

Missing Children in Chandigarh: A Study

–Sonam Rohta*

ABSTRACT

In every 8 minutes, one child goes missing in India which is a matter of grave concern. They are subjected to exploitation, sold into slavery, prostitution and have very little hope for their lives. Every day, around 150 children go missing in India – kidnapping and abduction are the biggest crimes in our country (National Crime Record Bureau, 2016). Among those missing children, 55% are girls and 45% of all missing children remain untraceable as yet raising fears of them having been killed or pushed into beggary or prostitution rackets. There are several factors which account for the disappearance of the children in our country. Poverty, society's intolerance and insufficient law enforcement are the root causes and reasons behind this growing problem of missing children in India. This problem needs to be addressed seriously as it concerns the children who are young, innocent, inexperienced and helpless. The present paper is an attempt to highlight the problem of missing children in Chandigarh. The major reasons for children going missing in Chandigarh are not the kidnapping or abduction, whereas 97% of children reported missing are the cases of runaway where children discreetly leave homes due to reasons like love affairs, elopement, family fights, financial crisis at home, deprivation of parental love and care, etc. The study also reflects on the problems faced by the families of missing children and the key role played by police during the investigation of the registered cases..

Keywords: *Missing Children, Runaway, Crime Against Children Need of Care and Protection*

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INTRODUCTION

There are 472 million children in India under the age of 18 years, which constitutes 39% of the total population in the country (Census, 2011). Nineteen percent of the world's children live in India. This is an enormous number and a huge responsibility for the nation. When the children of any country are educated, healthy, and happy and have equal access to opportunities, they are the country's greatest human resource. The problem of missing children, which is found in both developing and developed nations, amounts to the greater vulnerability of children. The vulnerability of children is compounded by various factors like being abandoned, physical or mental disabilities, child poverty, powerlessness, defenceless, etc. In such a situation, it becomes a big responsibility of the state to provide the safe environment for the healthy development of children.

According to the National Crime Records Bureau (NCRB), one child goes missing in India in every 8 minutes, of which, 40% of those children have not been found. They are subjected to exploitation, sold into slavery, prostitution and have very little hope for their lives. Every day, around 150 children go missing in India – kidnapping and abduction are the biggest crimes in our country (NCRB, 2016). Among those missing children, 55% are girls and 45% of all missing children remain untraceable as yet raising fears of them having been killed or pushed into beggary or prostitution rackets. Over the last 10 years, crimes against children have increased five times over (National Crime Record Bureau Data Series). The law on missing children in India needs to be more stringent and well defined.

Who are these Missing Children?

Rule 92 (1) of the Juvenile Justice (Care and Protection of Children) Model Rules 2016 defines a missing child as – ‘a child whose whereabouts are not known to the parents, legal guardian or any other person or institution legally entrusted with the custody of the child, whatever may be the circumstances or causes of disappearance, and shall be considered missing and in need of care and protection until located or his safety and well-being established’. The words ‘missing-child’ gives an impression of tragic and frightening kidnapping. But these cases of missing children represent a number of problems and factors, which can cause child to be missing including abduction by family members or by non-family members or strangers, children who run away on their own or are forced

to runaway due to compelling circumstances within their families or surroundings, children who are abandoned, trafficked or smuggled for various reasons and children who are lost by chance. Since the group of missing children is very diverse and heterogeneous, there is no specific applied set of definitions to describe them.

NISMART (National Incidence Studies of Missing, Abducted, Runaway and Throwaway Children) defined a missing child in two ways: first, in terms of those who were missing from their caretakers 'caretaker missing' and second, in terms of those who were missing from their caretakers and reported to an agency for help locating them 'reported missing'. The term 'missing children' is also used for those children who are sought by the police and missing children agencies for their any reason of being missing. The socioeconomic spectrum of missing children in India varies widely. Children who are lost or run away without informing their parents or guardians may be broadly termed as missing. Missing children are a major and growing concern, which needs to be given attention by central and state government bodies.

