

# Missing Investigations



*Sgt. Gerald Ehrsam #5210*

Columbus Police

Missing Persons Unit

# **Columbus Police Missing Persons Unit**

The Columbus Police Missing Persons Unit (MPU) is part of the Family Crimes Section within the Criminal Investigative Subdivision. The MPU is currently staffed by seven (7) detectives (down 1) and one (1) sergeant. The MPU is staffed daily on first and second shift, limited staffing during evening mid-watch hours and not staffed during third shift hours. MPU is responsible for the investigation of reported missing persons, missing children and endangered 'high-risk' missing individuals when there is no evidence of kidnapping, abduction or unlawful restraint.

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MPU is also responsible for reviewing all Interference with Custody reports and conducting follow up investigations as warranted. Patrol personnel are tasked with the primary response and investigation of missing person calls for service.

MPU personnel are responsible for immediate response for endangered 'high-risk' missing person incidents and follow up investigation, as warranted, for all missing person reports.

These reports are for both, juveniles and adults.

# **Columbus Police Missing Persons Unit**

While most missing person cases resolve themselves, usually with the victim returning on their own, some cases require more immediate attention. Victims that are “High-Risk”- such as children 10 years of age and younger with no previous history of running away, any missing person (regardless of age) with diminished capacity, elderly individuals, suicidal individuals, or any missing person with odd or unusual circumstances surrounding their disappearance, generate a higher priority response.

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The MPU uses an “all hands on deck” approach to these cases, deploying all available resources to achieve a safe and successful recovery of the victim when possible. The MPU has connections with many outside agencies and resources, to include: foreign jurisdiction law enforcement agencies, Franklin County Children Services, health care providers/hospitals, rehabilitation facilities, advocacy groups, and search and rescue organizations to name a few. During a High-Risk Missing Persons investigation, many of these resources are utilized on a regular basis.

# Definitions

**Missing Child** - A missing child is a minor who is missing from the home of, or the care, custody, and control of, the minor's parents, parent who is the residential parent and legal custodian, guardian, legal custodian or other person having responsibility for the care of the minor; a minor who is missing and about whom there is reason to believe the minor could be the victim of a violation of the ORC, in particular, Kidnapping, Abduction, Unlawful Restraint and/or Interference with Custody (as defined in 2901.30 of the Ohio Revised Code).

# Definitions

**Missing Person** - A missing person is an individual who is eighteen (18) years of age or older, whose temporary or permanent residence is in Ohio, and who meets one of the following characteristics: the individual has a physical or mental disability, the individual is missing under circumstances indicating that the individual's safety may be in danger, or the individual is missing under circumstances indicating that the individual's disappearance was not voluntary (as defined in 2901.41 of the Ohio Revised Code).

# Definitions

**High Risk** - High risk means any missing person or child who is in immediate danger or may be a danger to themselves or others. Missing children ages 10 and under will be presumed to be in danger unless evidence to the contrary exists, for example, multiple missing reports exist or the child was taken by a responsible but non-custodial parent.

# Common Misconception

Do I have to wait a certain amount of time to report my (child, parent, sibling, roommate, etc.) missing?

No! One of the challenges for MPU is a delay in reporting. Time is crucial in missing person cases, especially in high-risk situations. If you believe, based on the definitions above, someone has gone missing, call the police immediately

Do I have to be in person to file a missing report?

No, but Jurisdiction certainly can be an issue

# Safeguards

- With young children or family members with diminished capacity, make sure there are security features on doors that would prevent them from exiting the home without others' knowledge. Cameras!
- Have recent photos available of all family members, in case they were to go missing. (obtain an Ohio ID Card – even for children)
- Take control of or limit access to vehicles/keys to which persons with Elderly/diminished capacity have access to.

# Safeguards

- Keep a list of addresses for friends/relatives that children/family members like to frequent.
- Keep a list of doctor and dentist information of all family members.
- Keep a list of license plate numbers for vehicles that are accessible.
- Have all family members share their location on electronic and/or cellular devices.

# Safeguards

- Provide family members with a device that can be tracked, such as an air tag, cellular phone, tablet, watch, etc.
- Enable manufacturer tracking functions on vehicles.
- Know what social media apps your family members are using.
- Use parental controls on electronic devices and monitor activity vs taking a phone away.
- Ensure children are attending school and/or are at where they should be (geo-fence apps).
- Keep a list of workplace and school addresses.

# **What should I do if I believe someone is missing?**

- Immediately call the police.
- Do not leave the house- wait for Police to arrive.
- Immediately start searching the house, checking everywhere a person could be hiding or have fallen asleep
  - Crawl spaces, attics, under beds, garages, cars, etc.
  - Behind furniture, closets, under laundry, etc.
- Begin calling friends and family members to keep an eye out for victim.

