The “Missing” Missing:

How the “Ideal Victim” is Framed in Media Coverage of Missing Persons

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SUMMARY

Not all missing people are created equal in the United States, especially when it comes to media coverage. Through the selection of specific cases and the emphasis of certain personal attributes, the media frames the issue of missing persons. The media tells us who goes missing in the United States, and ultimately who is worth looking for. Nils Christie (1986) coined the term “ideal victim” suggesting that a person is most likely legitimized as a crime victim if they are female, very young, or very old. The ideal victim is innocent, defenseless, blameless, and deserving of sympathy. Previous research has neglected to apply the concept of the ideal victim to missing persons cases and it has ignored the experiences of the families of the missing. This research is the first of its kind in that it systematically analyzes how the media frames missing persons cases while also giving a voice to the family members left behind.

The analysis of 178 television newsmagazine episodes in Study 1 finds that the media is framing missing persons as a White and female issue. The media is also consistently framing the media-worthy missing person in very specific ways: (1) She is attractive; (2) She is a good person who is missed; (3) She is a victim; and (4) She has secrets. Fourteen family members of missing persons were interviewed in Study 2 and their sentiments echo the findings from Study 1. Their experiences with the media have convinced them that the media frames the ideal missing person as white, female, beautiful, relatable, defenseless and an all-around good person deserving of our attention.

The families all agree that getting media coverage for a missing person is a responsibility that falls most heavily on the family members. The only media attention most cases are getting is the media coverage the families are creating themselves. The families have important advice to give to other families of missing persons. They offer specific suggestions on how to generate and keep media interest in a case, how to cope emotionally with media-related stressors, and where to find help when needed.
CHAPTER I: INTRODUCTION

A. Introduction and Significance of Research

We may remember them as the faces on milk cartons and on posters in toll booths. Or maybe we’ve seen their faces on the “Have You Seen Me?” mailings. They stare back at us from billboards on our way into work and sometimes we even see their faces on TV. They are the faces of the missing. Sometimes we look at them with just a passing glance; other times we linger. But did you ever stop to wonder how many more people are out there missing whose faces we haven’t seen? To take it a step further, did you ever stop to wonder about the families left behind? For every missing face we see, or don’t see, there is a family left behind. In most cases those families are facing struggles we cannot even imagine as they try to bring attention to their loved one’s case.

This study began with an interest in finding out what goes on behind the scenes in a missing person case. I had the unique experience of growing up in a community where two women went missing within months of each other. Both cases grew to be very high-profile cases across media outlets. Like many other people in my community, I volunteered at searches whenever possible. I saw the family and close friends of the missing women struggling with grief while trying to do everything possible to find their loved ones. The effects of a family member going missing were so obviously devastating in so many ways that I had never contemplated before. I felt for the families and wondered how many more families were out there going through the same thing. I thought of cases I had heard of on the news or on television programs, and found myself reminiscing exclusively of cases of white women and white young girls. My initial thoughts were around why so many white females go missing in the United States. This naïve thought quickly led way to an educated guess that non-Whites and men probably also go missing, but we just aren’t hearing about them for some reason. I began searching scholarly outlets for statistics regarding who receives media coverage in missing persons cases, and was
able to find very little. I went on to ask, “Why do we see and hear about some cases while others go overlooked?” I was unable to find a compelling answer to that question as well.

There is a huge gap in the scholarly literature as it currently exists in at least two specific areas. First, with the exception of one study on missing children, no one has analyzed media coverage of missing person cases. No one has investigated what types of cases are seeing television coverage and what types of cases are not. Previous scholars have studied media trends of crime coverage and victim representation for many different types of crime, but not for missing person cases. This study is going to fill that gap. Second, and arguably most importantly, the voices of the families of the missing are not being heard. Previous studies have interviewed reporters, editors, and even the viewing audience regarding general crime coverage patterns. However, with the exception of one study that spoke with five siblings of missing persons, no one has ever asked the families of the missing what is going on. No one has asked them what it is like to navigate through the media maze when a loved one goes missing. This study is going to do just that.

These gaps must be filled because missing persons is a topic that affects many people across many communities in the United States. In 2011, more than 678,000 people were reported missing in the United States. Approximately 60% of persons reported missing were White or Hispanic and 34% were Black. Males and females each accounted for approximately 50% of missing persons. About 81% of missing persons were under the age of 21 and 19% were aged 21 or over (FBI, 2011). It has long been suggested that getting pictures of the missing person to as many people as possible will increase the likelihood that the person is found. Television newsmagazine programs, especially those with a national audience, provide a large platform for quick dissemination of photographs and information regarding missing person cases. Logistically speaking, it would be impossible for all of these missing person cases to have received national coverage. However, one would hope that the media-covered
cases were representative of the missing person population as a whole. Significant over or under-representations of certain groups of missing persons may suggest the presence of what Nils Christie (1986) identifies as an “ideal victim” in terms of media coverage of missing person cases. This research sheds light on current media practices as they apply to coverage of missing person cases.

The goal of this research is to scientifically assess the current state of media coverage of missing persons cases by answering the following questions:

1) Is the gender, racial, and age composition of missing person cases covered on national newsmagazine television programs representative of the United States missing person population as a whole?

2) How are media-worthy missing persons framed by national newsmagazine television programs? Are certain traits of a missing person or characteristics of his or her life frequently emphasized or excluded in television coverage?

3) How are the quantity and quality of interactions with news media outlets similar of different for families of high-profile missing persons when compared to families of low-profile missing persons?

By answering these questions, we learn who goes missing in the United States and ultimately, who is worth looking for, according to the media. By making the families of the missing a significant part of this research, I give a voice to a population previously unheard. From these families we learn what is happening behind the scenes in media coverage of missing persons cases. These families have advice they want to share with other families of this missing so this project also serves as an outlet to organize that guidance.

Studies of victims in the media have consistently found that Whites and females are over-represented as victims and that African Americans and males are under-represented as victims. These
findings have led to the suggestion that a hierarchy of victimization exists, at the top of which sits the most ideal and worthy victims, and at the bottom the most unworthy victims. Nils Christie (1986) coined the term “ideal victim” suggesting that a person is most likely legitimized as a crime victim if they are female, very young, or very old. The ideal victim is innocent, defenseless, blameless, and deserving of sympathy. This research takes the concept of the ideal victim a step further. I study the media framing of missing person cases to see if an “ideal missing person” exists.

This research consists of two distinct studies. Study 1 focuses on media framing. A frame is described by Tankard, Hendrickson, Silberman, Bliss and Ghanem (1991) as “a central organizing idea for news content that supplies a content and suggests what the issue is through the use of selection, emphasis, exclusion, and elaboration” (p. 11). I analyze media framing as it applies to coverage of missing person cases. Through a content and discourse analysis of national newsmagazine television programs, I examine how the media frames the issue of missing persons (who goes missing and ultimately who is worth looking for) and how the media frames the media-worthy missing person (verbal descriptors).

Study 2 is designed to build upon the findings from Study 1. Ultimately, Study 2 aims to uncover what leads some cases to become high-profile cases while others go unnoticed. Study 2 presents and evaluates the experiences of families of high-profile missing persons as compared to the experiences of families of low-profile missing persons in regards to their interactions with media outlets. In-depth interviews with 14 families of missing persons provide insight into the phenomenon of the ideal missing person and its impact on the families of missing persons. Previous research studies have focused solely on the content of specific media outlets. This study is unique in that it acknowledges and incorporates the voices of the families of the missing in the analyses of the current state of media coverage of missing persons.
The conclusion of this research asserts that, indeed, an ideal missing person exists. The analysis of newsmagazine programs shows that White missing persons and female missing persons are over-represented and that Black missing persons and male missing persons are under-represented in television coverage of missing person cases. Thus the media is framing missing persons as a White and female issue. In the case that a missing person case does make it onto TV, the media is also consistently framing the media-worthy missing person in the following very specific ways: (1) She is attractive; (2) She is a good person who is missed; (3) She is a victim; and (4) She has secrets.

Sentiments from family members interviewed echo the findings from Study 1. Using specific examples from their own experiences they justify their beliefs that the media frames the ideal missing person as white, female, beautiful, relatable, defenseless, vulnerable, and an all-around good person deserving of our attention.

The initial goal of the family interviews was to find and explain the differences in experiences of families of high-profile cases versus families of low-profile cases. Differences definitely do exist. Families of high-profile cases are more actively seeking out media coverage and are receiving coverage across a greater variety of outlets. A cycle seems to be created where high-profile families are doing more work, so they are seeing more results, so they are doing more work. Low-profile families are seeing fewer results and are getting discouraged. Families of low-profile cases share more feelings of frustration with the police and are able to explain a link between police involvement and media coverage.

The interviews with the family members of missing persons also provide many other significant and impactful findings. As a naïve television audience member, I always imagined the media banging down the doors of the families of the missing, looking for a story. And so I was most surprised to learn, that all interviewees agree that getting media coverage for a missing person is a responsibility that falls
most heavily on the family members. The only media attention most cases are getting is the media coverage the families are creating. Possibly the most influential finding of the interviews with the family members is that these families have important advice to give to other families of missing persons. They offer specific suggestions on how to generate and keep media interest in a case, how to cope emotionally with media-related stressors, and where to find help when needed. The families believe that media coverage matters. They know its potential and have seen it work, and so they desperately want that coverage for their missing loved one.

B. Background

People of any race, gender, or age may go missing. But with few exceptions, missing adults and missing children are usually talked about and studied separately. A person also can go missing for many different reasons and under many different circumstances. He or she may be willingly or unwillingly missing. All factors considered, one of the most talked about and researched subtopics of missing persons is child abduction. Child abduction can take on many forms. These forms have many different names and often many different definitions. The terms used most frequently are: family or familial abduction, nonfamily or non-familial abduction, and stereotypical kidnapping. Family abduction can be defined as “the taking or keeping of a child by a family member in violation of a custody order, a decree, or other legitimate custodial rights, where the taking or keeping involved some element of concealment, flight, or intent to deprive a lawful custodian indefinitely of custodial privileges” (Hammer, Finkelhor, & Sedlak, 2002, p. 2).

A nonfamily abduction is defined as “(1) An episode in which a nonfamily perpetrator takes a child by the use of physical force or threat of bodily harm or detains the child for a substantial period of time (at least 1 hour) in an isolated place by the use of physical force or threat of bodily harm without lawful authority or parental permission, or (2) an episode in which a child younger than 15 or mentally
incompetent, and without lawful authority or parental permission, is taken or detained or voluntarily accompanies a nonfamily perpetrator who conceals the child’s whereabouts, demands ransom, or expresses the intention to keep the child permanently” (Finkelhor, Hammer, & Sedlak, 2002, p. 2). Nonfamily abductors generally make an effort to isolate children in order to commit another crime, often sexual assault (Finkelhor & Ormrod, 2000). Stereotypical kidnapping refers to “A nonfamily abduction perpetrated by a slight acquaintance or stranger in which a child is detained overnight, transported at least 50 miles, held for ransom or abducted with intent to keep the child permanently, or killed “(Finkelhor, et al., 2002, p. 2).

An estimated 203,900 children are abducted by family members each year (Hammer, et al., 2002). It is estimated that there are 58,200 child victims of nonfamily abductions each year. There are approximately 115 stereotypical kidnappings each year. In 40 percent of stereotypical kidnappings the victims are killed and 4 percent of victims of stereotypical kidnappings are not recovered. Almost half of all victims of both nonfamily abductions and stereotypical kidnappings are sexually assaulted by the perpetrator (Finkelhor, et al., 2002).

According to national statistics, over 128,000 adults were reported missing in 2011. Adults can become considered missing under many different circumstances. Missing adults do tend to fall into the following categories: lost and of sound mind, lost and of unsound mind, abducted, runaway, absent friend, or institutional absconder (Swanton & Wilson, 1989). The National Crime Information Center includes categories like endangered, involuntary, disability, and catastrophe (FBI, 2011). Regardless of how an adult or child comes to be missing, these large numbers of missing persons estimates suggest that this is an issue that touches the lives of many families in the United States.

The disappearance of a family member, regardless of the reason, is a stressful situation for families. Child abduction is a devastating crime for abduction victims as well as for their families, the communities in which they live, and often the general public. Every person’s experience is unique.
Parents and other family members may experience fear, anxiety, guilt, anger, or sadness (Just In Case, 1990). Survivors of abduction report feeling angry, ashamed, upset, and confused. They often feel like what happened was their fault. They report feeling like no one understands and not wanting to be touched sometimes. Some survivors may feel like they are returning to a family life that is very different from how it was before the abduction (You’re Not Alone, 2008).

A study of adults whose siblings were kidnapped years ago found many common consequences among siblings of victims. The siblings reported a loss of trust in their parents, law enforcement, and in the belief that they were safe in their environments during the time of the abduction. Also found were long term effects, including lack of trust with family members and authority figures, trouble communicating during difficult situations, and hyper-vigilance regarding their own children’s whereabouts (Greif & Bowers, 2007).

