

# Lost and

*How technology, tips, and plain old luck help police solve most missing-person cases*

BY CHITRA RAGAVAN

When cultural anthropologists finally begin sifting through the sands of the summer of 2001, they may easily conclude that this was a nation riven by a plague of missing persons. They will note the nonstop attention devoted to the disappearance of

Washington intern Chandra Levy. They will find that her plight heightened the urgency in other fresh cases and even renewed interest in those detectives had long considered dormant.

Eventually, however, they will stumble onto the larger truth: Thanks to some amazing advances in forensics, technology, and communications, along with greater police and corporate commitment, the unsolved case of the missing person remains a dramatic exception. Most cases are resolved routinely, easily, and quickly. Most are the product of a family dispute. Most do not generate semipermanent panels of pundits for the cable TV talk shows.

Since the kidnapping of the Lindbergh baby in the 1930s, a subtle fear and durable mythology about missing persons have pervaded the American psyche. It is a



**MISSING.** A child (right) darts past a yellow ribbon marking the disappearance of two girls.



# Found



FROM LEFT: FBI / AP; SCOTT GOLDSMITH FOR USN&WR



## Missing and action

High-profile cases of missing children and adults have often spurred congressional action.

### Charles Lindbergh Jr.

**ABDUCTED:** March 1, 1932, from home in New Jersey  
**LEGISLATION:** Congress moved to establish federal jurisdiction over interstate kidnapping cases. The Lindbergh baby was found dead near the family's home. The case was solved in 1935 but endured as perhaps the nation's best-known kidnapping case.



### Etan Patz

**ABDUCTED:** May 25, 1979, in SoHo, New York  
**ACTION:** The public outcry over Etan's disappearance became a catalyst for a missing children's movement. Etan's case prompted the appearance of photos of missing children on milk cartons. He was declared legally dead in late June.



### Adam Walsh

**ABDUCTED:** 1981 from a Hollywood, Fla., shopping mall and later murdered.  
**LEGISLATION:** Congress ordered law enforcement agencies to enter missing children in the FBI's National Crime Information Center database. In 1984, Congress launched the National Center for Missing and Exploited Children.



### Polly Klaas

**ABDUCTED:** 1993 and then murdered  
**ACTION:** Two months after Polly's abduction, Congress passed the International Parental Kidnapping Crime Act, which made international child abduction by a parent a federal offense. Klaas's killer, Richard Allen Davis, was sentenced to death.



### Kristen Modafferi

**DISAPPEARED:** The 18-year-old disappeared in San Francisco in June 1997.  
**LEGISLATION:** In a bill known as Kristen's law, Congress created a national center for missing adults. It also authorized the attorney general to make \$1 million grants for four years to public and private agencies to find missing persons over 18.



fear reinvigorated periodically by heart-breaking cases like the abduction and murder of children like Etan Patz, Adam Walsh, and Polly Klaas. But consider: Last year there was more than one person found for every person who was reported missing.

"Twenty years ago," says Ernie Allen, who heads the National Center for Missing and Exploited Children (NCMEC), "if you were the parent of a missing child, you were on your own." Now the FBI, the Customs Service, and even the Secret Service are aiding in the hunt (box, Page 17). Collectively, missing-person cases are being resolved in record numbers. Indeed, it's rare that a missing person ends up the victim of foul play.

**Plaintive vigils.** Those successes, of course, do little to cheer families whose plaintive vigils for missing relatives are ongoing, largely private, and not the subject of *Larry King Live*. Dail Dinwiddie walked out of her home in Columbia, S.C., on the evening of Sept. 24, 1992, and never came back. After attending a U2 concert, she partied with friends into the early morning hours at a nightclub. As she was leaving, she told a bouncer that two men had been hassling her in the parking lot. The 23-year-old waited a bit, then left through the front door. Ever since, Jean and Dan Dinwiddie have been without their daughter. "You don't sleep; the phone rings, your blood pressure goes up," says Jean Dinwiddie. "For nine years, we've never gone to my mailbox without my stomach feeling sick and nervous. 'Yes, today is the day.'"

But probably, it won't be. As time passes, the odds of finding someone dwindle. Too soon, such cases fade from view. Police cannot search forever. Friends move on. And families, though tips and tidbits of gossip cruelly renew hope, eventually become resigned to the loss. Harold Chambers, a Columbia, S.C., police investigator, is still assigned to the Dinwiddie case. The family calls him occasionally with tips, and he dutifully sends out tracking dogs and patrol officers. "They need somebody they can call on," says Chambers, "and I guess I'm it." Most families, like the Dinwiddies, nurse their grief largely in silence.