However, the problem of missing children is being addressed by both governmental and non-governmental agencies and many online databases are created to record the traced and untraced the cases of missing children. Falerio, in her newspaper article in '*The New York Times*', says, 'It is remarkably difficult to get reliable figures about how many Indian children go missing, but the scale of the problem appears to be staggering. According to the country's Ministry of Women and Child Development, 242,938 children disappeared between 2012 and 2017. But according to TrackChild, a government database, nearly that many children 237,040 went missing between 2012 and 2014 alone'.

Why Children Go Missing?

There are several factors which account for the disappearance of the children in our country. Poverty, society's intolerance and insufficient law enforcement are the root causes and reasons behind this growing problem of missing children in India. According to CRY (Child Rights and You), 180 children go missing on an average every day in India. While the number of children who go missing remains alarming, the number of untraced children keep piling year on year. According to the Ministry of Home Affairs data, the number of untraced children increased by a shocking 84% between 2013 and 2015. The total number of untraced children in 2015 was 62,988 as against 34,244 in the year 2013. The

numbers may be much higher as many cases have never been reported because families of many of those children are from a marginalized background and do not have knowledge and resources to report a case of missing child. Moreover, their complaints are also denied and not taken seriously by police because it requires time, manpower and resources, and the police force in India is short on all of those.

There are also a large number of children who runaway from homes after dropping out of school or facing abuse and poverty at home. They usually run away to the large metropolitan cities where they fall prey to exploitation and are employed at tea stalls, sold into brothels, start beggary, etc. Problematic family relationships are highly correlated with running away from home. Studies reveal that adolescents who run away from home report the troubled relationship with their family members such as family fights, instability at home, lack of parental supervision, etc. The longer the children remain on streets, the more likely they have chances to develop a substance abuse disorder and the adolescents who are engaged in heavy drug use are more prone to run away.

A countless number of children go missing every year across the country. Missing children in India are a major problem, which needs to be given more systematic attention. These children represent diverse cultures, religions, castes, communities, and social and economic groups. The government is undoubtedly committed for the welfare of children. India has legal provisions to counter trafficking as per the Immoral Traffic Prevention Act 1986. The MWCD (Ministry of Women and Child Development) has taken a number of initiatives to combat trafficking of Women and Children. However, despite its best efforts, there are innumerable children who are subject to exploitation and atrocities of various kinds. In addition, many cases of missing children are not reported to the police at all for various reasons including lack of awareness, fear to approach police, illiteracy; also, police involvement in the resolution of different kinds of cases varies widely across the country.

The Role of Police

The main role of the police in all situations is to endorse the law, prevent crime and disorder and safeguard the citizens. Like all other citizens, children also have their fundamental rights and they should be offered full protection by the criminal law.¹ As per the directions of the Hon'ble

¹ Standard Operating Procedure for Cases of Missing Children, Ministry of Women & Child Development

Supreme Court of India in *Bachpan Bachao Andolan vs. Union of India* (WP (Civil) 75 of 2012) on 10th May 2013: ‘upon receipt of a complaint regarding a missing child, an FIR should be registered forthwith as a case of trafficking or abduction’. When the child goes missing, there are other stakeholders like investigating officer, Juvenile Justice Board and Child Welfare Committee, which perform certain legal role and responsibilities in tracing the missing child.

NCRB release in the year 2016 in compliance with Supreme Court directives included a new chapter on ‘Missing Persons and Children’ which shows that a total of 1,11,569 children (41,175 boys and 70,394 girls) were reported missing. Before 2013, it was not required for police to register an FIR against missing children case; therefore, very few cases were reported and ‘zero FIR’ was registered against missing children cases. According to the Section 363–369 of the Indian Penal Code, a missing child could be a victim of kidnapping/abduction for various purposes including: the purpose of begging, ransom, marriage/illicit intercourse, grievous hurt, murder, unnatural lust, slavery, wrongful confinement, etc. Apart from the above, a missing child could also become a victim of kidnapping/abduction for labour, entertainment and sports, adoption, child soldiers or combatants in armed conflicts, other illegal activities among the various forms of abuse/exploitation.