In the case that a child is murdered during the course of an abduction, the consequences are even more somber. Research conducted with families of murdered children has shown that the unique and horrifying characteristics of the crime, combined with frustration with the criminal justice system, media involvement, widespread publicity, and anger at the senselessness of the crime, can increase distress and interfere with the grieving process (Riches & Dawson, 1998).

When a loved-one goes missing, families find themselves in a unique situation with no road map or how-to-guide. Families are dependent on law enforcement and others responding to the event of a disappearance, but these are not necessarily people who will respond to the physical and emotional needs of parents and siblings. There is no formal system in which families of missing persons receive the immediate assistance and support that they need. Families may feel unsupported and at a loss for what to do. Navigating their way through the media is just one of the many daily struggles these families face, but it is a very important struggle.
Media coverage is part and parcel of missing persons cases. Media coverage has been found to have important impacts on police investigations. Coverage may cause an offender to change his or her behavior. It may also persuade the offender or an accomplice to come forward to the police. A member of the media-informed public may recognize a perpetrator or have other knowledge of the crime (Innes, 1999). Increased media coverage may be equated with an increased perception of the importance of a specific case by the viewing public. Viewers may be more likely to take interest in, or to contribute to, the investigation of a highly publicized case. Media coverage may have a direct impact on many aspects of missing person cases. It may affect how many people are informed of, and motivated to attend, upcoming volunteer search opportunities. Media coverage could affect many phases of the formal criminal justice process including investigation, trial, and sentencing. Cases with heavy media coverage may also impact policy and legislative developments. Ultimately, more missing people may be found if more people have the opportunity to hear about their cases and see their pictures. The National Center for Missing and Exploited Children’s “Picture Them Home” campaign is grounded in the statistic that one in every six missing children is found when someone recognizes them from a picture and alerts authorities. Pictures are considered the single most important tool in the search for a missing child (NCMEC, 2000).

Prior research establishes that the media plays an important role in missing person cases. Unlike previous studies that aimed to shed light on general patterns of news coverage across many different genres of crimes, this research analyzes coverage of missing person cases only. While previous studies have focused on local and national newspaper and television news broadcast coverage, this study concentrates on national newsmagazine television programs. Newsmagazine programs have been chosen because of their unique tendency to spend longer amounts of time dedicated to one issue. Most often, these programs focus on only one or two stories during each one-hour episode. Extended time and space dedicated to the coverage of missing person cases may allow for time to display pictures of
the missing person, disseminate important victim and circumstance characteristics, show tip-line numbers and website addresses, and advertise ongoing search or family support efforts.

Also, different than most previous studies that focus on behaviors of news reporters and editors, this research focuses on the victims and their families. This research provides a previously unheard, first-hand account, of exactly what role the media plays and how it impacts the families of missing persons. Each family member interviewed for this research is a sort of expert in the field, as his or her lived experiences and daily dealings with the media provide a unique perspective and understanding that cannot be garnered through alternative research approaches. By presenting interactions with media outlets from the perspectives of the families, this research draws attention to inequalities in coverage and gives a voice to groups previously unheard.

C. Summary of Methodology

This research project encompasses two complimentary studies. Study 1 focuses on media framing. A frame is described by Tankard, Hendrickson, Silberman, Bliss and Ghanem (1991) as “a central organizing idea for news content that supplies a content and suggests what the issue is through the use of selection, emphasis, exclusion, and elaboration” (p. 11). I analyze media framing as it applies to coverage of missing person cases. Findings from a content analysis of 178 newsmagazine episodes are compared to national missing person statistics to determine if media coverage is representative of the missing person population in terms of race, gender, and age. A chi-square goodness of fit test is used to determine if the missing persons covered on television are significantly different from the missing persons population in the United States. This method allows me to examine how the media frames the issue of missing persons (who goes missing and ultimately who is worth looking for).

Study 1 also consists of an examination of the full transcripts of 25 of the episodes from the study 1 content analysis. A discourse analysis of text is used to identify recurrent themes among the
These themes are then organized in an effort to support, extend, or contradict previous notions of ideal victims in the media as established by previous researchers. This process helps determine how the media verbally frames the media-worthy missing person.

Study 2 is designed to build upon the findings of Study 1. Under the assumption that certain types of missing persons are being over or under-represented in the media and that the media is framing media-worthy missing persons in specific ways, Study 2 provides insight into what exactly is going on behind the scenes that leads to this type of coverage. This study intends to discover reasons why some cases are higher-profile and some cases are lower-profile.

Study 2 presents and evaluates the experiences of families of high-profile missing persons as compared to the experiences of families of low-profile missing persons in regards to their interactions with media outlets. Fourteen family members of fourteen different missing persons were interviewed regarding their experiences dealing with the media. Themes were noted within and across interviews. The most common themes are presented along with the support of direct quotes from interviewed family members. In-depth interviews with family members of missing persons provide insight into the phenomenon of the ideal missing person and its impact on the families of missing persons. Possible explanations for, and implications of, the current state of media coverage of missing person cases are explored with a focus on Nils Christie’s idea of the “ideal victim”.

D. Overview

This chapter has provided some background on the prevalence of missing persons in the United States and has touched on the importance of media coverage in missing person cases. The purpose, significance, and methodology of this research have also been explored. Chapter 2 consists of a review of literature related to this research. It begins by exploring previous studies of how victims of crime are represented in the news. Next, framing will be conceptualized as it applies to this study. Finally, Nils
Christie’s (1986) research into the ideal victim will be introduced, along with other related research along the topics of hierarchy of victimization and worthy and unworthy victims. Chapter 3 presents the design and methodology of this research. Study 1, the content and discourse analysis of newsmagazine programs will be explained first, followed by Study 2, the case studies of families of missing persons. Chapter 4, the results chapter, begins by presenting the findings from the content analysis of 178 newsmagazine episodes covering missing persons. Inter-reality comparisons of race, gender, and age will be showcased. Next follows the results from the discourse analysis of 25 full transcripts. Recurrent frames, with examples, are presented. The final section of this chapter presents the findings from the case studies of families of missing persons. The eight themes that emerged from the in-depth interviews will be shared through specific examples and direct quotes from family members. Finally, Chapter 5 contains a summary of the findings of this research along with the implications. Limitations and recommendations for futures studies are also discussed.
CHAPTER II: THEORETICAL PERSPECTIVE AND LITERATURE REVIEW

A. Media Framing

In recent decades, the concepts of frames and framing have guided research endeavors across disciplines. In general, framing refers to how messages and events are presented, and made sense of, by their senders and receivers. A frame is described by Tankard, Hendrickson, Silberman, Bliss and Ghanem (1991) as “a central organizing idea for news content that supplies a content and suggests what the issue is through the use of selection, emphasis, exclusion, and elaboration” (p. 11). Reese (2001) explains, “Framing refers to the way events and issues are organized and made sense of, especially by media, media professionals, and their audiences” (p. 7). Although framing studies are not regularly used in criminology, this research is an example of how easily applicable and useful studies of this type are to the field of criminal justice. This research is the first of its kind to apply media framing to missing persons cases. I explain how the media is currently framing the issue of missing persons in the United States as a White and Female issue. I go on to explain how the media-worthy missing persons are framed during coverage as vulnerable, defenseless, personable people worthy of viewers sympathy and attention. These claims are supported through results from a content and discourse analysis of television newsmagazine programs as well as through family reports. The current state of media framing of missing persons cases aligns with previous research of victim representation in the news and the concept of an ideal victim.

Frame analysis’ origin is most frequently credited to Goffman’s 1974 work on frames of reference. Goffman suggests that because people are constantly receiving new information, they attempt to make sense of the world around them by applying interpretive schemas called primary frameworks (Goffman, 1974). He suggests that facts take on meaning when they are placed within a storyline or frame. Others liken the idea of a frame to that of a picture frame, surrounding an issue and
drawing the mind’s eye toward specific details. Tuchman (1978) explains that frames “organize strips of the everyday world” (p. 192). Framing analysis can also apply to visual messages. Analyzing picture cues for meaning is important because pictures can be framed just like words (Gamson, 1989). Implicit visual images are used to frame messages regarding minority groups in the news (Messaris & Abraham, 2001).

Entman (1993) emphasizes the key roles of selection and salience in the framing process. Frames select certain aspects of a reality and draw attention toward them while drawing attention away from other aspects. They can be defined just as strongly by what they omit as by what they include. In regards to salience, frames make certain aspects more noticeable, meaningful, or memorable. Messages become more salient most frequently by placement and repetition, as well as by specific content (Entman, 1993).

Entman (1993) describes four main purposes of framing. Frames define problems, most frequently in terms of prevailing cultural values. They also diagnose the causes of the problem. Frames make moral judgments of the causes and their overall effects. Finally, they suggest remedies for treating the problem while evaluating potential effectiveness of those remedies. Entman goes on to delineate the four locations of frames within the communication process: communicator, text, receiver, and culture. The communicators decide what to say, a decision often guided by frames in their own belief systems. Frames also appear within the text by presence or absence of words, images, or other sources of information that reinforce themes. Frames exist within the receiver’s way of thinking and may exist independently of the frames in the text or the framing intentions of the communicator. Finally, frames exist with a culture, as a demonstration of the most commonly held beliefs and ways of thinking of a social group (Entman, 1993).

Framing research in general can be sorted into two groups: studies of framing as the dependent variable and studies of framing as the independent variable. Studies of framing as the dependent
variable are also referred to as studies of frame building, which is how frames are established and adopted. In terms of framing by the media, journalists may be influenced by multiple variables including individual characteristics, media routines, organizational practices, outside organizations, and ideologies (Shoemaker & Reese, 1996).

Studies of framing as the independent variable focus on frame setting, or more generally, framing effects. The focus is on whether or not framing of issues influences evaluations or actions (Scheufele, 1999). In studying framing effects, Chong and Druckman (2008) suggest a three step process underlying framing. First the issue has to be available in memory, meaning a person must have some previous understanding of an issue. Second, the issue must be accessible, which is often achieved through recent or repeated exposure. Third, an individual will consciously evaluate the issue. This view suggests that frequency of a message is not the only important factor and that quality of content can, and does, play a role. Much of the current research studies framing effects.

Frames can be considered from two distinct vantage points, that of the media (sender) and that of the individual (receiver). Media frames encompass aspects of presenting the news. Entman (1993) identifies media frames as attributes of the news. Gamson and Modigliani (1989) illustrate the framing process by describing the packages that media outlets use to characterize an issue. These packages, identified as media frames, influence how issues are understood by the viewing audience. These media frames have a central frame or story line that gives meaning to unfolding issues. Media packages provide information about an issue, including the issue’s impact on other people and its overall significance (Tewksbury & Scheufele, 2009). Tuchman (1978) also defines media frames, explaining that “the news frame organizes everyday reality and the news frame is part and parcel of everyday reality” (p. 193).
Individual frames refer to how news is comprehended by an audience. Kinder and Sanders (1990) equivocate individual frames with “internal structures of the mind” (p. 74). Entman (1993) describes individual frames as “information-processing schemata” (p. 7). They are clusters of ideas stored in the mind that help individuals process information (Entman, 1993). Gamson (1989) would argue that the preferred reading in a frame analysis of news content is that of the intentions of the sender. Senders may be journalists, sources, or other media agents, but they are all sponsors of frames. At times events are consciously framed in a way to please a sponsor or further the interests of outside organizations (Gamson, 1989)

There exists across researchers and disciplines the debate whether framing should be integrated or distinguished from priming and agenda setting frameworks. Agenda setting, built from Lippmann’s (1922) observations that behavior and public opinion is a response to mental images, posits that elements that are emphasized as important in the media become important in the minds of viewers (McCombs & Ghanem, 2001). Scheufele and Tewksbury (2007) explain that agenda setting can make some issues more salient in viewers’ minds and affect subsequent judgments of that issue (priming). Thus, the media’s agenda becomes society’s agenda. Framing has been termed second-level agenda setting in that first-level agenda setting transfers object salience, while second-level agenda setting transfers attribute salience. Simply speaking, the first level tells us what to think about, while the second levels tells us how to think about it (Poindexter, Smith, & Heider, 2003). Lee & Wahl (2007) conducted a framing analysis of the internet pedophile story. They found that the frequent telling of the story made sexual predators prominent characters in society’s view of cyberspace, furthering society’s defensive values and suggesting an agenda-setting function of the media.

Other researchers believe that agenda-setting and framing should be kept separate. While priming and agenda-setting are based on salience-based accessibility effects, claiming that the more an
issue is presented the easier it is to access it, framing is based on applicability effects, such as how an issue is characterized for audience interpretation (Scheufele & Tewksbury, 2007). Amid all the differing definitions of framing, researchers can agree that framing analysis is a useful research technique in the quest to increase one’s understanding of media behaviors.

There are at least three ways in which framing studies can be applied to missing persons, all three of which I attempt in this research. The first two are primarily issues of frame building or looking at framing as the dependent variable. First, I ask, “How is the issue of missing persons framed in the media?” This is equivalent to asking “Who goes missing in the United States and, ultimately, who is worth looking for?” Through a content analysis of a mass media outlet like newsmagazine programs, and a comparison to national missing person statistics, I put together a picture of what the issue of missing persons in the United States is all about.

