Families of the Missing: Communication with Law Enforcement & Ambiguous Loss

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Abstract

In 2017, 651,226 missing person cases entered the National Crime Information Center database (the vast majority were canceled/cleared). When a family member/friend disappears, law enforcement is likely the first large, complex system they encounter. Unfortunately, the relationship between families and law enforcement can be fraught and complicated. This exploratory study seeks to illuminate the communication qualities of the communication interface between families of the missing and law enforcement and how this communication may impact the family's capacity to cope with ongoing ambiguous loss.

Context & Definitions

- As of 12/31/17, the National Crime Information Center database contained 88,809 active missing persons records.

- A missing person is someone who has disappeared, and there is uncertainty regarding the individual's fate, whereabouts, and if the person is dead or alive.

- Ambiguous loss (Boss, 2006) is a loss that has no apparent resolution or closure. As a result, this leaves a person searching for answers, and may complicate and delay grieving and may result unresolved grief.

- Ambiguous loss is chronic and can be result in trauma.

- The search for the missing involves interactions with large and complex systems including but not limited to mainstream and social media, helping professionals, psychics, non-profit agencies devoted to the missing, and law enforcement which is likely the first system a family may encounter in its search.

Method

Data for this exploratory study was collected via:

- Participant observation in families of missing persons events

- Open-ended interviews (approx. 1 hour) with 5 members of law enforcement each with over 20 years of experience with missing persons cases that assessed their perceptions of communication with families of the missing

- In person and online surveys of families with longer-term (greater than one year) missing persons (sample size of 11) that assessed their perceptions of communication with law enforcement

Preliminary Findings: Family Perceptions

Overall, families with long-term missing persons had predominantly negative perceptions of their communication with law enforcement.

Communication Was Helpful

	Excellent	Good	Fair	Poor
	0	3	3	5

Been Clear in Their Communication

	Excellent	Good	Fair	Poor
	0	2	3	6

Kept the Family Updated

	Excellent	Good	Fair	Poor
	0	1	2	8

Offered Information About Resources

	Excellent	Good	Fair	Poor
	0	1	3	7

Preliminary Findings: Law Enforcement Perceptions

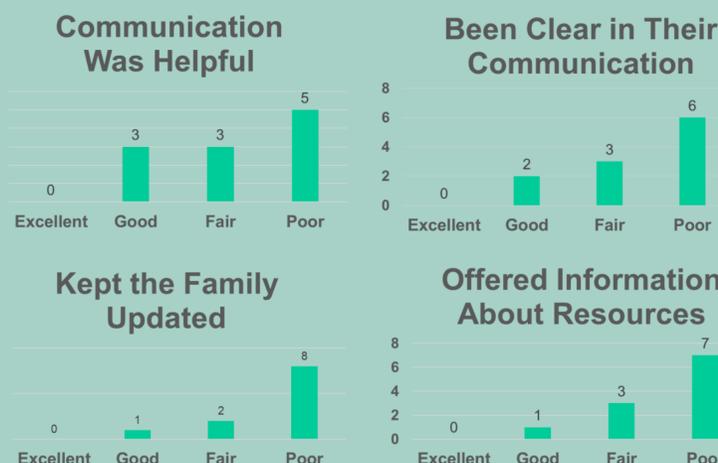Themes from interviews with law enforcement reveal:

- Quality of training in handling missing persons varies greatly across law enforcement organizations

- Families may have unrealistic expectations of law enforcement in investigating missing persons cases

- Those closest to the missing person will need to be ruled out as having a role in the disappearance which may cause tension

- Families need to be completely honest and forthcoming with details about the missing person – some of which may paint the missing person in a negative light (drug abuse, sex work, mental illness, previous criminal record, etc.)

Implications

- Lack of regular updates from law enforcement – even if nothing new has been learned – can exacerbate the difficulties of dealing with ambiguous loss.

- Law enforcement and families need to be educated about each other's concerns and challenges in order to manage expectations, underscore the importance for clarity and honesty, and provide needed resources in the common goal of finding missing loved ones.

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