Crime against Children in India

There is no separate classification of offences against children. Crimes against Children are the offences committed against children or the crimes in which children are the victims. There is a huge variation in the percentage of crime against children between 2014 and 2016. The crime against children recorded between 2014 and 2015 was 5.3% and it increased up to 13.6% between 2015 and 2016. The total number of crime against children reported in 2016 was 106,958 while 94,172 crimes were reported in 2015 (NCRB).

Table 1: Missing and Traced Children (Below 18 years) 2016

<i>S. No.</i>	<i>Status of Missing and Traced Children</i>	<i>All India</i>	<i>Chandigarh</i>
1.	Untraced/unrecovered missing children from previous years	48,162	234
2.	Children missing 2016	63,407	201

3.	Total children missing	111,569	435
4.	Total recovered/Traced 2016	55,944	152
5.	Percentage recovery (Total recovered or traced / total missing)	50.1	34.9
6.	Unrecovered/untraced missing children (Including previous years untraced missing children)	55,625	283

Source: Crime in India 2016, NCRB

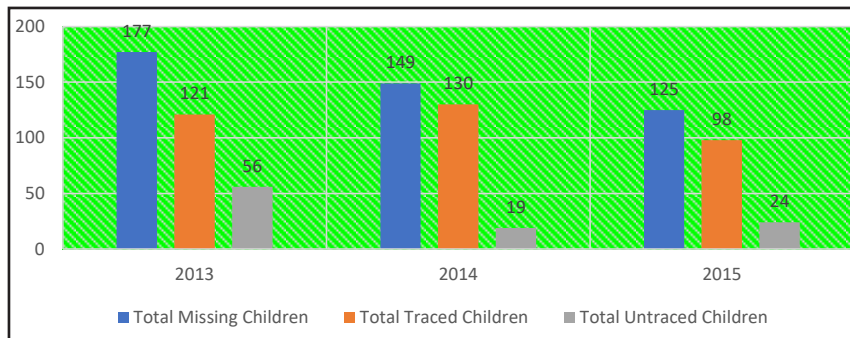
Problem of Missing Children in Chandigarh

'In Chandigarh, number of missing children is on rise: With barely five months gone, the city has already seen 33 children go missing with 28 of them (85%) teenaged girls.' (**Hindustan Times, 26th May, 2017**)

'Eight children who had gone missing from the city were traced by the UT police during a special drive conducted in the past seven days.' (**The Tribune, 11th September, 2017**)

'Under operation Muskaan, cops have reunited 107 children with their families. The Chandigarh Police started this operation in December 2014 as a part of the Women Safety Week to reunite missing children with their families.' (**The Indian Express, 13th July, 2015**)

The below fig. shows the total number of missing, traced and untraced children in Chandigarh between the year 2013 and 2015. The data was collected from the office records maintained by the Chandigarh Police. It was found that the number of missing children had gradually decreased during the period of three years.



Source: Chandigarh Police Records

Fig. 1: Missing Children Cases from 2013-2015 in Chandigarh

Chandigarh is an important city in India which seems to have progressed far better than any Indian region. The city has the highest per capita income in India, making it one of the most affluent cities. As per details from Census 2011, Chandigarh has the population of 10.55 Lakhs, an increase from figure of 9.01 Lakh in 2001 census. The study revealed that most of the cases of missing children in Chandigarh are registered from the slums and periphery of the city. The main inhabitant of these areas is the migrant population who migrates to the city primarily for the employment or income generation purposes. Their family size is bigger than their houses and children are mostly neglected by parents in terms of education, guidance, proper nutrition and childcare.