An analysis of 5 years of newsmagazine stories on poverty found that African Americans accounted for 62 percent of the poor persons pictured in stories even though they only account for 29 percent of the United States population in poverty (Gilens, 1996). These visual images frame poverty as an African American issue. The opposite may be said of the issue of missing persons. Study 1 seeks to find out if certain groups of missing persons are over-represented, thus framing missing persons as a white or female issue, for instance.

A second framing study addresses the question, “Once a missing person is deemed media-worthy and receives media coverage, how is that missing person framed?” Entman (1993) explained that framing involves selecting some aspects of a perceived reality and making them more prominent. Thus, one might expect that certain aspects of a missing person’s appearance or personal life may be given more attention during media coverage. A thorough analysis of verbal descriptors provides an answer to this question.
Information gathered from asking either of the first two questions may suggest the existence of an “ideal victim” frame in terms of media coverage of missing persons. A review of previous literature on victim representation in the news finds that white and female victims are consistently over-represented while African Americans and men are under-represented (Dixon, Azocar, & Casas, 2003; Romer, Jamieson, & de Coteau, 1998; Anastasio & Costa, 2004). It has been suggested that a sort of hierarchy of worthy and unworthy victims exists in media coverage and in people’s minds, among which women, White people, the very old and young, the innocent and the vulnerable occupy a place at the top (Christie, 1986; Greer, 2007; Madriz, 1997). Through a content and discourse analysis, I will address these suggestions.

The third framing study is one of framing effects, or considering framing as the independent variable. This question asks, “Does individual framing of the issue of missing persons affect judgment or behavior?” This line of inquiry could investigate whether media viewers judge White persons as more likely to go missing or more worthy of coverage. Researchers could analyze behaviors of law enforcement, judges, jurors, and legislatures to see if exposure to media-worthy missing persons has any effect on their behaviors. In Study 2, I interview families of missing persons to see if these frames exist in their minds and if and how it affects their opinions, choices, and behaviors.

B. Representations of Victims in the News

Very few media studies have focused solely on the representation of race, gender and age in missing person cases. This study is an attempt to help fill that gap. However, numerous more general studies have analyzed race, gender and age as it relates to media portrayals of victims of crime in general. It can be logically assumed that missing people, especially those who are victims of abduction or other unsafe circumstances, are portrayed in the media in a similar manner. A number of studies have been conducted that analyze representations of race in television news programs. Dixon, Azocar,
and Casas (2003) drew a sample of broadcasts from NBC Nightly News, ABC World News Tonight, and CBS Evening News. Portrayals of victimization on the news were compared to national statistics from the U.S. Department of Justice special report on violent victimization. They found that African Americans were underrepresented as crime victims on the news (30%) as compared to crime reports (48%). Whites were overrepresented as victims on the news (51%) compared to crime reports (28%).

Dixon and Linz (2000) conducted a content analysis of a random sample of local television news in Los Angeles and Orange Counties. They developed and used three indices of victimization in the study: intergroup measures, inter-role measures, and inter-reality measures. Intergroup measures compared portrayals of Whites in the media to Blacks or Latinos. Inter-role measures compared the portrayal of positive and negative roles within a cultural group. Inter-reality measures compared the portrayals on television with social indicator measures such as government reports. The inter-reality measures found that Whites are overrepresented as victims and that Latinos are underrepresented as victims when compared to national statistics. This study did not find Blacks to be underrepresented or overrepresented as victims.

Romer, Jamieson, and de Coteau (1998) studied evening news broadcasts from three television stations in Philadelphia. They found that White actors were shown as victims of violent crime at greater rates than White actors are shown as perpetrators. Overall, Whites were more likely to be portrayed as victims and non-Whites were more likely to be portrayed as perpetrators.

In one of the first studies that focused on coverage of Hispanic persons, Chiricos and Escholz (2002) analyzed the content of three weeks of local news broadcasts in Orlando, Florida. In Orlando, Hispanics make up 14 percent of the population, yet they accounted for just four percent of television news coverage. Two of the local stations did not cover a single story with a Hispanic victim during the three week period (Chiricos & Escholz, 2002).
Race and gender representations have also been studied in terms of how victims are portrayed in printed media. Pritchard and Hughes (1997) examined two Milwaukee newspapers’ coverage of homicides. A homicide’s newsworthiness was increased when Whites, females, children, or elderly persons were the victims. Interviews with reporters suggested that newsworthiness is often judged on the basis of age, race, and gender of the victim and multiple White reporters admitted that they paid more attention to homicides in which Whites were involved. These findings were echoed by Sorenson, Manz and Berk (1998) in their comparison of Los Angeles newspaper coverage of homicides to official local statistics. They found that homicides with White, child, elderly, or female victims received more coverage than homicides with Black and Latino victims.

A more in-depth study by Anastasio and Costa (2004) analyzed 148 articles from national newspapers and found that violent crime coverage personalizes male victims more than female victims. Males were covered using more personal information and were more often referred to by name rather than as a victim. A second study expanded these findings through questionnaires that assessed empathy for victims, victim blame, and responsibility of perpetrators. It was found that more personalized victim descriptions resulted in greater victim empathy and less victim blame (Anastasio & Costa, 2004).

Very little research could be found that focused specifically on missing person cases. Min and Feaster (2010) analyzed 185 cases of missing children stories covered on five national television news programs. They compared race and gender of cases covered in the news to FBI national statistics and found that African American missing children and female missing children were significantly underrepresented in television news coverage. Study 1 of this research uses a similar approach, but focuses on both missing adults and missing children. It also compares age of missing persons covered in the news to national statistics along with race and gender. This study also provides examples of the way the media-worthy missing persons are being framed.
Only one study was found that focused on the lived experiences of family members of missing persons. Greif and Bowers (2007) conducted a focus group with five adults whose siblings had been abducted as children or young adults. One common theme they found was that the media plays an important role in missing person cases. The media forms the public and the family’s views of an event. In some situations, media coverage can cast blame on families. Sometimes inaccurate information is spread, causing stress for the family. In better circumstances, when the media portrays a victim as innocent in his or her circumstances, the families receive support and assistance with searches (Greif & Bowers, 2007). This current research is inspired by the previous study’s focus on siblings of the missing. In Study 2 of this research, 14 family members of missing persons are interviewed to expand our knowledge of the real life experiences of families working to find media coverage for their loved ones. I report, compare and contrast the families’ experiences, share their opinions, and organize their advice to other families of the missing.

In summary, previous studies of media representations of race and gender have consistently found that Whites are overrepresented as victims and African Americans are underrepresented as victims. In addition, some studies have found specifically that White female victims garner the greatest amounts of media attention. Race and gender clearly have an impact on what stories are covered and how stories are covered. These findings lead one to believe that an ideal victim of sorts exists in the eyes of the media outlets. Through media framing, this ideal victim may soon, if not already, exist in the minds of viewers as well.

C. The “Ideal Victim” and Related Research

It has long been suggested that there exists a sort of hierarchy of victimization, at the top of which are the most ideal or worthy victims, and at the bottom the most unworthy victims. Nils Christie (1986) introduces “the ideal victim” and identifies attributes that are most likely to legitimize someone
as a victim of crime. Among his list of characteristics, Christie suggests that the victim is often female, very young, or very old. The victim is innocent, defenseless, blameless and deserving of sympathy. This research contends that an “ideal missing person” may exist in the media. The content and discourse analysis of newsmagazine programs finds that White, female, good, personable, and defenseless people make the most ideal missing persons. Families agree with these findings. They suggest that a hierarchy of sorts also exists in determining which types of missing persons cases receive the most media coverage. They believe that being a White female will put one higher up the hierarchy than being a Black male. Other factors like being young or having strong family ties pushes one higher up the hierarchy, while being a runaway or having a criminal past pushes one lower.

In discussing the six warrants that factor prevalently in claims-making about missing children, Joel Best (1987) focuses on at least two warrants that coincide with conceptions of the ideal victim: the value of children and blameless victims. Missing children have come to be defined as sentimentally priceless. Interviews with parents of missing children demonstrate the uncertainty and enormous sense of loss felt by a parent of a missing child. It is also an understanding that children are innocent and powerless and thus face great risks when they are missing. Even runaways may be considered blameless as it is assumed they are running away from great evils at home (Best, 1987). Echoing these sentiments are the findings of a study of the television program “Law & Order: Special Victims Unit” (SVU). Researchers found that “special victims” meant young victims in almost half of all episodes during the viewing period. They suggest that children grab viewers’ attention in a powerful way because they represent vulnerability and potential for the future (Britto, Hughes, Saltzman & Stroh, 2007).

Greer (2007) suggests the existence of a hierarchy of victimization that exists in the media in regards to coverage and compassion for victims. The ideal victim receives great amounts of media attention while those at the bottom of the hierarchy are considered undeserving victims and receive
little, if any, media attention. Victims at the top of the hierarchy induce empathy and grieving from viewers and can persuade changes in social and criminal justice practices and policies (Greer, 2007).

Numerous studies of rape victims have demonstrated similar findings. Jones and Aronson (1973) studied the attribution of fault to a rape victim under the assumptions that because individuals believe in a just world, they are more likely to attribute fault to a respectable person’s actions since it is harder to find fault in that person’s character. As expected, after analyzing undergraduate rape questionnaires, they found that a rape victim was faulted more if she was a virgin or married (most respectable) than if she was divorced. Participants also sentenced perpetrators to longer prison terms for the rape of a married woman as compared to a divorced woman (Jones & Aronson, 1973). An earlier study by Landy and Aronson (1969) also concluded that a defendant received a longer sentence when the victim was respectable (altruistic and successful) versus unrespectable (dishonest or otherwise despicable).

Physical appearance and dress has also been considered as an important victim characteristic. Workman and Freeburg (1999) found that subjects assigned more responsibility to victims in short skirts as compared to those in moderate or long skirts. In a study of high school students, participants were shown photographs of date rape victims in either provocative or conservative clothing. The victims in provocative clothing were deemed most responsible for their rapist’s behavior (Cassidy & Hurrell, 1995). Deitz, Littman, and Bentley (1984) found that subjects responded least favorably to unattractive rape victims, especially if the rape victim fought back.

Madriz (1997) conducted focus groups and in-depth interviews with women in New York City to assess how they view images of crime and victims. She found that images of victims are mostly White, middle-class women who look “normal” and small. She continues to describe the ideal victim as “fragile, good, innocent, vulnerable women, unknown to the criminal and attacked- kidnapped, killed, or raped-
unexpectedly” (p. 352). There also exist images of undeserving or non-ideal victims. These victims do not behave in socially accepted ways and may dress provocatively. Middle class white elderly women associate non-ideal victims with Black and Latina women who do not follow codes of behavior.

Fattah Ezzat (2002) draws attention to innocent victims who evoke empathy and compassion in comparison with victims who got what they deserved or brought the victimization upon themselves. These victims of the latter description are often deemed unworthy or expendable. He goes on to suggest that criminal justice and victim assistance agencies make moral judgments of either superiority or inferiority of victims and create a normative hierarchy of victims. Victims are categorized as guilty or innocent, worthy or unworthy, good or bad, and deserving or undeserving.

Cavender, Bond-Maupin, and Jurik (1999) examined the portrayal of female victims on the national television program America’s Most Wanted. They were interested in how the host, John Walsh, controlled the narrative. He often provided personal details about the victims’ lives in an attempt to establish her worth. He included descriptions of the victims as being part of a happy couple, being very athletic, and reading the Bible every day. It seems important that a victim’s worth is established in some way for the viewing audience. These same sorts of descriptors may also be used in television coverage of missing person cases.

Extensive research has analyzed child abductions with an effort to identify characteristics specific to victims. Risk factors identified with an increased likelihood of being a victim of abduction are difficult to list, as victims are usually “average” children with normal lives in normal families. However, victims of familial abductions tend to be younger than age six. Victims are equally distributed across racial/ethnic groups in proportion to the general population. Children abducted by family members are usually in their own home or yard or someone else’s home or yard immediately prior to the abduction (Hammer, et al., 2002).
Eighty-one percent of nonfamily abducted children are between the ages of 12 and 17. Fifty-eight percent of stereotypical kidnapping victims are 12 years of age or older. Girls account for the majority of both non-familial abductions and stereotypical kidnappings. The National Incidence Studies of Missing, Abducted, Runaway and Thrownaway Children (NISMART) found that black children account for 42 percent of all non-familial abductions even though they make up only 15 percent of the overall United States child population. Generally accessible places like streets, parks, and wooded areas are the origination points of most abductions. Non-familial abductions and stereotypical kidnappings occur relatively equally across seasons with the exception of occurring less frequently in the winter (Finkelhor, et al., 2002).

Some typical characteristics of child abduction murder victims have been found. The victim is most often white, female, and approximately 11 years old. The victim is from a middle class family who lives in a single family residence in an urban or suburban area. The victim does not live in a high risk family situation and the family relationship is good. Over half of abductions that lead to murder occur within three city blocks of the victim’s home (Brown, Keppel, Weis, & Skeen, 2006).