# What should I do if I believe someone is missing?

- Try searching for location on electronic devices
- When police arrive, provide a very descriptive account of circumstances surrounding the person(s) disappearance. Video of exiting if camera.
- Cooperate with responding officers/detectives- They will ask for specific information to complete a report- **and will need to search the home, even if you have already done so!** Many recoveries have been made as a result of a secondary search.
- Provide recent photograph(s) of the victim.

# **What should I expect after filing a Missing Person report?**

If the victim is considered “High Risk” police personnel will remain with the reporting party to continue gathering information and to ensure the victim does not return. An extensive and organized search will be conducted by the MPU. All resources will be utilized until the victim is recovered or all possible leads/resources have been exhausted.

# **What should I expect after filing a Missing Person report?**

If no recovery is made during the search, a Missing Person poster will be distributed to all major media outlets and social media. The missing person will be entered into a national database for all law enforcement personnel. A detective will be assigned as the lead investigator and will continue to progress/actively work the case utilizing available resources.

# **What should I expect after filing a Missing Person report?**

If the victim is not considered “High Risk” a report will be generated and assigned to a MPU detective. The assigned detective will progress/work the case, conducting follow-ups and checking with outside resources, but no active search will be conducted unless additional information is obtained that would change the circumstances of the victim’s disappearance.

# Anatomy of a Missing Case

- Jurisdiction – Missing vs Criminal... Agencies may refuse reports
- A framework can be put in place – standard searches, etc.
- However, EVERY case is unique - every person is important
  - Personal aspect to the reporting party/family
  - Reality of casework for detectives – cumulative weight
- Triage is necessary – stressful reality for screeners (over 300/mo. + 60 IWC)
  - Reports are reviewed to assign & close (other agencies may not do this)
  - Resources are limited – this is a reality, Doesn't diminish individual importance
  - Material changes need to be reported – Detective advised
  - Honesty is needed in this process – false information dilutes later truth
    - Habitual Behavior/Substance Abuse is not a barrier, but a triage reality
    - Mental Capacity and Abilities must be fairly reported (College Example)

# Anatomy of a Missing Case

- Verifying correct identifiers, vehicle information – help us help you
- Current contact information (phone, social media, etc.) is vital
  - When it's needed, it's needed! Geo-location apps, friend-share
  - Please try not to take phones – reduce value (flip, app/device restrictions)
  - When addiction is at stake – remove the sell value of the phone
- Current family, friends, work associates...
- Move away from high risk factors, if possible (vital – Autism)
- Get Geo devices – restrictions of a charging device vs near-field
- Flexibility in recovery – temp kinship placement (juveniles)
  - Police can't force a child back into a home
  - Children can simply walk away again – this is a harsh reality!
  - Reality in that the minor's voice must be heard/compromise may be essential

# Anatomy of an IWC

- Ohio Law – mother full custody upon birth if unwed
  - Father must establish custodial rights – court vs. agreement
  - Precious time passes when establishing this right
- Primarily Civil (both parties) – can be complex
  - Court should determine criminal status
  - Safety should be the concern
- No parental abduction law in Ohio
  - Rely on a misdemeanor – generally not enforceable outside of Ohio
  - Rarely given a “Warrant to Take Physical Possession of Minor Child”
  - Local Agencies may not recognize as a law violation
- Access to Federal Assistance – IWC non-force is difficult

# Problems, Issues, or Concerns...

- Police access to resources: Federal, State, Local (CPD/SO Resources)
  - Role – CART Team, **BCI Analysts**, Physical Resources (chopper/drone, K9, etc.)
  - CPD still utilizes outside **analyst** assistance after hours (BCI vs OSP HUB)
  - Building partnerships (Medical, Elder, FCBDD, FCSO, Transportation, etc.)
  - Communication with families/release of information
- Multiple submissions: AG, NAMUS, NCMEC (private - same/similar)
  - Role/purpose of each entity vs simple data entry
  - Utilize assistance/outreach – NCMEC services, Cleveland Missing
  - Utilization of DNA (BCI to CODIS) vs private submission
  - Location of fingerprints – to FBI NGI (Next Generation Identification) Database

# Problems, Issues, or Concerns...

- Reality of addressing the underlying issue
  - Juvenile repetitive missings – what is driving the cycle
    - Learning disability, access to medication, transportation, etc.
    - Recent news article: 25% of Ohio Students chronically absent
    - Habitual cycle dilutes triage process (what are the #'s)?
    - Simply returning back to where they left doesn't stop the cycle
  - Adult addiction/transient living – stopping the cycle
    - Are they missing when they decline to talk with family?
    - Out-patient meetings for addiction, while living near temptation/access!? Mental health while transient...
    - Families financing the problem through frustration

Thank you!!!

