a difficult concept for the child to grasp.

"It is much more beneficial to children to help them build the confidence and self-esteem they need to stay as safe as possible in any potentially dangerous situation they encounter rather than teaching them to be 'on the lookout' for a particular type of person. The 'stranger-danger' message is not effective and, based on what we know about those who harm children; danger to children is

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**MISSING**  
Can you help?

**Lucy Sefton**

Age at disappearance: 13  
Missing From: Hackney, east London  
Since: 1st November 2003  
Description: Lucy is 5'6" tall, of slim build and black hair and brown eyes. She has a mole on her left cheek and was last seen wearing a denim jacket, a red T-shirt (saying 'possible'), blue checked trousers and blue Adidas trainers.

Confidential Freefone  
**0500 700 700**  
National Missing Persons Helpline  
www.missingpersons.org

capco LAFARGE PLASTERBOARD HEPSEC

### A missing person's appeal featuring 14-year-old Lucy Sefton's image on the back of a lorry

greater from someone they or their family knows than from a 'stranger'."

#### Unusual methods

The current scheme being given a public airing in Pennsylvania, USA, is called 'Missing Fat Kids' and centres around featuring the photographs of overweight children on the side of packets of 'Whoppers', a well known American sweet product manufactured by the huge Hershey company, underneath the caption 'How Could You Not Have Seen Me?'

In a statement that would be regarded in many other nations as definitely not politically correct, Hershey spokesperson Stephanie Moritz told a recent press conference: 'Hershey is proud to lend a hand in helping reunite parents with their obese sons and daughters, many of whom had been amongst our most loyal customers before they went missing.'

'For these parents, the sight of that empty chair at the dinner table every night brings a pain that can not be comforted - even by eating all of the extra food that's now up for grabs every night. Hershey is committed to doing everything it can to help these folks find their fat little babies.'

She told journalists that the

'Whoppers' campaign follows the same concept as the 'Have You Seen Me' campaign on the side of milk cartons.

#### Experiences worldwide

Meanwhile across the Canadian border the problem is far less than that in the USA but Royal Canadian Police statistics show it is a growing problem, with just over 62,000 children being reported missing each year, and growing by about 2,000, or four per cent a year. The majority, around 78 per cent, of the missing kids are runaways between the ages of 12 and 17, with one in seven being recognised from poster campaigns across the various provinces.

The Canadian police also report that less than one percent of those missing have been abducted by strangers, with figures for 1998, the latest figures released, showing 42 youngsters being abducted in that year.

In South Africa around 1,400 children are reported missing each year and this led in April last year to the launch of the South African Centre for Missing and Exploited Children, a non-profit making organisation that works closely with the Bureau for Missing Persons of the South Africa Police.

Officials there acknowledge that the actual number of missing children is probably considerably

higher than the 1,400 reported to them, and add: 'Similarly, the annual figure of 25,000 reported cases of rape and sexual assault of children is undoubtedly underestimated. Child protection services estimate that in South Africa, one in three girls and one in five boys suffer sexual exploitation in one form or another. Furthermore, over 2,000 children are murdered each year in South Africa.'

These astonishing figures contrast sharply with British figures. In Scotland, for example, around 9,000 children go missing each year, with approximately 77,000 going missing throughout the whole of the United Kingdom, though the number of children murdered in the UK is estimated by the World Health Organisation to be around 50 a year, with the majority of them being killed by their parents or relatives. It is only in such tragic cases as that of Holly Wells and Jessica Chapman in 2002, where they were murdered by their own school caretaker, which hit the headlines.

In Britain, too, the establishment a decade ago of the Police National Missing Persons Bureau based at Scotland Yard has had an effect, with the Bureau linking its expertise and resources to all UK police forces and Interpol.

In Scotland the launch of the UK version of the Missing Kids Website, originally established in the US, last summer was met with applause from all quarters, as the world wide web it is seen as a major tool in the recovery of missing and abducted children.

Richard Grey, assistant chief constable of Strathclyde Police, said: 'The trauma which families suffer when children go missing is something which no parent wishes to experience. The police are acutely aware of the effects this type of incident can have and therefore the search for and investigation of missing children is given the highest priority.'

He added: 'Extending the Missing Kids Website to Scotland will greatly assist the police service in locating some of the most vulnerable young people in our communities and returning them home safely.'