Researchers surveying offenders found that the child’s attractiveness and how the child is dressed are important. Size is important, and offenders believe that younger children are less likely to report being victimized (Conte, Wolf, & Smith, 1989). Forty-nine percent of offenders studied by Elliot, Browne, and Kilcoyne (1995) reported that they looked for children who had low self-esteem or low confidence.

It is possible that news agents implicitly use the criteria of ‘the ideal victim’ to determine a story’s newsworthiness and ultimately its attraction to viewers. Crimes against children, those inherently pure and innocent, are deemed morally reproachable by society and thus generate high levels of newsworthiness (Min & Feaster, 2008). Reporters and editors may consciously or
subconsciously categorize missing persons along a similar line, determining which cases the viewing audience will identify with or empathize with more. This research demonstrates that an ideal missing person exists in media coverage. Media outlets show preference to missing Whites and missing females. A missing person with a good reputation, solid relationships, and inherent vulnerabilities is who viewers are seeing on television.

D. Summary

Because many people lack personal experience with missing person cases, they may derive most of their knowledge on the topic from media coverage. The media frames certain cases and certain aspects of cases as important, and through repetition, those aspects may form schemas in viewers’ minds. A systematic framing analysis of how missing person cases and missing persons are portrayed in the media sheds greater light on the ideal victim frame as it applies to missing persons. The analysis of television newsmagazine programs finds that White and female missing persons are over-represented in the media and Black and male missing persons are under-represented in the media. Once a person does receive attention as a missing person, she is most likely to be framed as someone with a beautiful appearance, a good personality, positive social relationships, and an inherent defenselessness or vulnerability. Interviews with family members of missing persons reinforce previous findings that ideal victims do exist and suggest that ideal missing persons may exist as well. With specific examples, families share how efforts for coverage or rewarded or denied based on demographic and social characteristics.
CHAPTER III: RESEARCH DESIGN AND METHODOLOGY

A. Introduction

This research consists of two distinct studies. Study 1 focuses on media framing. A frame is described by Tankard, Hendrickson, Silberman, Bliss and Ghanem (1991) as “a central organizing idea for news content that supplies a content and suggests what the issue is through the use of selection, emphasis, exclusion, and elaboration” (p. 11). I analyze media framing as it applies to coverage of missing person cases. Through a content and discourse analysis of national newsmagazine television programs, I examine how the media frames the issue of missing persons (who goes missing and ultimately who is worth looking for) and how the media frames the media-worthy missing person (verbal descriptors).

Study 2 first attempts to either reinforce or dispute the findings of Study 1. Study 2 is designed to provide insight about what is going on with media coverage of missing persons and why. Ultimately, Study 2 aims to uncover what leads some cases to become high-profile cases while others go unnoticed. Study 2 presents and evaluates the experiences of families of high-profile missing persons as compared to the experiences of families of low-profile missing persons in regards to their interactions with media outlets. In-depth interviews with families of missing persons provide insight into the phenomenon of the ideal missing person and its impact on the families of missing persons.

B. Study 1: Content and Discourse Analysis of Newsmagazine Programs

1. Introduction and Research Questions

Study 1 focuses on the framing of missing persons cases by different media outlets. Through a content and discourse analysis of national newsmagazine television programs, I examine how the media
frames the issue of missing persons (who goes missing and ultimately who is worth looking for) and how
the media frames the media-worthy missing person (verbal descriptors).

The goal of Study 1 is to understand how the issue of missing persons is packaged and presented
to viewing audiences by national newsmagazine television programs. Inter-reality comparisons of media
coverage to FBI missing person statistics address the first research question:

RQ1: Is the gender, racial, and age composition of missing person cases covered on national
newsmagazine television programs representative of the United States missing person
population as a whole?

Based on findings from previous research on representations of race and gender in the media,
the hypotheses are as follows:

H1: White missing persons will receive significantly greater amounts of newsmagazine television
coverage and Black missing persons will receive significantly lesser amounts of newsmagazine
television coverage as compared to their actual presence according to national statistics.

H2: Female missing persons will receive significantly greater amounts of newsmagazine
television coverage and male missing persons will receive significantly lesser amounts of
newsmagazine television coverage as compared to their actual presence according to national
statistics.

H2: Missing persons under the age of 21 will receive significantly greater amounts of
newsmagazine television coverage and missing persons age 21 and over will receive significantly
lesser amounts of newsmagazine television coverage as compared to their actual presence
according to national statistics.
An analysis of the verbal descriptions of missing persons from a sample of episode transcripts addresses the second research question:

RQ2: How are media-worthy missing persons framed by national newsmagazine television programs?

2. Sample

To address the first research question regarding whether or not the gender, racial, and age composition of missing person cases covered on national newsmagazine television programs is representative of the United States missing person population as a whole, I conducted an analysis of four national newsmagazine-type programs and compared the findings to national statistics. Transcript summaries from Nancy Grace (CNN/HLN) episodes and TV Guide summaries of Dateline (NBC), 20/20 (ABC), and 48 Hours Mystery (CBS) episodes were gathered for every episode airing in between January 1, 2008 and December 31, 2011. Nancy Grace transcript summaries were obtained from the CNN website and Dateline, 20/20, and 48 Hours Mystery episode summaries were obtained from the TV Guide website. The unit of analysis for this study was episodes that cover missing person cases. Consequently, episodes summaries that did not highlight missing person cases were removed from the sample. Because Nancy Grace airs five days a week, a systematic sampling interval was used to reduce the sample to 100, providing for equal representation from each day of the week. As shown in Table 1, the final sample included 42 episodes of Dateline, 19 episodes of 20/20, 17 episodes of 48 Hours Mystery, and 100 episodes of Nancy Grace. The total number of episodes for this study was 178 episodes. The unit of analysis for this study was missing person cases. Some episodes covered more than one missing person. Thus, the total for this study was 189 missing person cases.
Table 1
Final Sample of Episodes and Cases

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Program</th>
<th># of Episodes</th>
<th># of Cases</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Dateline (NBC)</td>
<td>42</td>
<td>44</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>20/20 (ABC)</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>22</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>48 Hours Mystery (CBS)</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nancy Grace (HLN/CNN)</td>
<td>100</td>
<td>103</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>178</td>
<td>189</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

I identified the national missing person population through the use of official national statistics. The National Crime Information Center’s (NCIC) Missing and Unidentified Person Statistics for 2011 was examined. The report is issued annually by the Federal Bureau of Investigation. The missing person file includes record of missing individuals who:

- have a proven mental or physical disability
- are missing under circumstances that indicate that they may be in physical danger
- are missing following a catastrophe
- are missing under circumstances indicating their disappearance may have been involuntary
- are under the age of 21 and do not meet the previous criteria
- are 21 and older and do not meet criteria but there exists a reasonable concern for their safety

(FBI, 2011)

As shown in Table 2, approximately 50% of missing persons in 2011 were female and 50% were male. In terms of race, approximately 64% were White/Hispanic and 34% were Black. About 81% of missing persons were under the age of 21, while 19% were 21 and older (FBI, 2011).
Table 2
NCIC Missing Person Statistics for 2011

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Race</th>
<th>Number</th>
<th>Approximate %</th>
<th>Approx. % excluding unknown</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>White/Hispanic/Other</td>
<td>431,505</td>
<td>64</td>
<td>68</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Black</td>
<td>198,461</td>
<td>34</td>
<td>32</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unknown</td>
<td>17,894</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>N/A</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Number</th>
<th>Approximate %</th>
<th>Approx. % excluding unknown</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Female</td>
<td>334,658</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>50</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Male</td>
<td>334,172</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>50</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unknown</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>&lt; 1</td>
<td>N/A</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Number</th>
<th>Approximate %</th>
<th>Approx. % excluding unknown</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Under 21</td>
<td>550,424</td>
<td>81</td>
<td>81</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>21 and Over</td>
<td>128,436</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>678,860</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

In order to address the second research question regarding how media-worthy missing persons are framed by national newsmagazine television program, I obtained full transcripts for 25 randomly selected episodes. Table 3 shows how the transcripts were dispersed across programs, with 6 transcripts from Dateline episodes, 2 from 20/20, 5 from 48 Hours Mystery, and 12 from Nancy Grace.

Table 3
Full Transcript Dispersion

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Program</th>
<th># of Transcripts</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Dateline (NBC)</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>20/20 (ABC)</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>48 Hours Mystery (CBS)</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nancy Grace (HLN/CNN)</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>25</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

As shown in Table 4, twenty-one of the missing persons covered in the transcripts were White and 4 were Black. Eight of the missing persons were male and 17 were female. Missing persons under the age of 21 accounted for 17 of the cases while 8 cases were missing persons 21 and older.
Table 4
Demographics of Missing Persons in Transcripts

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Number</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Race</td>
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3. Procedures

The first research question addresses how the issue of missing persons is framed. Specifically, it looks at the race, gender, and age compositions of media-covered missing persons as compared to national statistics. Each episode covering a missing person case was given a unique identification number and was coded based on the date and time of program, program title, and network on which it aired. The race, gender, and age of the missing person were coded. In the few instances in which more than one missing person was covered during an episode, the episode was given multiple identification numbers. In cases where a child was abducted and the search was for both abductor and child, the missing person of interest for this study was the child. The following definitions and identification procedures were used:

Definition of missing person case. For the purpose of this study, missing person cases reflected all aspects of a case in which a person was or is kidnapped, abducted, a runaway, or otherwise reported by the media as missing. It included, but was not limited to, coverage of initial missing person/AMBER alerts, search efforts, recoveries, investigations, arrests, trials, and sentencing. Defined as such, it included both open and closed cases.
Definition of race. The FBI NCIC Missing Person and Unidentified Person Statistics for 2011 uses five categories of race: Asian, Black, Indian, Unknown, and White (includes Hispanic). Asian and Indian missing persons accounted for less than 5% of missing persons in the national statistics. So for the purpose of this study, three categories of race were used: Black, Unknown, and White/other (includes Hispanic and other races).

Definition of age. The FBI NCIC Missing Person and Unidentified Person Statistics for 2011 uses two categories of age: Under 21 and 21 and older. For the purpose of this study the same categories were used.

Identification of race, gender and age. Guidelines for interpreting race, gender, and age were developed to follow a method similar to the one used by Dixon and Linz (2000). Race, gender, and age were coded based on the stated race, gender, and age in the episode summaries or full transcripts. In instances that race, gender, or age were not verbally stated, the following indicators were used for inference: 1) photo or video shown, 2) family member shown (race of family member implies race of missing person), 3) previous news articles that indicate race, gender, or age.

Two coders (this researcher and another graduate student) studied the previous definitions set forth for identification of race, gender and age. To calculate inter-coder reliability a random selection of 30 episodes was coded by both coders.

In order to address the second research question of how the media frames the missing person, I undertook an analysis of media discourse. Discourse includes spoken or written language use as well as other kinds of semiotic activity including visual images and non-verbal communication. A society’s discourse is tightly connected with its ideologies and social hierarchies. Thus, examinations of discourse allow one to understand more completely how those ideologies and hierarchies are presented in texts. Analyzing discourse examines how language and representation generate meaning as well as
relationships between representation, power, and the construction of identity and subjectivity (Hall, 1997). Discourse practice encompasses the social processes of both text production and text consumption (Fairclough, 2000). I took a closer look at the discourse surrounding media-worthy missing persons as covered on newsmagazine television programs.

4. **Data Analysis**

Research question 1 asks whether the racial, gender, and age composition of missing person cases covered on national newsmagazine television programs is representative of the missing person population in the United States as a whole. Inter-reality comparisons of the NCIC Missing and Unidentified Person Statistics for 2011 to television coverage were used to address this question. According to national statistics published in 2011 from the FBI, 64% of persons reported missing in the United States were White and 34% were Black. This content analysis of newsmagazine programs noted the racial composition of missing persons on television coverage. I used a chi-square goodness of fit test to determine if the observed proportions differed significantly from national statistics.

In terms of gender, NCIC statistics show males accounting for 48% of persons reported missing and females accounting for 52% of persons reported missing in the United States. This analysis gathered total number and percentage of males and females present in the newsmagazine episodes. I used a chi-square goodness of fit test to determine if the observed proportions differed significantly from national statistics.

National statistics show that, in terms of age, 81% of missing persons reported in 2011 were under the age of 21, while 19% were age 21 or older. Statistics for age were gathered during the content analysis of newsmagazine programs. A chi-square goodness of fit test was used to determine if the observed proportions differ significantly from national statistics.
To address the second research question of how media-worthy missing persons are framed by national newsmagazine television programs, I used discourse analysis to analyze the sample of 25 transcripts. Analysis of text includes traditional analysis of linguistics such as vocabulary, grammar, and semantics as well as an analysis of the organization of text (Fairclough, 2000). Discourse analysis entails careful readings of texts with the goal of discovering discursive patterns of meanings, contradictions, and inconsistencies. It operates on the premise that language processes involved are not static, but are often fragmented and inconsistent (Gavey, 1989). This analysis of discourse allowed for a more qualitative understanding of what frames are woven in through the narrative texts.