The factors behind children going missing vary from place to place. In Chandigarh, most of the cases of missing children are reported between the ages of 11 and 15 years and these are the cases of love affairs and elopement. It indicates the complete maladjustment at home which compels children to leave their own homes at such a crucial age of their life because they do not have healthy environment, supporting family and knowledge to comprehend the consequences of early marriage or elopement. Police plays an important role in tracing the missing cases and there are various websites and databases designed for the search of missing children or persons in Chandigarh including Missing Child Search, ChildLine, KhoyaPaya, Track Child and Zipnet.

Rationale of the Study

The problem of missing children in our country is at increasing rate. During 2016, the major heads under 'Crime Against Children' were kidnapping and abduction, which were recorded 52.3 and 34.4%, respectively, under the Protection of Children from Sexual Offences Act, 2012 including child rape (NCRB). The missing children faced a number of problems like abduction or kidnapping either by family members or strangers, runaway children or those who are forced to leave their homes due to compelling circumstances in their families or external surroundings, children who are the victims of trafficking and exploitation. Undoubtedly, each of these groups of children points out to different social problems. Globally, there are various factors including cultural, social, financial, familial, psychological and exploitation, which are responsible for the growing problem of missing children. This problem needs to be addressed seriously as it concerns the children who are young, innocent, inexperienced and helpless.

Among all the UTs in India, total untraced and unrecovered cases of missing children is 435 and stands second highest after Delhi, which counts 14,661 cases of untraced/missing children till 2016 (NCRB, 2016). The present study is an attempt to understand the various factors leading to the problem of missing children in Chandigarh. The major reasons for children going missing in Chandigarh are not the kidnapping or abduction, whereas majority of children reported missing are run away cases who leave homes due to reasons like love affairs, elopement, family fights, financial crisis at home, deprivation of parental love and care, etc. The study also reflects the problems faced by the family members and the effective role played by police during the investigation of missing child. The study emphasizes on the provisions and necessary steps to be taken to provide suitable and healthy environment to children to prevent them from going missing.

Research Methodology

The result of this study is predominantly based on the primary research. The fieldwork was carried out in different locations covering all zones of Chandigarh. The data and information on cases of missing children in Chandigarh were collected from eight police stations, which include the police stations of Sectors 17, 11, 3, 26, 31, 39, Industrial Area and Manimajra. The descriptive methodology was employed in which participant observation in the field and structured interview guide was used as research tools. The sample consists of police personnel and families of missing children. In total, 451 cases of missing children in past 3 years were recorded from selective police stations and on the basis of that information, the convenience sampling method was used to interview the sample of 42 families based on their availability and willingness to share information with the researcher. To add more qualitative nature to the study, few in-depth case studies of victims' families and personal interview of SHO (Station House Officer) and ASI (Assistant Sub Inspector) of AHTU (Anti Human Trafficking Unit) were also recorded to understand the main reasons behind the problem of children going missing in Chandigarh.

OBJECTIVE

The main objective of the study was to examine the problem of missing children in Chandigarh and understand the factors leading to this problem

in city. It was an attempt to understand the social and economic status of the families of missing children and the role played by police in assisting the families during the investigation of missing children. The findings of the study also reflect the attitude of victim's families towards police and society when their children go missing. The study also provides the suitable suggestions and measures for the government to ensure the safety of children and rehabilitation of those who are traced through successful investigation and efforts of police.

Main Findings

Occupation of the Parents

The study revealed that most of the families of missing children were migrant labourers and daily wagers. 53% of those interviewed families were living in slums and periphery areas of Chandigarh who had no regular employment. They live from hand to mouth and strive hard to find ways to earn livelihood in the city. 27.8% of the families or respondents were engaged in very low-profile jobs where they had no job security. Most of them were reluctant to share about their occupation as they had no source of fixed income and stable job. The study found out that most the families were poor and slum dwellers who registered complaint against their missing children in a police station. It was very surprising that not even a single case of missing children belonged to the higher socioeconomic group.