The Levy family is suffering publicly, under the seeming 24-hour gaze of television cameras. In fact, the family's strategy of seeking attention is probably one reason that police have devoted so much time to tracking their daughter down. "This is not going to go away," Susan Levy, Chandra's mother, told *U.S. News* late last week.

Levy's case also has helped other families faced with recent disappearances to confront police with a potent question: "What about *our* missing person?" Chicago bookstore owners Ellen and Ulrich



Sandmeyer are trying to find their daughter Christina, 22, a Stanford University student and avid bicyclist. She disappeared July 13 after a bike trek through the mountains near Santa Cruz, Calif. "We have gotten tremendous coverage as the media tried to find similar cases," says Ellen Sandmeyer. "That's lucky for us."

The attention on Levy enabled Tracey Bradley to get word out on national television about her two daughters, Tionda, 10, and Diamond, 3. The girls have been missing since July 6, when they vanished from their home on Chicago's South Side. "Word would not get out as quick or as far," says Al Kindle, chief of staff to Chicago Alderman Toni Preckwinkle, who represents the ward where the girls live. "Levy has brought the case of the missing person to the forefront and made it possible in this case to get media attention." As of late last week, the girls had not been located.

Agonizing as these stories are, they are the notable exception. Last year, 876,213 persons were reported missing by police to the FBI's National Crime Information Center. But 882,163 persons were re-

FROM TOP: SCOTT GOLDSMITH FOR US&amp;WR; DAVID BUTOW—CORBIS SABA FOR US&amp;WR



**CIRCLE OF FAITH.** Neighbors surround Tracey Bradley (center) near her home on Chicago's South Side, part of a prayer vigil for her two young daughters, Tionda, 10, and Diamond, 3. The girls have been missing since July 6. Companies like Wal-Mart (below) place posters of missing children in their stores.



ported found, a number that includes cases cleared from previous years. As of July 1, there were 98,697 active files of missing persons in the NCIC. Who are all these missing people? Nearly 60 percent are juveniles, and overall, 55 percent are female. Ultimately, 99 percent of missing people return on their own or are found. "It's not all gloom and doom," says the NCMEC's Allen.

Police departments cite a 75 percent to 99 percent success rate for finding missing persons—far exceeding that of solving thefts and burglaries. But in some respects, the data are misleading. Because so many missing persons return voluntarily, says Robert Keppel, a homicide consultant and former veteran cop, the cases are really "resolved without police investigation."

Many cases, however, are solved—even when the missing person doesn't want to be found. Joel Cuaresma, a 31-year-old pharmacist from Corona, Calif., vanished after his lunch hour in March of 2000. His wife, Elaine, enlisted help from police, a private detective, and psychics. Weeks later, a security camera showed Cuaresma making a purchase with his American Express card at a store in Mexico City.

**Gut instinct.** And for all the high-tech wizardry available to police, gut instinct often carries the day. Donald "Rob" Wood's mother reported her 27-year-old son missing in July 1998 after he failed to pick her up at the Seattle airport. Detective Ray Holm ran the routine checks. Wood didn't seem like the typical missing person. He had a full-time job, close relationships, and no criminal background. "I was perplexed," says Holm. After five days, Holm rechecked a freight elevator shaft near Dutch Ned's bar, where Wood had been drinking. Horrified, he saw body parts splayed on the elevator floor, but then a finger moved. "Rob," he called. "Yeah, man," came the somewhat stupefied reply from Wood, who had fallen 80 feet. Wood's mother was so happy to have him safely returned that she donated \$15,000 to the Seattle police. "If you work hard enough, you get lucky," says Holm.

Cracking a missing-person case can be a life-changing event. In 1985, Bill Thomas, a social worker with the Los Angeles County Department of Children and Family Services, was assigned the case of 9-year-old Inez Jean McCaerney. The girl's foster mother told Thomas that Inez had described vivid dreams of her mother in Florida. Most important, the little girl recalled a night when a strange woman woke her up and took her away. After three months of interviewing Inez, Thomas took a long shot and contacted the NCMEC. He was stunned. The agency had an Inez Jean

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*Sanders* in its files. She had been reported missing by her mother. A woman her mother had met at a truck stop in Arizona, it turned out, had abducted the child and then abandoned her. When the FBI brought Thomas a picture of Inez, it was a match. Two days later, the girl was reunited with her mother, still living in Florida. Last week, choking back tears, Thomas recalled the moment. Getting Inez back to her mom, he said, "was the highlight of my social work career." It also taught him that "no matter what a kid is telling you, it means something. You *have* to pay attention to it."

ing the person isn't great. "Police response varies throughout the nation," says Keppel. "It varies towards the bad."