To begin the analysis, I operationalized the constructs of interest. The topics of interest were reflective of my research interest in understanding how the ideal missing person is framed in the media. The resulting coding categories were chosen based on findings from previous literature while still allowing for the emergence of themes not previously discovered.

Next I gathered the texts, in this case 25 full transcripts from national newsmagazine programs airing between 2008 and 2011. I read all transcripts in their entirety to get a general idea and feeling for the content. Next began a systematic analysis of noting where established categories were discussed or alluded to. Each transcript was read line by line and coded for the presences of any of the established constructs of interest. Original topics of potential future interest were also coded.

After coding for specific categories, I examined the structure of transcripts. I noted how the missing person was introduced and what details of the case or characteristics of the missing person took priority in their presentation. I also gave attention to linguistic mechanisms. For example, notes were made to differentiate between the use of “we” and “I”, as “we” may suppose audience agreement. This also included examining vocabulary choice, thus it was noted if the missing person was referred to as a victim of circumstances or a responsible party in their disappearance.
The data was organized so that instances of each category were grouped together. I analyzed the presentation and significance of each instance and organized the data into more coherent themes or frames. Specific discursive statements were chosen to illustrate each frame. I suggested functions of linguistic mechanisms as they applied to specific themes. With only one exception, the organized themes/frames presented serve to support and build upon previous notions of the ideal victim as it applies to media coverage of missing persons.

C. Case Studies

1. Introduction and Research Question

Study 2 was developed under the assumption that Study 1 would establish that certain types of missing persons cases are being over and under-represented in the media and also that the media-worthy missing are being framed in specific. The numbers and descriptive findings from Study 1 are not enough to truly understand what is going on with media coverage of missing persons. Unfortunately many research projects conclude with the presentation of a societal problem. This research seeks to do more than state the problem. I speak with a previously unheard from population, the families of the missing. Families of missing persons have the ability to give a unique first-hand account of what is going on behind the scenes in missing persons cases. I ask the families of the missing to try and explain this current state of media coverage. They share their own experiences regarding the media, offer their opinions on why media coverage of missing persons is unequal, and give advice for other families in similar situations.

This study was conducted within the transformative paradigm. Transformative research generally embodies the following characteristics: (1) It focuses on the lives and experiences of marginalized groups; (2) It examines how race or ethnicity leads to unequal power relationships; (3) It relates findings to social and political action; and (4) It creates research approaches based on transformative theories.
(Mertens, Farley, Madison, & Singleton, 1994). The first study followed a more traditional, scientific model that was deductive in nature, starting with a theory that guided the research. In contrast, the second study took a more inductive approach resembling grounded theory, in which information generated during the interviews led to theory development. Because interviews of families of missing persons have not been academically published yet, it was impossible to assume exactly which themes would emerge. And while some themes generated may have directly corresponded or refuted the concept of the ideal victim, this researcher kept an open mind when conducting and coding interviews so that original themes also emerged.

Many media studies that have taken in-depth looks into how stories get coverage have been grounded in gatekeeping theory. Gatekeeping theory provides a description of the processes that either allow or prevent events from receiving media attention. In 1950, David Manning White analyzed the written explanations of a newspaper editor (Mr. Gates) describing why he rejected stories. An interview study of 18 minority journalists found that mainstream norms impacted journalist roles, often leading them to avoid advocating for their community (Nishikawa, Towner, Clawson & Waltenburg, 2009). This research does not deny the presence of gatekeeping in the media, however, the hope for Study 2 is to uncover some of the processes, behaviors, and interpretations that take place in families’ interactions with media outlets as described from the families’ standpoints. They may have some opinions on why the current state of media coverage of missing persons is the way that it is.

Study 2 addresses the following research question:

RQ3: How are the quantity and quality of interactions with news media outlets similar or different for families of high-profile missing persons when compared to families of low-profile missing persons?
2. Participants

Using a criterion-based purposive sampling technique, participants were chosen based on their knowledge about the topic, willingness to talk, and representativeness of a range of views (Rubin & Rubin, 1995). Fourteen family members were selected for case studies (eight family members of high-profile missing persons and six family members of low-profile missing persons). They represented missing persons who disappeared between 1990 and 2013. Demographic descriptions of the family members interviewed and the missing persons represented in this study are presented in Tables 5 and 6, respectively.

Table 5  
Demographics of Family Members Interviewed  

<table>
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<td>4</td>
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Table 6  
Demographics of Missing Persons Represented  

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<td>Under 21</td>
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<td>21 and Over</td>
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Family was identified as immediate or extended family members and/or persons living with the person at the time of the disappearance and/or persons in romantic relationships of one year or longer with the missing person at the time of his or her disappearance. Only family members 18 years or older were eligible for interviews. Identification of a missing person as high or low-profile was determined by the amount of media coverage the case received. The amount of coverage was evaluated through family reports, as well as searches of online media collections by the researcher, and determined the status as either a high or low-profile missing person. This researcher continuously monitored a subject’s eligibility by conducting in-depth interviews after initial contact was made and consent had been documented. A subject with experience with missing persons continued to be eligible as long as they were willing to participate, regardless of whether or not the missing person of focus was still missing.

Participants for this study were recruited from the United States. Multiple methods of recruitment were utilized. A recruitment flier (Appendix A) was created with basic information including purpose of the study and researcher’s contact information. Interested persons were asked to contact the researcher to set up an informational meeting. In an effort to gather families of high-profile missing persons, transcripts from Study 1 were reviewed and searches for articles on missing persons from major newspapers were conducted to establish a list of names of high-profile missing person cases. Fliers were sent to media agents if identified or emailed to published family email addresses or Facebook pages when available.

In an effort to reach families of lower-profile missing persons, fliers were sent to organizations dedicated to advocating for missing persons, with a request that the flier be shared with potentially interested family members. The flier was also posted on Facebook pages committed to the discussion of missing person cases.
Both populations of interest were also targeted through the use of key informants or locators. Persons from agencies dedicated to locating missing persons or advocating on behalf of families of missing persons were informed of the purpose and criteria of this study and asked to pass on recruitment fliers to potential study participants. Interested persons who contacted the researcher were screened over the phone using the eligibility screening guide (Appendix B) and an interview date and time was scheduled for interested participants who proved eligible for the study.

After the agreement to participate was gained from at least two families, snowball sampling was used to gather more families. Participating families were asked to email or mail the flier to other families they know who have had experiences with missing persons. They were asked to pass on the flier with a simple introduction or email subject of “For your information”. They were discouraged from providing any specifics of the research and from trying to persuade others to join the research. They were allowed to choose whether or not to disclose their participation in the study. As explained by Biernacki and Waldorf (1981), snowball sampling is an effective sampling method used often in qualitative research to gather participants through referrals from others who possess shared characteristics of interest. It is most effective when researching a sensitive topic, or one in which the population of interest has low visibility and is not easily located. Missing person cases receiving little or no media coverage may fall into the latter category. This researcher followed guidelines established by Biernacki and Waldorf (1981) for controlling the types of snowball chains and number of cases in each chain. Every attempt was made to ensure that family members from both populations (low-profile and high-profile missing persons) reflect characteristics of the general population from which they are thought to belong to. Thus, fair representation of race and gender were accounted for. This researcher also took notice when referrals through a particular snowball chain began to produce information that became repetitive. That subgroup of the population was considered exhausted and every effort was made to include subsequent interviews of more diverse viewpoints.
It should be noted that there may be an unintentional selection bias in this sample in that it may favor the media savvy families of missing persons. Although equal efforts were made to recruit families through letters, personal contacts, and social media outlets: the majority of responding families heard about the study through social media. Some saw the flier posted on social media sites. Others were recruited by participating families they had befriended on Facebook. Because no missing persons study of this type has been conducted before, it is impossible to compare the results of these recruitment methods to the results of previous recruitment methods not favoring social media outlets.

There is also possible self-selection bias, as all potential participants had total control over whether or not to participate in this study. It is possible the people with previous negative experiences with the media or with academic researchers intentionally avoided this research project. Minority family members who are suspicious of White authority figures may also have shied away from participating which may account for small number of non-White participants.

This study compares the experiences of families of high-profile cases to families of low-profile cases. By definition, this study neglects a subset of the missing persons population; the no-coverage missing persons. Some missing persons may not receive any media coverage at all. Conversations with advocates in the field suggest that the no-coverage missing persons group consists mostly of the people that are not being reported missing. Homeless people, prostitutes, victims of human trafficking, or people for whom there is no voice may fall into this category.

3. Procedures

This researcher informed family members who agreed to participate in the study of the purpose of the study, potential benefits and harms, and that they have to right to discontinue participation at any time. I assured them verbally and in writing that their identities would be confidential, and that the recordings and transcripts would be kept in a confidential location. To ensure informed consent:
1. Participants were informed of the following: (1) who is conducting the research, (2) how they were chosen as a participant, (3) what the time commitment is, (4) what the risks and benefits are, (5) what participation will entail, (6) they have the right to decline from participation at any time, and (7) how confidentiality will be maintained.

2. They were asked to sign the informed consent form (Appendix C) and were be given a copy. They had contact information for the researcher and were encouraged to ask questions.

3. They will be provided with results from the research if they request. A print copy of study results will be mailed or emailed to participants after completion of the study if requested.

This researcher informed the participants that she will use the following descriptive information in all documents generated from this research: (1) race, gender, and age (child or adult) of the family members and missing person, and (2) relationships of family members to the missing person. Upon completion of the interviews, I realized that because some cases were so unique, it would be essential to use additional measures to ensure confidentiality. In all cases, pseudonyms are used for both the missing person and his or her family member. In some instances, identifying characteristics of the missing person and family members, such as occupation or relationship, have been altered to protect identities.

Every effort was made to minimize risks for the subjects. Participants showed their interest and potential willingness to participate in the study by contacting the researcher in response to a recruitment flyer. Recruitment fliers provided contact information for the researcher (phone and email) that allowed interested persons to contact the researcher in private. The participant also had the freedom to choose whether or not to participate after initial contact with the researcher. After verbal consent was established, a written consent form was signed by the participant. The participant was told
verbally and in writing that they may choose not to answer certain questions and may postpone or discontinue participation at any time.

Informed consent was obtained using procedures and documents in a language understandable to the subject. In the cases of in-person interviews, subjects met the researcher at the location of their choice and were given the informed consent document immediately after greetings and introductions. In the cases of phone interviews, verbal consent was given over the phone and a written consent form was either faxed or emailed to the family member or mailed to the family member along with a stamped envelope.

Interviews took place with one family member at a time during a time and at a location of their choosing. Possible interview sites (public library, coffee shop, UIC) were suggested if necessary. Participants were encouraged to choose an interview site that they felt safe with and were comfortable in. Participants were asked intermittently throughout each interview if they felt healthy and comfortable and would like to continue. They were reminded that they may postpone or discontinue participation at any time. Referrals to counselors, social service agencies, or support groups were available if necessary or if requested.

This researcher used multiple case studies to enhance the understanding of a complex phenomenon regarding social inequality. The primary task of the case studies was to conduct interviews. Family members participated in in-depth interviews that took place over one to three meetings. The interviews were conducted at the location of the family member’s choice. Possible venues included the family member’s home or a private room at the local public library. Every effort was made to secure in-person interviews, but in the event that an interview could not take place in person, family members participated in phone interviews. Each interview lasted between 45 and 120 minutes. Follow-up interviews, when necessary, lasted between 25 and 45 minutes. Interviews were recorded
and transcribed. This researcher used a semi-structured interview approach with an interview guide. This approach guided the interviewer to cover certain topics rather than provide a question/answer script. The guide was divided into the following sections, each related to different aspects of the family member’s experience:

1. **Demographic information**
   - Date
   - Name of interviewee
   - Location
   - Relationship to missing person
   - More comfortable identifying missing family member as white or black as defined in study

2. **Background information (circumstances surrounding disappearance)**
   - Location
   - Date of disappearance
   - Give a brief description of disappearance (how, why, who, etc.)
   - Was reported to police or missing person agency? (when and how, or why not)

3. **Quantity and quality of media attempts and interactions**
   - Attempts at contact made by family
     - What media outlets (TV, paper, magazine, internet) did you try to contact (when and how)?
     - Any attempts that you know of by police or other agencies?
     - What was the result of attempts?
4. Impacts of coverage/non-coverage

- Emotional responses of the family
- Perceived impact on police investigation (interest level, search ad response, etc.)

5. Did you find alternative routes for publicity?

6. Additional information you would like to share that you feel would be beneficial to this line of research

While recording each interview, I also make jottings on a notebook in my lap. Specific to each interview, I jotted down potential follow up questions or probes that might have elicited additional meaningful information. I returned to the follow up questions during the interview or during a follow-up interview. Recorded interviews were transcribed, and a print copy of each interview was produced.

