



Parliamentary Hearings on Safeguarding Runaway and Missing Children 16 and 17 October, 2007

Although improvements have been made, responsibility in the UK today for missing and abducted children is fragmented and disorganised. This is as true for the government and public authorities as it is for the voluntary sector. It is a deplorable state of affairs for a 21st century society.

PACT believes that there are four fundamental, interlocking problems that need to be addressed urgently.

First, in government there is a lack of leadership and no clear chain of responsibility. Because too many departments are involved, none takes overall responsibility for coordinating policies and distributing funds, the foundation of a coherent response to the problem of missing and abducted children.

Second, there are no comprehensive and reliable data for the UK as a whole. We simply do not know how many children go missing or why. Such information as exists is drawn from disparate and uncoordinated sources that lack common definitions and a uniform statistical base. Since it is crucial to understand whether a child has run away, been thrown out of home, or been abducted, this gravely hampers the formulation of effective policies and programmes.

Third, there is poor coordination between the police, Whitehall and the voluntary sector. It is compounded by inadequate coordination within each of these groups. This leads to the erratic and inefficient allocation of resources from Whitehall; wasteful duplication of services and research by NGOs; and disparate standards for data collection on missing children across the police forces of the UK.

Fourth, and more fundamentally, underlying the systemic weaknesses described above is a reluctance across all sectors to treat missing children as a discrete and unique problem, which cannot be folded into the larger issue of missing persons as a whole. *PACT* is particularly concerned that the current reorganisation by the Home Office and police of their

structures for tackling missing persons will fail to recognise the unique challenge presented by children who go missing.

PACT has analysed these issues in greater detail in two reports: *Every Five Minutes* (2005) and *A Postcode Lottery* (2006). Both these reports are attached to this memorandum. A third report – *Beyond 'Every Five Minutes'* – will be published next month. It will set out *PACT'S* recommendations for remedying the deficiencies in organisation and policy described above. These recommendations can be briefly summarised as follows.

The heart of the matter is to establish the scale and nature of the missing child problem. Only then will Whitehall, the police and the voluntary sector be in a position to devise coordinated, effective strategies for tackling it. This means statistics collected against uniform, standardised criteria across the UK to create a national data base; a Whitehall department and/or agency with lead policy and budgetary responsibility for all aspects of the missing child problem; and the elimination of superfluous overlap between NGOs.

There are various ways in which these reforms could be achieved. In *PACT'S* view, the best and most ambitious solution is to create a national resource centre to coordinate data collection and research programmes; devise policies; and provide effective, practical support to missing children and their families. It would bring together representatives from central government, local authorities, the police and the voluntary sector.

Such a resource centre could draw on the experience of the tried and tested National Center for Missing and Exploited Children, which has been in existence in the United States for over 20 years. Financed by the US Congress, the Center, working closely with law enforcement agencies, brings together data analysis, policy formulation and research. Together with a nation-wide child alert system and the universal use of the MissingKids website, it has rescued hundreds of children over the years, as well as making a significant contribution to child welfare.

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