That's especially true in smaller police departments that operate with limited resources. And because the cases are so infrequent, there is a general lack of experience and readiness. But David Klinger, a University of Missouri criminologist, says police are unfairly criticized. "It's the tail wagging the dog," says Klinger. He argues that police can't be faulted for waiting a period of time to see if a person is indeed missing. After all, it's not a crime for an

child, under age 10, police react quickly.

Police handling of missing-child cases has long been controversial, particularly because so many of the cases are really battles between the child's parents. In the early 1980s, several high-profile abduction cases began to change the way police operated. Among the first was that of Etan Patz, 22 years ago. Just recently, Etan's parents finally signed papers declaring him legally dead (box, Page 18). The case of Adam Walsh, in 1981, showed in horrifying detail how unprepared police were to handle child abductions. Many of these

abductions led to passage of new laws (table, Page 14). Media accounts claimed that as many as 1.8 million children disappeared every year and that 50,000 were snatched by strangers. A series of made-for-TV movies fueled the perception of an unrelenting flood of missing children. In 1986, 2,800 shopping malls participated in a weeklong push to fingerprint 10 million children. During the 1980s, photos of missing kids first began to appear on utility bills, pizza boxes, and, most famously, milk cartons. In 1985, President Reagan declared May 25 National Missing Children's Day. But there were a few thousand cases shy of an epidemic. In 1986, a Pulitzer Prize-winning series in the *Denver Post* revealed that the vast majority of kids labeled "missing" actually were involved in custody disputes or had run

## On the missing trail

*Advances in forensic technology have enabled police to solve even the most vexing cases.*



**LEADING EDGE.** Age-progression technology produced from a photo at age 3 a composite of Katrina Mattson at 7 (center) that closely resembled how she looked when found at the age of 8.



**RECONSTRUCTION.** Working from a skull, investigators use clay to depict how the person might have looked. Then they create a composite photo to compare it with a missing person.

Abductions by strangers understandably generate the most fear and attention, but such kidnappings are only the fourth-largest category of missing children reported to NCMEC. According to the Center's Ben Ermini, runaways are first, followed by family abductions, those lost or otherwise missing, and finally, nonfamily abductions. In the past decade, the center has resolved 925 nonfamily cases. In those cases, 191 children—about 21 percent—were found murdered. Though the speculation that swirls around cases like Chandra Levy's surely may make it seem otherwise, most cases of missing children and adults aren't the result of foul play. When a crime has been committed, however, the cops' record of success at rescu-

adult to disappear. Even parents wait an average of two hours before reporting that a child is gone.

This go-slow approach, while understandable, can cost plenty. "In the most serious cases," says the NCMEC's Allen, "time is the enemy." Nearly 25 percent of homicides begin with a missing-person complaint, and nearly three quarters of child-abduction victims who are murdered are killed within three hours of being grabbed, says Keppel. A 1990 U.S. law has barred waiting periods by police departments (some departments even had 24-to-72-hour mandatory waits in the past) for missing-child cases, requiring an immediate police report and NCIC entry in every missing-child case. And generally if it's a young

away. Rather than 50,000 kids abducted each year by strangers—the number circulated by the nonprofit Child Find organization—the paper reported that just 67 cases of abductions by strangers had been investigated by the FBI the previous year. "Still," says Allen, "all of these kids are at-risk kids."

And not just at risk but also increasingly much harder to find because of a sharp rise in international abductions. In such cases, the FBI, the Customs Service, the Secret Service, and Interpol get involved. Agents from all these agencies are detailed to the NCMEC. Secret Service senior analyst James Rutherford, who is detailed to the center, says last year there were 1,697 international cases, a 67 percent increase

over the previous year. Of those, 1,374 children were located with the assistance of the Secret Service. "I've recovered a million dollars," says Rutherford, who used to investigate currency fraud. "But when I recovered my first child, wow!"