This researcher gave subjects a unique numerical code identifier. I stored subject identifiers (other than the numerical code) and consent forms separately from transcribed interviews in a locked file cabinet, along with audio recordings of interviews. A stand-alone laptop was used to store an electronic
copy of the interviews. Written copies of transcribed interviews were stored in a separate locked file cabinet. This researcher destroyed audio recording immediately after transcription and will destroy subject identifiers immediately after study completion.

In addition to interviews, the case studies also consisted of the review of existing documents and online data. This researcher examined applicable web pages and blogs. A LexisNexis search of news articles and a Google hits count were conducted. The name of the missing person of interest was typed in quotations, followed by the word missing, into the Google search box. The number of hits on the web and in the news was recorded. The number of LexisNexis news hits and number of Google hits were used in addition to family reports to categorize a case as high or low-profile. In the event that a family mentions a specific blog’s or web page’s coverage of the case, that site was examined for more context. This part of the case study was also used to triangulate the information received during the interviews. The quality of this study was assessed and enhanced using Mertens’ Listing of Criteria for Judging Quality in Qualitative Research: credibility, transferability, dependability, confirmability, and transformative criteria (Mertens, 2010).

4 Data Analysis

The data analysis procedure in Study 2 differ from the analysis of the transcripts in Study 1 in at least one major way: it takes a more grounded theory approach. Rather than letting previous research and theories guide the analysis, I let the interviews “do the talking”. Because family members of missing persons have not been interviewed on such a large scale for academic research, there were no scholarly findings to influence my beliefs of what I would learn. This allowed me to listen to the interviews and organize the findings in a more unbiased manner. While the conclusion of the project ties both studies strongly to previous research findings and notions of the ideal victim, the analysis of the interviews was conducted as independently of preconceived notions as possible.
I used the following data analysis procedures for transcribed data as based upon guidelines set forth by Emerson, Fretz, and Shaw (1995). Using an open-coding method, I read each transcript line by line, recording words or phrases in the margins that reflect the significance of events and experiences in each section. I sought to generate as many codes as possible without limiting myself to codes or themes established by previous researchers in the field. Next, I wrote initial memos regarding potential theoretical insights as to what is going on in the data, from which I selected potential themes for further analysis. Then began a more focused coding during which I connected themes across interviews and delineated subthemes where appropriate. Finally, with future audiences in mind, I began to write integrative memos that provided more substantiated examinations of themes and subthemes. Information gathered from the Google counts and web page/blog examinations were presented to reinforce or dispute data when applicable.

I gave a brief demographic description of each case study including: (1) race, gender, and age (child or adult) of the family members and missing person; and (2) relationships of family members to the missing person. Themes were then presented using an integrative strategy, weaving together excerpts from the interviews along with researcher commentary. These results represented the researcher’s best understanding of the lived experiences of the families of missing persons. This researcher presented exact words of the families to describe their experiences whenever possible.
CHAPTER IV: RESULTS

A. Study 1: Content and Discourse Analysis of Newsmagazine Programs

1. Framing the Issue: Who Goes Missing?

Research question 1 asks whether or not the racial, gender, and age composition of missing person cases covered on national newsmagazine television programs is representative of the missing person population in the United States as a whole. Inter-reality comparisons of the NCIC Missing and Unidentified Person Statistics for 2011 to television coverage were used to address this question. Ideally, the population of missing persons who we see on television programs should look similar to the actual United States population of missing people. The results of the content analysis of 178 newsmagazine programs tells us that we are seeing a very different picture of what the missing person problem actually looks like.

According to national statistics published in 2011 from the FBI, 64% of person reported missing in the United States were White/Hispanic/Other and 34% were Black. One would hope that the television content showed similar proportions. However, this content analysis of newsmagazine television programs found that in the episodes analyzed, 94% of missing persons were White/Hispanic/Other and 4% were Black. As shown in Figure 1, in confirmation of Hypotheses 1, this clearly illustrates an over-representation of White/Hispanic/Other missing persons and an under-representation of Black missing persons in television coverage, $X^2(1, N=189) = 66.968, p<.001$. 
Figure 1

Inter-reality Comparison of Race

FBI Statistics - % of Victims

- White/Hispanic/Other: 32%
- Black: 68%

Television Coverage - % of Victims

- White/Hispanic/Other: 4%
- Black: 96%

X² (1, N=189) = 66.968, p < .001

In terms of gender, NCIC statistics show males accounting for 50% of missing persons and females accounting for 50% of missing persons in the United States. This analysis found that in coverage of missing persons on television, males accounted for 13% of coverage and females accounted for 87% of coverage. These findings, as shown in Figure 2, support Hypotheses 2 and strongly demonstrate an over-representation of female missing persons and an under-representation of male missing persons in television coverage, X²(1, N=189) = 105.190, p<.001.

Figure 2

Inter-reality Comparison of Gender

FBI Statistics - % of Victims

- Female: 50%
- Male: 50%

Television Coverage - % of Victims

- Female: 13%
- Male: 87%

X² (1, N=189) = 105.190, p < .001
The NCIC statistics on missing persons in 2011 detail the missing persons population as 81% under 21 and 19% 21 and over. According to this analysis of newsmagazine programs, 70% of missing persons were under 21 and 30 percent were 21 and over. Contrary to predictions as stated in Hypotheses 3, Figure 3, depicts these findings to show an underrepresentation of missing persons under the age of 21 and an overrepresentation of missing persons 21 and over, $X^2(1, N=189) = 13.876$, $p<.001$.

**Figure 3**

*Inter-reality Comparison of Age*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>FBI Statistics - % of Victims</th>
<th>Television Coverage - % of Victims</th>
</tr>
</thead>
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<tr>
<td>Under 21: 19</td>
<td>Under 21: 30</td>
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<tr>
<td>21 and Over: 81</td>
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These figures make it easy to see that Whites and females are over-represented and Blacks and males are under-represented in television coverage of missing persons cases. Though less dramatic, the results also show that missing persons under 21 are slightly under-represented and those 21 and over are slightly over-represented in television coverage.

Television newsmagazine programs are not covering all cases equally. The media is framing the missing persons issue as a White and female issue. The message being sent to viewers is that in the United States, only Whites and females go missing. Taken a step further, coverage suggests that these
are the missing people who are worth our time and attention. These are the missing people worth looking for.

2. Framing the Ideal Missing Person

a. Introduction

Research Question 2 seeks to discover how media-worthy missing persons are framed by national newsmagazine television programs. A discourse analysis of full transcripts provides a more qualitative description of how missing persons are framed in the media. As established in the first part of this study, not all missing persons receive media coverage. This part of the study seeks to understand what characteristics of the media-worthy missing person, or aspects of his or her life, are focused on during television coverage. With less than 60 minutes to dedicate to covering each case, media outlets must choose where to spend their attention. Their choices frame the missing person in specific ways. Studying how the media frames a missing person may help clarify what characteristics make a person most worthy of media coverage. Ultimately these findings help one understand what makes one missing person more media-worthy than another. Narrative themes from 25 full transcripts were gathered and studied and suggest that the media frames the ideal missing person in the following ways: (1) She is attractive; (2) She is a good person who is missed; (3) She is a victim; and (4) She has secrets.

b. She is Attractive

It is not surprising that physical appearance is an important aspect of media coverage of missing persons cases. Previous researchers studying response to rape victims found that subjects showed a more favorable response to attractive victims versus unattractive victims (Deitz, Littman & Bentley, 1984). Other studies found that clothing choice is also an important component of physical appearance that affects people’s judgments. Subjects attach more blame to victims who dress provocatively than to victim who do not dress provocatively (Workman & Freeburg, 1999; Cassidy & Hurrell, 1995).
Coverage of a missing person almost always includes the dissemination of physical characteristics of the missing person, as would be expected considering that the physical descriptors are likely the most important personal details in finding and identifying a missing person. Every transcript analyzed described the general appearance of the person at the time they went missing, usually with reference to height, weight, and dress. However, over half of the transcripts went beyond the basic description of the missing person at the time of his or her disappearance and included additional descriptions of flattering physical characteristics.

To introduce a missing woman, viewers are told, “Lisa was a sexy, high-kicking cowgirl” (48 Hours, 05-07-09). A speaker describes a little girl who was abducted as “pretty, blonde, very quiet” (Dateline, 10-02-09). Mother reminisces about her missing son sharing that she thought “her baby looked particularly good in yellow” (07-02-10). In the coverage of a missing little girl, viewers learn that she is “a little 2nd-grader, looks like an angel” and is also “beautiful on the inside and out” (Nancy Grace, 10-29-09). There are stories of “handsome honeymooners”, a “Gorgeous young 8th grade school teacher”, a “gorgeous young Marine” and a “gorgeous young satellite TV salesperson” (Dateline, 08-28-09; Nancy Grace, 03-08-11; Nancy Grace, 01-09-08; Nancy Grace, 11-11-09).

Most frequently, the word “beautiful” is used to describe the missing person. A mother describes how her daughter “blossomed into a beautiful woman” (48 Hours, 01-15-11). A story is introduced with the headline, “A beautiful little Raleigh, North Carolina boy just 3 years old” (Nancy Grace, 05-19-08). Linking two cases together is the phrase “another case of a beautiful young woman who vanished” (48 Hours, 07-01-08). Quick descriptions like “beautiful co-ed and Army wife”, “beautiful little 2-year-old”, and “beautiful 8-month-old baby boy” are used to introduce stories (Nancy Grace, 03-08-11; Nancy Grace, 07-18-08; Nancy Grace, 01-06-10). A father describes his abducted daughter as “a beautiful little girl” (Nancy Grace, 12-06-11).
Attention is frequently given to one specific aspect of beauty: the smile of the missing person. A missing husband “always had a nice smile” (Dateline, 08-28-09). The description of a missing woman includes that “She’s got a smile that lights up a room” (Nancy Grace, 11-11-09). And a father describes his daughter as having “big brown eyes, the way she would look at you, and her smile. She just made your heart melt” (20/20, 11-07-08).

These findings support the suggestion that appearance is important in determining a victim’s, or missing person’s, worth. They align with previous studies that found participants responded least favorably to unattractive victims and tended to blame victims who dressed provocatively (Deitz, Littman & Bentley, 1984; Workman & Freeburg, 1999; Cassidy & Hurrell, 1995).

c. **She is a Good Person who is Missed**

1) **Introduction**

It has been proven that the more personalized details known about a victim, the more others empathize with him or her (Anastasio & Costa, 2004). Madriz (1997) talks about the ideal victim as being a good person who behaves in socially acceptable ways. This analysis of transcripts finds personality and personal life details to be a very significant part of coverage. Great amounts of time are spent providing background details that help establish the missing person as a good person who is missed in this world. Their positive personality traits are emphasized. Any negative traits are omitted or downplayed. Occupations and hobbies are mentioned even when they may have no direct impact on the circumstances of the disappearance or status of the investigation. This supports a previous study that found defendants receive harsher punishments during sentencing when their victims are respectable and successful (Landy & Aronson, 1969). A study of the television program America’s Most Wanted found that the host made frequent mention to relationships and hobbies of the victims to help establish his or her worth (Cavender, Bond-Maupin & Jurik, 1999). The same tactics seem to be at work
in coverage of missing persons cases. The missing person is identified as a cheerleader or an avid runner. Mention is also frequently made of his or her role as a mother, beloved sibling, or loyal friend.

2) **She has a Great Personality**

Some episodes briefly touch on the type of person who went missing. A little boy who went missing is “incredibly intelligent” while another missing child is “very quiet. And very shy” (Nancy Grace, 05-19-08; Dateline, 10-02-09). A mother shares regarding her missing son that “He was so loving and caring” (Dateline, 07-02-10). A former coach describes a missing man as “very likeable, quiet young man, coachable, you know?” (Dateline, 08-28-09). An episode is introduced by asking, “How does a popular, smart student simply vanish?” (Nancy Grace, 01-04-11).

Other episodes go into greater detail about the missing person. Coworkers describe a missing woman as “warm, unfailingly friendly” and “extremely great personality, very loving, very thoughtful, very caring, very empathetic” (Dateline, 08-07-09). They also explain that she was very formal, saying “she was the type of person where she’s got nylons with her shores. Has to have her- her nylons on and, you know, her nails done” and “She definitely had that air about her. And- it was an air of, taking care of others and being the best hostess and things like that” (Dateline, 08-07-09).

Relatives go into great detail describing the personalities and social traits of their missing loved ones. A granddaughter is described as “a gift from heaven” and her grandmother says she has “her little-girl personality” and “she lights the room and she controls the house” (Dateline, 12-12-08). A father talks about his missing daughter, “She’s the type of person that lights up a room when she walks in it. She is –she’s very intelligent. She’s—she’s just a wonderful little girl to be around” (Nancy Grace, 12-06-11). Describing the son who was abducted, a parent shares, “He was—he was given a citizens award at school. He got along well. He had a keen sense of fairness. He really didn’t like it when things weren’t fair” (Nancy Grace, 02-28-11) A sister talks about her missing sibling “she had such a good spirit to her.
Anyone who met her just loved her” (20/20, 05-15-09). A mother reminiscing about her teenage son who disappeared, shares that he was “a very bring young man and we really believe his future was just full of promise” and goes on, “How willing he was to help out others and you know, that he was very brilliant young man, and, of course, we know that, but hearing other people confirm that just was a true gift, and he’s a dedicated and hardworking person who loved his family” (Nancy Grace, 03-08-11).