Lack of Family Planning

The study revealed that most of the families of missing children were not aware about the family planning. Most of the families were living in one-room accommodation and their family size was usually larger than the size of their houses. Of all interviewed families, 19% of the parents claimed to have five to six children and 17% of them had more than seven children with less than a year difference in the age group of their children. This problem causes severe poverty in the lives of children because they have to adjust within the income which is not sufficient to feed even two persons in a day.

Large size of family also deprives the child of getting individual attention from his/her parents, which increases the chances of behavioural problems among children and they tend to run away from home. The poor families often treat their children as bread earners and ignore the fact

that it is their responsibility to provide care, affection and educate their children for their better future.

Low-Income Families

The study found out that most of the interviewed families were having the monthly income below Rs. 5000/- per month. They always live in a fear of meeting their ends due to which children are neglected by their parents for fulfilling their basic physical and emotional needs.

Poor and overcrowded housing and pressure for earnings to supplement or substitute for those of the father may affect family life unfavourably (La Epstein, 1957). People at progressively lower levels of socioeconomic status have correspondingly less opportunity to control the circumstances and events that affect their lives.

Areas Prone for Missing Children

It was found out that almost 75% of the cases of missing children were reported from slums and periphery of Chandigarh, that is, the areas which are mostly populated by migrant labourers who move to the city along with their families in search of the better livelihood. The study reveals that 97% of the children were reported missing from their home itself while their parents were away to earn their daily wages. It was very surprising to note that the researcher did not come across even a single case which was reported by the upper-class section of the society. Police personnel also claimed that maximum of the cases were registered from the disadvantaged and economically weaker section of the society. Lack of awareness, illiteracy, unemployment and poverty are the main factors responsible for growing social problems among people belonging to the poor section of the society.

SHO at Sector-11, Chandigarh shared that the poverty is the main reason behind children going missing from their home. It is often seen that children from poor families run away and leave their home without informing their parents. He said that the police do not involve the local community in investigating the cases of missing children unless they find it necessary. There are no such NGOs in Chandigarh which are helpful to the police during the investigation of missing cases and the police also lack faith in NGOs as they are interested until police lodge the FIR. The public can be helpful in reducing the crime rate in our country if they are sensitized enough to understand the importance of sharing information with the police whenever they find anything going wrong in their vicinity.

Gender and Missing Children

It was observed that more girls were reported missing as compared to the boys. In teenagers, there are substantially more cases of females going missing than males; whereas in adults, males go missing more often than females (NPIA, 2011: 17). Of all interviewed families, 63% were girls and only 36% were boys, which indicate that the girls have more problems as compared to the boys. The reasons for running away from home also vary between boys and girls. Elopement was a major reason for girls going missing or running away from home whereas the issues like fights, scolding by parents or elders and other problems in family force boys to leave their home. The study also revealed that as compared to boys, girls face lot of problems and stigma in society when they run away from home or get eloped with their partner.

Shalini, a 15 years old girl, went missing from her home. Her parents who were daily wagers registered the missing child/persons complaint in police station. After two days, parents received a call from Shalini that she had eloped with her neighbour. Boy was also 17 years old and not lawfully eligible to get married. With the help of police, Shalini was traced and brought home safely but her life was totally changed afterwards. She was not allowed to attend school, to meet her friends outside home, to attend any family function or visit relatives, etc. She was confined within the four walls of house. Parents also lost their reputation in the community after this incident. When Shalini completed her 18 years of age, with great difficulty, her parents managed to find a suitable match and got her married because Shalini became a curse for them. One can imagine the adversity of Shalini's life where her future is predicted ill-fated or doomed at the age of 18.