Over time, police have assembled a protocol for teaching officers what to look for when a child has been abducted, and how best to conduct a search. Stephen Steidel, a former longtime Long Island cop who now trains police for NCMC, says the typical kidnapper is a 27-year-old white male, a transient construction worker or day laborer with marginal social skills. An abductor might leave telltale signs in a car, such as duct tape on the passenger's-side seat belt that might disable the unlock button. When Robert Keppel trains police departments to solve child homicides, he tells cops that when they fan out looking for a body, they must be only 3 feet apart when searching for a child. He also tells police officers that the killer often lives near the scene of the murder or near the victim's home.

**The guy next door.** And yet, says Keppel, in 1995, when 9-year-old Jimmy Ryce got off the school bus and disappeared near Homestead, Fla., searchers fanned out far and wide but failed to look at farmhand Juan Carlos Chavez's trailer just 6 miles from Jimmy's home. Three months later, Chavez's landlady, visiting his trailer, found Jimmy's backpack and called police. Chavez confessed he had taken Jimmy to a second abandoned trailer just 2 miles from the boy's home. There he raped and murdered the boy, dismembered him, and buried his body parts in cement planters in an avocado grove nearby. Chavez is now on death row for the murder. Says Keppel, "The answer was right there next door."

Tragedies have yielded breakthroughs in finding other missing children. In 1996, 9-year-old Amber Hagerman was kidnapped in Arlington, Texas, and killed even though an eyewitness saw the abduction and called police. "Police realized their eyes weren't enough—they needed the community's help," says Allen. Amber's murder led to an innovative program, known as the AMBER (America's

## SECRET SERVICE

# Protecting presidents—and children

**P**olice were convinced that William "Brad" Jackson had killed his 9-year-old daughter. But they lacked the evidence—most notably a body—to prove it. So they set out to get it. They tracked Jackson's car with a global positioning device, mapping his every move. And about a month after Valiree's

Congress expanded its mission. The reason: The Secret Service's forensic experts are considered among the world's best at dissecting documents, creating composites, and analyzing handwriting. The agency—charged with tracking threats to the president—also has some of the most cutting-edge tools for fighting crime. Among them: an ultrasensitive high-tech system that uses a mix of gold dust and zinc to lift fingerprints from difficult surfaces.

**Top priority.** "These investigations go to the top of the line," says Jack Johnson, special agent in charge of the Secret Service's Forensic Services division. The agency has aided some 700 child abuse, abduction, and homicide probes, including a 1997 case in which a 9-year-old girl was left for dead in the fetid stairwell of her Chicago housing project after being sexually assaulted, beaten, and poisoned with bug spray. She survived, but was paralyzed, blind, and unable to speak. Cops had a suspect—but needed hard evidence. They got it from Secret Service forensic experts, who matched writing carved into the girl's abdomen with the handwriting of

suspect Patrick Sykes. Sykes was sentenced to 120 years in prison on multiple counts of criminal sexual assault, aggravated kidnapping, and attempted murder.

When the police in Spokane hit a snag, they, too, turned to the Secret Service. They shipped the garbage bags to the agency's lab in Washington, D.C. Using the gold dust and zinc, experts there were able to detect Jackson's fingerprints on the plastic sacks. The evidence helped convict Jackson of first-degree murder and send him away for 56 years. —C.R.



**SECRET SERVICE.** A scientist at the Secret Service Forensic Laboratory uses a laser light to examine a surface for fingerprints (above). When a filter is applied (left), fingerprints can be seen.

Oct. 19, 1999, disappearance, they followed her father's trail to a shallow grave in a remote area some 40 miles northwest of the family's Spokane, Wash., home; inside they discovered a body too decomposed to identify, wrapped in garbage bags. In the old days, that might have been the end of the road—case closed. But not anymore. Instead, police called upon a new source for help: the Secret Service. The elite agency, best known for protecting presidents, has been helping the National Center for Missing and Exploited Children since 1994, when

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Missing: Broadcast Emergency Response) Plan, created in 1996 by Dallas/Fort Worth radio managers and Texas law enforcement agencies. In serious abductions, police fax the information to broadcasters who alert communities nearby using the Emergency Alert System. The AMBER Plan has since spread to other states and been credited with recovering 16 children. This fall, the NCMC will take the program nationwide. The Federal Communications Commission is expected to issue a specific code for the plan by the end of the year.