A character trait frequently noted is that of dependability. A former employer describes a missing woman claiming, “Oh she was wonderful, very dependable and devoted” (Dateline, 05-28-10). Another missing person is portrayed as “reliable to the core” (Dateline, 08-07-09). Family members of a missing woman say “she is the kind of person that’s highly responsible and would never have vanished on her own” (Nancy Grace, 03-08-11). A mother tells the host of her missing teenage daughter, “She’s a wonderful girl. I’ve never had to worry about Hailey” (Nancy Grace, 01-04-11).

3) **She is a Productive Member of Society**

The occupation of the missing person is referenced in the coverage of most adult missing persons. In the introduction of an episode about a missing young woman, the audience is informed that she was a “beloved teacher” and was also “filling in as an assistant principal from time to time” (48 hours, 07-01-08). Viewers are given background information about another missing woman that includes that she “had been in newspaper ad sales until she lost her job in 2006” (48 Hours, 05-07-11). One episode covers a “young satellite TV saleswoman” (Nancy Grace, 11-11-09). A different episode focuses on a missing woman who was “selling kitchen products” (48 Hours, 06-10-08). In an episode of 48 Hours, viewers learn that the missing woman’s “career as a financial analyst was taking off” (07-01-08).

A missing person’s hobbies are shared in many episodes. Within the first few minutes of the program, reference is often made to the interests of the person missing. One host introduces a missing
teenager as a cheerleader, a missing mother as an “avid runner”, and a missing marine as one who “specializes in combat logistics” (Nancy Grace, 01-04-11; Nancy Grace, 07-18-08; Nancy Grace, 01-09-08). Viewers learn early in an episode of a missing woman that she was “teaching by day and taking classes by night; she applied for a doctoral program” (48 Hours, 07-01-08). The previous coach of a missing man informs the audience that he was a “good linebacker” (Dateline, 08-28-09). An acquaintance of a missing baby boy describes him as “always moving around and doing stuff. Loved to play” (Nancy Grace, 01-06-10).

In some episodes, loved ones help personalize their missing person through detailed descriptions of how they enjoyed spending their time. In talking about a missing woman who loved pageants, her family elaborates saying that she “fell in love with pageants as a teenager. Besides winning crowns, the pageant victories also fulfilled another goal for Tara: money for school” (48 Hours, 07-01-08). A friend describes a missing woman explaining that “she loved to have a good time, and she loved to dance” she goes on to say, “She, too, was a huge Facebook fan” (48 Hours, 05-07-11). A mother shares the life of her missing son saying he “excelled at school and sports. He loved Pacman, fishing and listening to ‘Through the Fire’ by Chaka Khan” (Dateline, 07-02-10). A parent explains of a daughter that disappeared that she “was class president and a talented artist who wanted to be a Disney animator” (20/20, 05-15-09).

4) **She has Meaningful Relationships**

Identifying significant personal relationships appears important in portraying the missing person as someone viewers can identify with. The missing person is a friend, mother, child or sibling. A missing teacher in introduced as a “mentor and friend” (48 Hours, 07-01-08). A sibling talks of her sister who is missing sharing that “Anyone who met her just loved her” (20/20, 05-15-09). A mother offers of her abducted son that “he was a great older brother and younger brother” (Nancy Grace, 02-28-11). A
step-father talks about an abducted boy saying, “He was always known as my shadow. He grew up sitting on my lap in front of the keyboard. We spent pretty much every minute of every day together” (48 Hours, 08-24-08).

When a missing person is also a mother, the fact is shared throughout the episode. The host introduces a missing woman as “a mother of two” (Nancy Grace, 07-18-08). A friend claims of a missing woman that “she was a very good mom” (Dateline, 05-28-10). In a different program, it is explained that a missing woman became a “single mother again” (48 Hours, 01-15-11). A missing woman is described as a “devoted mother” who “spent all of her free time with her children.” Her brother goes on to say “I think as long as I can remember, what she wanted to be was a mom and she just couldn’t wait to be that mom” (48 Hours, 06-10-08).

Nils Christie describes the ideal victim as “deserving of sympathy” (1986). Cavender, Bond-Maupin, and Jurik (1999) explain that it is important to provide details about a person’s life in order to establish his or her worth in the eyes of the audience. Through the use thick descriptions of personality traits and frequent reference to personal life details, it appears that establishing a missing person’s worth is very important and may help to grab and keep the audience’s attention and help form judgments that the missing person is worthy of our attention and sympathy.

d. **She is a Victim**

Nils Christie (1986) introduces the idea of the ideal victim, explaining that there are specific criteria that help to legitimize someone as a crime victim. Among those criteria is the establishment of the person as innocent, defenseless, blameless, and deserving of sympathy. Television coverage of missing persons cases makes a point of acknowledging that the missing person is not responsible for his or her disappearance, but rather a victim of a crime or a potentially criminal situation. They ascribe the missing person a victim status by drawing attention to his or her vulnerabilities and defenselessness. Pregnancy
or medical conditions are considered vulnerabilities. Simply being of a young age qualifies one as being defenseless. In talking about missing children, Joel Best (1987) explains that it is a general understanding that missing children are innocent and powerless to control their circumstances, thus establishing themselves as blameless victims.

Victim status impacts viewer perceptions. A study of the television program Law & Order: Special Victims Unit concludes that children grab viewers’ attention because they represent vulnerability (Britto, Hughes, Saltzman & Stroh, 2007). Determining a missing person to be a victim also directly impacts the families left behind. Siblings interviewed in a previous study report that having victim status helps bring support and assistance with search efforts (Greif & Bowers, 2007).

Many of the transcripts analyzed in this study, especially those featuring missing children, focus on the missing person’s vulnerability or defenselessness. Medical conditions of missing persons are framed as vulnerabilities frequently. In the coverage of a case where a little boy goes missing, he is introduced as a missing 5-year-old boy with cerebral palsy. Note is made of the braces on his legs and the difficulty he had walking without his braces (Nancy Grace, 08-11-09). In discussing a missing little baby, a doctor shares:

I’m pretty concerned Nancy. We don’t really know where the baby is or who the baby is with. But the baby is clearly going to be stressed out. We have to be concerned that the baby is not getting fed enough, not getting the emotional needs that Gabriel needs. And I think that we have to be just concerned that the baby is going to be environmentally in an unsafe situation because 8-month-olds are fairly mobile. So depending on where he is he could get himself into a lot of trouble if he’s left alone, especially if it cold. So I think his health is at great risk. (Nancy Grace, 01-06-10).
Pregnancy is often referred to as a risk factor or vulnerability. In covering a woman who is eight months pregnant, her pregnancy is mentioned frequently. There is talk about the risks involved, “I’m very concerned for both of them because it’s not just one person, its two. They’re very much at risk here” it continues, “Add into the mix that she is due to deliver at any moment” (Nancy Grace, 01-09-08). In the coverage of a young woman who is missing, the host reminds viewers throughout the program the woman is five months pregnant (Nancy Grace, 03-08-11).

Simply being young is associated with defenselessness. When sharing the details of a child abduction from a car, the host says, “Take a look at the baby girl asleep” (Nancy Grace, 12-06-11). A sleeping baby is unarguably one of the most defenseless victims of all. Even school-aged children are inherently defenseless and vulnerable. A mother of a young boy who was abducted admits that she felt guilty for letting her son “go out alone that day” (48 Hours, 09-05-09).

One of the most powerful tools for framing a missing person as vulnerable and defenseless is to include the element of terror that a person experienced during an abduction. One episode informs that the abducted boy was being held hostage by a gun before he was taken, while another episode tells of a girl “kidnapped, screaming, from a bus stop” (Dateline, 02-28-11; Dateline, 10-02-09). In discussing the scene of the disappearance of a young girl, the detective explains “She was running from somebody, based on the evidence that we do have, it wasn’t somebody that she knew or wanted to be with” (20/20, 05-15-2009). The aunt of a missing boy describes the last time she saw her nephew:

He was just crying and bawling his eyes out; he didn’t want to go with her. It was like she’s hollering at him, forcing him to get into the car. I’ve never seen him act like that before. He was bearing on the back of the window, screaming and hollering, “Aunt Jeannie, please don’t let me go. Don’t let me go.” Eventually they drove away (Dateline, 07-02-10).
One of the most important ways to legitimize someone as an ideal crime victim is to prove them to be innocent and defenseless (Christie, 1986). That is exactly what almost half of the episodes did. These episodes used specific examples of a person’s risk factors and vulnerabilities to frame the person as defenseless and vulnerable. Joel Best (1987) explains that, regarding missing children, it is an understanding that children are innocent and powerless and thus face great risks when they are missing. The previous excerpts from transcripts show that the vulnerability of a missing child is mentioned frequently and effectively in television programs covering missing children.

**e. She has Secrets**

Previous research has found that a victim’s worthiness of sympathy or responsibility for an offender’s actions can be determined by the victim’s behavior and lifestyle choices. Nils Christie (1986) explains that the ideal victim is blameless and deserving of sympathy. Madriz describes non-ideal victims, those least deserving of sympathy, as victims who do not act in socially accepted ways or do not follow codes of behavior (1997). Landy and Aronson (1969) conclude that a defendant received a longer sentence when the victim was respectable versus unrespectable (dishonest or otherwise despicable).

With that in mind, the final frame of the missing person having secrets is surprising, in that it is contrary to previous findings. One would not expect to see the framing of the missing person in a negative light. Though only present in five of the transcripts, in each case, secret lifestyles and vices were presented early in the episode to provide background on the missing person.

The most frequent secret life or vice mentioned was that of alternative sexual lifestyle choices. A story about a missing teacher included the detail that “she did have several romantic relationships that occurred in relative proximity to one another” (48 Hours, 07-01-08). The introduction of an episode about a missing woman asks, “Did that secret life, which Paige kept hidden from her family, play a role in her disappearance?” (48 Hours, 06-10-08). The episode goes on to explain that the missing woman
was a dance teacher by day and a high-priced escort with a fake name by night. It is expanded that “Sessions with Carrie could include stripping, dancing and role-playing” (48 Hours, 06-10-08). In the case of a missing mom, the episode shares information about the missing woman that was found on a website forum for the local S&M scene. The defense attorney explains that “She loved the internet and was kind of a kinky girl” (Dateline, 05-28-10). In discussing a woman who vanished, it was explained that the husband claimed they were living an alternative lifestyle of swinging. Friends questioned why she had married the man after she had accused him of beating her, and claimed that she was secretly planning a divorce. (Dateline, 08-07-09).

Negative personality traits and deviant behavior also are mentioned. An episode about a missing woman shows friends talking about how the missing woman was insecure and claimed “that need to be loved caused her to overlook a lot of things” (48 Hours, 05-07-11). They also mention that the missing woman had recently run out of money. A woman interviewed talks about how much people didn’t really know about the missing woman “starting with insurmountable money problems when the inheritance ran out. There was also a life-long battle with depression and dependence on medication” (48 Hours, 05-07-11). She also explains that the missing woman was using cocaine again.

It should be noted that all episodes that mentioned these non-flattering characteristics were episodes that covered missing women. These findings conflict with previous research about worthy victims. However, previous research did not apply the idea of ideal and worthy victims to television coverage of victims. It is possible that the sensationalism behind some of these details helps to increase, and keep, interest in the story during hour-long newsmagazine programs.

B. Study 2: Case Studies

1. Introduction
Study 1 gives evidence that not all missing persons cases are being treated equally in the media. Newsmagazine programs are over-representing White and female missing persons and under-representing Black and male missing persons, ultimately framing missing persons as a White and female issue in the United States. The media is also consistently framing the media-worthy missing person in specific ways: (1) She is attractive; (2) She is a good person who is missed; (3) She is a victim; and (4) She has secrets.

The current study addresses research Question 3 and asks how the quantity and quality of interactions with news media outlets is similar or different for families of high-profile missing persons when compared to families of low-profile missing persons. To get a more accurate first-hand account of what goes on behind the scenes in a missing persons case, 14 family members of missing persons are interviewed about their experiences working with the media.

Study 2 presents and evaluates the experiences of families of high-profile missing persons as compared to the experiences of families of low-profile missing persons in regards to their interactions with media outlets. In-depth interviews with families of missing persons provide insight into the phenomenon of the ideal missing person and its impact on the families of missing persons. Fourteen family members completed interviews. The number of LexisNexis news hits and number of Google hits are used in addition to family reports to categorize a case as high or low coverage. What resulted is actually a spectrum of coverage. Three cases fall at the very high end and three cases fall at the very low end. The rest of the cases fall along the spectrum. For the purpose of this study, eight cases are categorized as high-profile and six are categorized as low-profile.