Most Vulnerable Age

The majority of children (47%) who went missing were in the age group of 11–18 years. Children and young people, between the ages of 12 and 17, are most likely to go missing (NPIA, 2011: 16). It is generally assumed that 1–18 years of age is roughly the period of adolescent growth terminating in full physical and sexual maturity. Of all the interviewed families, there was no case of missing child below 5 years whereas only 8% of the cases were between the ages of 6 and 10 years. The adolescents are at higher risk as it is a period of active growth and development – physical, sexual, social and emotional. Poor parents are unaware to provide guidance, care

and protection for children which forces children to lead down to the deteriorating paths.

Reason for Going Missing

The study revealed the fact that majority of the cases of missing children were reported for a common reason behind going missing. Almost 90% of the cases were runaway cases where children left their house on their own because of the love affair and elopement. It was very surprising that not even a single case was registered against abduction or kidnapping. There are many factors which lead children towards this extreme decision in early stage of their life but poverty and negligence of parents were found responsible behind this problem. Studies show that young people who run away from home frequently report strained relationships with caregivers such as family conflict, parental rejection, harsh punishment, poor-parenting, lack of parental supervision and instability in the home. On the other hand, research indicates that strong, positive relationships with parents reduced the risk of leaving home (Sydney McKinney).

Sub-Inspector in AHTU, Sector-17, Chandigarh, deals with the cases of abduction and trafficking of children in Chandigarh. He said that elopement is the main reason behind children going missing in Chandigarh. The areas prone to this problem are slums and periphery areas of Chandigarh. The young boys and girls leave their home due to love affair or get eloped without realizing the harsh consequences of their decision to get married without reaching the legal age of marriage. As compared to boys, the girls face lot of resentment and stigma in society as well as inside their family. The parents often abandon their daughters and refuse to reveal any information regarding them to anybody including police. In the cases of elopement, the police also face lot of challenges as the local community denies coming forward due to the sensitivity of the issue. Apart from quality education, sports/recreational facilities should be made available to the children especially in the places belonging to low socioeconomic groups which would help children to channelize their energy to something constructive and useful.

The Role of Police

The police play a very significant role during the investigation of cases of missing children. When the families of the missing children were enquired regarding the help and support provided by the police, 55% of the total

interviewed families gave very positive response and these were the cases in which police did not play an active role in investigation process because children returned to their home without any help of the police.

Majority of the families (40%) shared very dreadful experience with the police and revealed that they rather regret involving police in their case. Many families even revealed that police were least bothered about their case and when their children returned home they themselves visited the police station to cancel FIR against their missing children.

Few of the families refused to talk about the help provided by the police and claimed that the police never visited their house even after registering the FIR in the cases of missing children. The lack of training and awareness among police personnel causes lot of problems to the victims' family. Families had to constrain the police to start the investigation and the follow-up in search of missing child. Due to some reason, police were reluctant to investigate the cases of elopement; families were compelled to collect all evidences or information regarding their child's whereabouts without any help provided by the police.

Divya, a 17 years old girl, eloped with a man who was much older to her age. Her mother filed a complaint in police station but unfortunately police didn't take much interest after finding out that it was a case of elopement. Divya's mother said, "Police mujhe hamesha ye kehti thi ki mein apni beti ke baarein mein bhul jaun kyunki usne shaadi karli" (Police would always tell me that I should forget about my daughter because she got married). When Divya found out that her husband was already married and father of one daughter, she tried to seek police help to return back to her mother's house safely. But police didn't provide any help to Divya and her mother because Divya's husband bribed the police. Divya's mother was terribly disturbed and expressed her resentment towards police; she said that Divya would never be happy with her husband and she could have saved her daughter's life if the police had been helpful to them.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the important findings of the study of missing children in Chandigarh, the following suggestions/recommendations for both governmental and non-governmental bodies are proposed:

- 1. Need to Prioritize the Problem of Missing Children:** The problem of missing children is not given much attention which is a matter

of grave concern, since it is a human right issue. It has not received much attention either by the government or by the society at large. In this way, this issue needs to be given priority by all stakeholders especially the law enforcement agencies.