**“Code Adam.”** Corporations have also joined in. Using simple but effective ways to generate publicity, they have been particularly helpful in disseminating children’s photographs. According to the NCMC’s Ermini, 1 in every 6 children recovered is found as a direct result of someone’s looking at a photo. The center has created the technology for making sophisticated age-progression and age-regression photographs of children, which

often are very accurate. Other companies, like the Connecticut-based direct-marketing company Advo, are using “Have you seen me?” cards, combining ads for products or services with pictures of missing children that reach 80 million mailboxes. So far, the cards have been credited with leading to the recovery of 110 missing children. Kathleen Mooney, a 5-year old Pennsylvania girl, was reunited with her mother in July 2000. Her father had abducted her and traveled with her for 18 months, ending up on the Honduran island of Roatán. An anonymous tip from an American tourist led to the child.

Wal-Mart also has several successful missing-children initiatives. Stores invoke a “Code Adam” policy every time a child is reported lost. Employees stop working, immediately staff the exits, and search for the child. Wal-Marts also display missing-children bulletin boards that have led to the re-

covery of 56 children. Last May, Alberta Morris, 59, and her friend Glenda Thomas, 52, were washing Morris’s throw rugs at a laundromat in Connerville, Okla. They were drawn to a little girl who was playing as her dad did her laundry. The women later drove to the Wal-Mart in nearby Ada, to shop. As Morris wheeled her cat food bags out the door, she says she heard her friend screaming, “Get back here! Look at this!” There on the Wal-Mart bulletin board was a picture of the girl, 19-month-old Marissa Meuse, from Port Orange, Fla. The girl had been abducted by her father during a bitter custody dispute. Morris and Thomas alerted police. Meuse was returned to her mother. The mother subsequently got a job at, where else, Wal-Mart. |

*With Michael Schaffer in Washington, Randy Dottinga in Los Angeles, and Ingrid Lobet in Seattle*

## BITTER END

## An icon of tragedy

Stanley Patz knows that his son isn’t coming home. It’s been more than 22 years since he waved goodbye as Etan, then 6, headed off from their Manhattan loft to his school bus stop. It was the first time Etan was allowed to make the two-block trek on his own—and the last time his parents would see him. Etan never made it to the bus stop.

For weeks, police helicopters searched rooftops, bloodhounds sniffed city streets, and volunteers covered lampposts and store windows with Etan’s photo, which eventually made its way to some 60 countries and still appears on the New York City Police Department’s Web site. But after years of false leads, like one in 1985 that led the FBI to Israel, where they believed ultraorthodox Jews were holding Etan, the Patzes finally gave up this summer. They filed court papers asking that their son—who was the impetus behind photos

of missing kids on milk cartons—be declared legally dead. The child whose disappearance turned May 25 into Missing Children’s Day was no longer thought of as missing. “It’s sad, but we are never getting our 6-year-old back. That would be totally unrealistic,” says Stanley Patz.

The court action marked the end of the search but the beginning of a new campaign by the Patzes to bring to justice the man they believe abducted and killed their son. The family plans to file a wrongful-death lawsuit this week against Jose Ramos, 56, who is now serving a 23-year sentence for molesting a Pennsylvania boy in 1986.

**No body.** According to court papers and Stuart GraBois, a former prosecutor in the case who’s now a legal adviser to the Patzes, Ramos admitted to police that the boy was in his apartment on May 25, 1979—the day he vanished—but claimed he left un-



**CLOSURE.** Stanley and Julie Patz hold a photo of Etan.

scathed to visit an aunt in the city’s Washington Heights section. (The Patzes say they do not have any relatives in Washington Heights.) According to GraBois, Ramos knew a woman the family had hired to walk Etan to school during a bus strike that ended the day before he disappeared. In addition, GraBois says, an inmate told cops that Ramos told him that he had sexually assaulted the boy. Neither Ramos nor his attorney was available for comment last week.

A spokesperson for the Manhattan district attorney’s office said last week that the office doesn’t have enough information yet to bring criminal charges and that the investigation is ongoing. But the Patzes are pursuing the case in civil court, where the burden of proof is less.

“A lot of people don’t understand how empowering this is for the fami-

ly,” says Brian O’Dwyer, the Patzes’ lawyer. “What it does is give them the opportunity to let the world know that this man caused the death of their son.”

Stanley Patz says it doesn’t matter if they win or lose. All he wants is an answer. Every year on Etan’s birthday and the anniversary of his disappearance, Patz sends his son’s missing-child poster to Ramos. On the back, he always writes the same thing: “What did you do to my little boy?” —Miki Meek