

When a child goes missing

Proposal for a missing child alert and response system in Pakistan.

Express Tribune

Feb 6, 2018

<https://tribune.com.pk/story/1627084/6-child-goes-missing/>

In 1996, a nine year old girl Amber Hagerman was kidnapped and brutally murdered in Arlington, Texas. Within days of this tragic incident, plans were initiated to developing better laws and more effective child protection systems. Thus began the development and adoption of 'Amber Alert', an acronym for "America's Missing Broadcast Emergency Response". As of January 2018, over 900 children have been recovered through this program which has now been adopted by 22 other countries besides the US.

Somewhere in another country on the same globe in the same time period, a single individual sliced and chemically dissolved the dead bodies of over 100 children in Lahore. Militants barbarically massacred 132 school children in Peshawar and in the small town of Husain Khanwala videos emerged of 280 children who were abused, filmed and blackmailed. In the first six months of 2017, ten minor children between the ages of five to ten were kidnapped, raped and killed in Kasur. None of these soul-shattering events were however significant enough to shake an insensitive government to change and reform its archaic and dysfunctional policing processes.

There is an urgent need to develop a nation-wide 'Missing Child Alert' (MCA) system supported by 'Missing Child Response Teams (MCRTs) in each province of Pakistan. An MCA alert is raised when the police has determined that a missing child complaint meets the 'MCA' criteria. The 'alert' sends messages to radio and TV stations, posts messages on websites and social media and asks the cell phone companies to send SMS messages to cell phone users in the selected area (city, province or nation-wide). TV channels begin to show tickers while the radio stations

interrupt broadcasts to announce details of the missing child. Simultaneously the 'MCRT' teams spring into action to investigate, search and recover the missing child.

While the formation of provincial 'Child Protection Authorities' is a welcome initiative, it may have been far more productive to first enact MCA and MCRT legislation. Such a legislation is required to bind the concerned organisations to undertake the information dissemination tasks as soon as an MCA alert is activated. Likewise provinces could define the role, composition and functioning of MCRTs.

The government currently has no mechanism for collecting data for missing children. Only for Karachi the missing child figures for the year 2017 vary between 1894 (obtained by an NGO) to 72 (registered by the police). A 'Missing Child Alert' (MCA) and 'Missing Child Response Teams' (MCRT) system could radically transform the accountability, recording, alerting and investigating processes for the recovery of missing children. Making it mandatory to raise an FIR instead of making entries in the "roznamcha" register must be the first step for all missing child complaints. Establishing a computer / IT facility in every police station of the province must be the next. The following paragraphs define a typical MCA sequence.

1. As soon as a family has sufficient reason to believe that a child is missing, it reports the matter to the nearest police station.
2. The police is bound to act in either of the two ways. a. If the missing child event meets the defined MCA criteria, an FIR is registered and an MCA alert and MCRT processes are activated; b. If the missing child event falls short of the MCA criteria then only the MCRT is activated and an FIR registered.

An MCA alert is raised only if the event simultaneously meets a 3 point criteria i.e.

a. The missing person is a child under the age of 18; b. The police have reason to believe that the missing child has been abducted / missing; c. The police have reason to believe that the physical safety or the life of the child is in danger. The decision to initiate the MCA alert ought to be taken by a senior police officer such as an SSP, SP or DPO.

MCRT is activated for all cases of missing children, independently or in conjunction with an MCA alert. MCRT is a rapid response task force that assumes complete responsibility for the recovery of a missing child. Led by a police SSP/SP, an MCRT consists of highly trained professionals such as a forensic expert, an investigator, a search and rescue professional, a special branch representative, a digital forensic

expert, a 'Crime Scene Unit' representative and a 'Child Protection Officer' of the Child Protection Authority. Each province could create and train as many MCRT teams as considered necessary.

An inorganic police system based on the laws enacted in 1861 and operating like domestic workers for those in power can neither change nor reform itself. The trick lies in meticulously reforming just one small process, such as an MCA system, to establish a precedence and pattern for the much needed change in almost every other aspect of governance.