2. **Need for Family Interventions:** There is a strong link between family and runaway children. The present study identified that 97% of the children were found missing from their home. It significantly adds to our understanding that there is a strong association between family issues and running away. It is also seen that children from low socioeconomic group are more prone to running away. The administration has to adopt protective and preventive strategy to address these key dimensions of children and family belonging to the weaker section of society.
3. **Community Involvement:** In order to make the investigation process of missing children more transparent and user-friendly, the police investigating team should involve the community at large such as the Panchayati Raj Institutions/Municipal Committees/Neighbourhood Committees/Resident Welfare Associations, etc., in addition to the existing resources.
4. **Proper Monitoring and Updating of Databases and Websites of Missing Children:** The databases and websites meant for tracking the missing children are neither very user-friendly, nor are they systematically updated, which causes discrepancies in records. One cannot be dependent on those websites for searching the missing child. Police agencies are also not very keen in taking any information from those databases because of the poor maintenance of websites. The figures of missing children given on websites do not match with the figures given by the police and other sources. In such cases, these websites and databases on missing children need to be user-friendly and efforts should be made to spread awareness to benefit general population in this regard.
5. **Sensitization of all Stakeholders:** There is a need to sensitize all the ranks of police personnel and other stakeholders towards the issue of missing children. The administration needs to design a proper module so that the uniform training is imparted to all the concerned stakeholders. The police personnel and community at large need to be sensitized together so that they can deal with issues that they come across while searching for the missing children. Furthermore, it will provide them a common platform to understand each other's perspectives about the problem of missing children.

- 6. Prioritization of Cases:** There is a need to identify the runaway children, abandoned children, neglected children or vulnerable children. It was observed during the field survey that most of the children in Chandigarh run away from their homes due to love affair and elopement. In such cases, parents face lot of problems especially when the child is below 15 years old. Mostly, the children who run away are between the age group of 11 and 15 years. The police personnel often neglect the case when they learn about the case of elopement. Police personnel need to be sensitized so that they provide the maximum help to the parents and understand the severity of the problem.
- 7. Counselling Centres:** When a child is restored after running away from home, he/she undergoes psychological trauma due to the family and societal pressure. Especially when girls face lot of discrimination and stigma as compared to boys. For such cases, the counselling centres should be opened for both parents and children where their social and psychological problems need to be addressed. Parents should be motivated and sensitized for taking preventive measures for the development, safety and security of their child.
- 8. Role of State Commissions:** The state commissions have a very important role to play in order to involve State Human Rights Commission, Women Commission of State/Centre, and Commission for Protection of Child Rights, etc., with the issue of missing children. The commissions need to understand that the problem of missing children varies from place to place and state to state. In Chandigarh, the problem of missing children is different from other states as 98% of the children leave their home due to elopement. As such bodies have tremendous influence and control over all stakeholders, they can appropriately address the issue of missing children by understanding the root cause of this problem.
- 9. Value Based Education:** Most of the research and programmes that address the problems of youth-at-risk are focused on high school students, usually between the ages of 14 and 18. The school has an important role to play as these children mostly belong to poor families and they rarely get any moral support and motivation from their parents. There should be an emphasis on moral values and value-based education in school which would help children to distinguish between right and wrong.

- 10. Poverty Alleviation Measures:** Poverty is acknowledged as one of the main factors in pushing children into vulnerable condition and exploitation. It is found that the children in Chandigarh who run away from home are mostly those children whose parents earn less than Rs. 10,000/- per month. Running away from home becomes only option for them when their parents are unable to fulfil their basic needs. The Central and State Governments have introduced several schemes and programmes with the objective of providing employment opportunities to the poor families and elevating them from the poverty line. All these programmes, especially concerning the children welfare, should be planned and implemented properly. Proper implementation of such programmes should have a priority approach.
- 11. Participation of Civil Societies and NGOs:** Police personnel argued that they do not rely upon NGOs for investigating the cases of missing children because they always have their vested interest. Research indicates that dropouts from school are more prone to run away from home. The child welfare commission should support the engagement of civil society and NGOs working in the field of child welfare, youth welfare, education and women welfare. The issue of missing children and running away can be addressed efficiently if both governmental and non-governmental bodies join together for achieving the common goal to promote child welfare.
- 12. Provision of Sports and Recreational Facilities:** It was found out that the children go missing mostly from low socioeconomic areas, which are prone to crime and social evils. The factors that predispose youth to risk include living in high-crime areas or low-income areas, living with a single parent or dysfunctional parents, and the lack of a responsible positive adult role model (Reid, 1994). Therefore, these children need to be provided certain facilities which would help them to channelize their energy. The facilities like playgrounds, sports activities, recreational camps and access to other hobby classes can provide an outlet for their creativity in a positive way.
- 13. Sensitization of Youth:** The youth need to be sensitized on the issue of early marriage, sex education, bad consequences of elopement, running away, etc. For this reason, workshops/seminars need to be organised for children at the levels of schools and colleges. The emphasis should be laid on sensitizing them on the issue of running

away from home and getting married before the marriageable age. They need to be given proper direction and guidance in every area of their life so that they can make the right choices and decisions for a better tomorrow.

14. **Special Attention Towards Girls:** The rate of girls going missing is higher as compared to boys. As per the study, 64% of girls were reported missing among all cases of missing children which indicates that girls are at higher risk. Special attention need to be devoted towards girls and awareness program should be organized to empower and educate them. The girls need to be protected and sensitized because they are considered as backbone of every family and society.
15. **Provision of Basic Facilities for Migrant Families:** Most of the cases of missing children were reported from the slums and periphery areas of Chandigarh, which are mostly inhabited by migrant population. Migrant children are often deprived of basic facilities like proper nutrition, shelter, clothing, education etc. Efforts should be made to provide special protection to these children. In that case, the government welfare programmes and policies should be framed exclusively for the upliftment and safety of migrant children.

CONCLUSION

Research indicates that the leading risk factors for running away from home are mental health and emotional distress, family instability, delinquency, substance use, and physical and sexual abuse. In addition, problems in school have been identified as risk factors for runaways. In Chandigarh, elopement is the main reason for children going missing. There were hardly any cases where children were kidnapped or abducted.

It was also noted that the cases of missing children registered in police station mostly belong to the lower socioeconomic group. The children go missing in Chandigarh especially from the village and slum areas. 57% of the total interviewed families whose children went missing were daily wagers and labourers who leave their home early morning and come back in late evening. Therefore, during the day time children mostly spend their time alone in house and they are also deprived of educational and other recreational facilities in their locality. The study also found that the number of missing girls was higher than boys, which shows that girls are

more prone to run away as compared to boys. The children who went missing were mostly between the ages of 11 and 15 years.

The police play a very important role in the search of missing children and most of the families of missing children expressed their resentment towards police. Most of the cases of missing children were traced out within a week because few days after running away from home children contacted their families and returned back home without taking any help from police. In many cases, the entry and address was incorrect in the registers maintained by police for filing an FIR. The police personnel need to be sensitized on this issue so that this problem is addressed properly and the necessary actions should be taken in time to provide immediate relief to both the families and missing children. The databases on missing children are very poorly maintained by the police as one cannot rely on the information generated through those sources. There is no authentic database on missing children which is properly monitored and updated on timely basis.

To address the problem of missing children, there is a requirement of massive mobilization of resources, strong political commitment and decentralized planning and management structure. Most importantly, there is a need for radical reforms in social services administration to ensure the efficient delivery of services. Coordination with other institutions of civil society is also a need of the hour.

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