The ultimate goal of this study is to present the experiences of families of high-profile missing persons as compared to families of low-profile missing persons. After analyzing the data, eight themes/topics are present in most interviews. Four themes demonstrate the distinct differences
between families of high-profile and low-profile cases. When presenting those topics where the differences are pronounced, detailed comparisons are given illustrating the differences. Surprisingly, there are four topics where sentiments are almost unanimous across all families, regardless of level of coverage. Specific examples of experiences are used to explore these topics.

With the exception of the most high-profile case, generating media coverage for a missing person case is a responsibility that falls heavily on the family. Although it is not the only factor, the amount of coverage a missing person receives is greatly impacted by the time and effort put in by family members. Families of high-profile cases remark that maintaining coverage is a full time job that requires time, money, and energy. They detail numerous large-scale, informed attempts to bring attention to their cases. Families of low-profile cases talk of setbacks in getting coverage. Money and time barriers are the most prominent. They also report fewer follow-throughs in their attempts. It is also possible that a cycle is created. High-profile families are doing more work, so they are seeing more results, so they are doing more work. Low-profile families are seeing fewer results and are getting discouraged.

The most glaring difference in experiences between families of high and low-profile cases is in the types, and amount, of media being used. In this section, media is broken up into two categories: “traditional media” and “new media”. Traditional media consists of newspaper, magazine, and television coverage, as well as the use of paper fliers. New media encompasses most online media sources, including but not limited to: Facebook, personal websites, Twitter, MySpace, and Craigslist. Families of high-profile missing persons report more examples of all types of traditional media coverage (other than fliers) than families of low-profile missing persons. For these high-profile families, press releases sent to traditional media outlets generate the highest turnout levels of media personnel at events for their missing persons. Families of low-profile cases rely more on new media, the media they
can generate themselves. The majority of experiences these families have are with establishing and maintaining an online presence.

These interviews also suggest that police involvement is directly related to media coverage. A cycle exists in which police involvement leads to media coverage, which in turn lends pressure to more police involvement and so on. Families of high-profile cases report more positive feelings toward the police department handling their cases than families of low-profile cases. Most low-profile families detail examples of police incompetence in the handling of their cases.

One other area that demonstrates a difference in experiences for families of high-profile as compared to families of low-profile cases is spikes in coverage. All families agree that certain events lead to spikes in media activity. Anniversaries, birthdays, holidays and prayer vigils lead to increased activity for a case. The types and extent of spikes vary. Families of high-profile cases see more television time and see better results from press releases. Lower-profile cases see more newspaper coverage in the best of circumstances, and in the least they see an increase in interest and activity on websites and Facebook pages. The spikes in coverage for high-profile cases last hours, days, and sometimes even weeks longer than those of low-profile cases. Thus, all families are seeing spikes, but the spikes are much smaller for the low-profile cases.

One theme that is expressed similarly across cases regardless of coverage levels is that in general, media people are good people. Families have positive experiences to share. They form and maintain positive relationships with reporters. They give examples of media agents who go above and beyond what was expected. Other than the occasional misquote, which is usually corrected, they describe working with media agents as pleasant.

All of the families reported similar beliefs regarding who gets media coverage, who doesn’t, and why. These beliefs are formed through their own experiences working with the media, as well as from
conversations they have with other families of missing persons, reporters, and police officers. Cases are most likely to receive coverage if the missing person is a female, is White, is young, is attractive, has a pleasant back-story, disappears under bizarre circumstances, and/or comes from a strong family. A case sees less coverage if the missing person is male, is non-White, is a runaway, has a questionable or criminal past, or comes from a quiet or weak family. Examples explaining how each of these characteristics works to qualify a case as high or low-profile are given. My classification of families as high or low-profile for this study echoes most of the previous sentiments. The cases at the high end are all female except for one. All high-profile missing persons are younger than thirty at the age of disappearance. The cases at the low end of the spectrum are older persons, mostly male, and many have questionable/criminal pasts or are runaways.

Regardless of their own experiences with the media, all of the families believe media coverage is important. There are many goals for media coverage. The most prominent goals are: bringing attention to the case, generating tips and leads, keeping pressure on the police, remembering the missing person, and ultimately bringing closure to the family. Another result of media coverage, though not necessarily a goal, is that most families find networks of support through social media outlets. Through Facebook and emails, families make contact with other families of missing persons as well as advocacy organizations.

The most potentially impactful finding of the interviews is that the families of the missing have advice to give. Most advice is to other families of missing persons, although some is to the media and general public. They tell families to get out there immediately with useful information, to absolutely have an online presence, and to bring in other cases whenever possible. They give specific suggestions on how to get longer television news segments and how to be themselves on camera. To the media,
they suggest ways to increase coverage for all missing persons including scrolling stories at the bottom of news programs and creating a channel specifically for coverage of missing persons.

This study successfully gives a voice to the families of the missing. By sharing their lived experiences with the media they bring attention to many issues that may otherwise have gone unnoticed. They bring awareness to the fact that getting coverage for a missing person is a task that falls heavily on the shoulders of the loved ones left behind. In dealing with that burden, the families face the many stressors that come with navigating through the media maze of missing persons coverage. They have to find the time, money, and energy to create and maintain some sort of media campaign while dealing with the frustrating realization that police involvement and media coverage go hand in hand. Their experiences and opinions lend credence to the claim that an ideal missing person does really exist in the media. Families of the missing describe this ideal missing person as female, White, young, attractive, a productive member of society and coming from a strong and vocal family. Astoundingly, in spite of all the turmoil and tribulations, these families are willing and inspired to share what they have learned with other families who are going through similar experiences. This study is the first scholarly attempt at organizing the advice of the families of the missing with the intention of reaching a large audience.

2. **Themes**

a. **It is all on the Families**

1) **No one Doing it for Them**

As someone who has never worked closely with the media nor has ever had a loved one go missing, I held the naïve belief that missing persons cases inherently generated interest from the media. I imagined reporters camped outside of the homes of the families and phones ringing off the hook. That is why I consider the first topic to be the most surprising and significant finding of the family interviews.
With the exception of the highest-profile case, the media rarely comes banging on doors looking for the story. One sentiment present in all of the interviews is that when a loved one goes missing, the only media one gets is the media one creates.

One relative realistically describes the state of affairs, “You actually have to get out there and hit the pavement. You have to let other people know that my baby is gone. Because unfortunately people feel that out of sight is out of mind but if you don’t care, why should we? And that’s a cold, hard reality” (Maureen). Often the family member feels like the only one fighting for their loved one. A brother explains, “I’m not gonna let her case die. That’s why I did the Facebook. That’s why I did her website for her. Um, I refuse to stop looking for her….Yeah; I’m definitely her biggest advocate” (Brandon). The sister of a missing man shares a similar viewpoint:

I work really hard at trying to keep this in the news. Because the thing about it is if I hadn’t done anything the police would have dropped this. I really believe they would have dropped it. It would've gone on the back burner and why not. See if we don't care why should they care. The only way to get through to them and to the person who has done this is the media. And it is a job. It really is a job. You have to contact and you have to keep it interesting and you have to keep doing stuff and its exhausting (Becky)

Some families trust that the police will play a big part in bringing attention to the case, but that is not usually how it works. The police have their own agenda. They tend to think long term about closing and prosecuting the case (Jill). It is the family’s responsibility to keep pressure on the police and the media. One mom shares:

I’m not taking on law enforcement it's just something that happens. They are so busy they forget to do things. And it gets pushed aside. Like one law enforcement officer said to me if you don't do this every single day, he picked up Kevin's folder, opened up the drawer and placed it
at the bottom of the file, this is where your son's file would have ended up. I told myself that day it's never going to happen. Kevin's file is going to stay on top. (Terry)

With little guidance, families are forced to use trial and error to figure out what works best when navigating through the media maze. One sister exclaims, “You don’t know how to do it, you just figure it out. Oh my God, I have people coming up to me saying....if I ever go missing, will you find me” (Susie)? Luckily one relative has a friend in the business. She showed her how to set up a website, organize a press conference and helped her call all the assignment desks for the news affiliates (Jill)

2) Full-time Job

Gaining and maintaining coverage for a missing loved one can be a full-time job. One family member agrees, “It did feel like that [a fulltime job]. I took this on and now I can’t put it down” (Jill). There is a huge time commitment involved in getting media coverage. A sister talks about traveling to where her brother went missing, “I went to Chicago and was there for two weeks doing nothing but this. Looking for Chris and talking to media. It was a nightmare. It was a nightmare” (Becky). The mom of a missing man so desperately wanted coverage for her son that she took a flier to each TV station office and waited until she could sit down with someone and tell them the story (Terry). “Getting media coverage requires work. It requires having the time to do the phone calls, answer phone calls in a timely basis, and take time out to go to interviews. And all that stuff requires time” (Matt)

The fight for coverage seems never ending. One sister feels strongly that it is important to keep the missing person in the media. She says, “I fought for 6 years to make sure they kept talking about my brother. Missing persons cases end up at the bottom of the file” (Marilyn). It requires time and effort to keep a case current and interesting in the hope that the media will stay on it. A sibling is always trying to think of ways to keep her sister’s name out there. She still organizes blood drives in her sister’s
name every eight weeks (Barb). Families feel like they always have to be thinking of the next thing. One family member shares some advice she learned from a friend, “The media is a shark that has to be constantly fed” (Jill). To make that task even more difficult, family members have to constantly meet and entice new reporters since there is such large turnover among local media agents (Barb).

3) **Stressors and Frustrations**

Dealing with the media can be a very stressful experience for family members of missing persons. A sister explains that the media wants to see immediate family members because that is where the most emotion is. She tried using a close friend as a spokesperson but the media didn’t take to it. “They didn’t want her. So if they seen me, they wanted me. Everybody wants to see me, not some stranger” (Susie). The media was after her for interviews. She didn’t want the media to know where she lived so she was forced to stay in hotels near her sister’s house.

While with all that information of course the psychics come forward and all sorts of people that try to help them make it crazier for you. Because one said that Kevin was on the banks of the river dying and had hours to live. We spent hours searching the bank of the river. Because when it comes to someone telling you about your child or someone you love you can't just push that aside. (Terry)

The families put a great amount of pressure on themselves to make their loved one’s case media-worthy, but some just don’t have the means. One mom talked to other parents who don’t have internet. “They feel lost and hopeless in getting attention for their loved ones (Terry). And even if they have the means, some people are too emotionally drained to keep up with the media. “Most of the families don’t have that energy. They are knocked down so hard that they either take antidepressant drugs, alcohol, sleeping pills or they get divorced through this and it is a very expensive situation” (Terry). A mother agrees, “It was my worst nightmare. I know I was lucky, it was only a few days, but I
didn’t eat, I couldn’t work, I couldn’t sleep” (Nancy). One mother puts bluntly the reality of dealing with media stressors, “If you don’t swim, you sink” (Terry).

Some families put in so much effort and get nothing in return. A sister tells, “We’ve done press releases. And none of the media showed up. And we released balloons and did a press release and nobody showed up. Not a one came” (Nicole). The aftermath of failed attempts includes exhaustion and discouragement among family members. And even those who do get the coveted television interview admit that it is not easy, but rather quite stressful. In example, a relative of a missing woman talks about doing live interviews, “When you are in an interview you only have a few minutes. Have to think about what going to say and practice before speaking” (Jill).

4) **Downsides to Coverage**

Most family members agree that any media coverage is better than no coverage. However, they acknowledge that there are some downsides to obtaining coverage for a loved one that can lead to stress for the families as well as for the person who is missing. Media outlets often sensationalize the story and focus on all the extra stuff that is really not pertinent to the case. “They all want to put their two cents in and it wastes time” (Marilyn). One family member cautions, “Some people have to be careful about what they post on Facebook because they could be friends of a media person and not even know it’s a media person. And you put one wrong thing on there, like about a family dispute, they will eat it up. They will keep it for later” (Maureen).

Because many online outlets allow for anonymity, People have the freedom to say false or hurtful things they wouldn’t be able to share through traditional media. The cousin of a missing man ran the family’s media campaign and elaborates that the tough part of social media for her was not having total control. People could put whatever they wanted on Facebook and she couldn’t always get in there right away to delete. People posted pictures of Blake that weren’t actually him and made
inappropriate comments to administrator posts (Maria). There is also frustration that she can’t control comments on other blogs or articles about the case. One person commented on a news article with, “Oh well, he was just drunk.” She shares that “It was frustrating because people have the anonymity that they don't have on Facebook. And I don't have any control over it” (Maria). A brother of a missing woman has similar frustrations, “You’ll see people writing comments on Facebook about the missing person that don’t even matter, like “she had issues” or “she probably ran away” and it just distracts from the purpose of the page and the case in general” (Brandon).

Maria also talks about her mom dealing with the “trolls” who cause trouble on the internet. “So usually the Internet rule is: don’t feed the trolls. So she would be responding to a message or someone says something offensive like I have something I want to tell you but I want an award for it. She would respond to that. She is an emotional person. I told her if it looks suspicious just don’t respond” (Maria)

There are also potential repercussions for the person who is missing in the case that they are found. Media coverage stays with a missing person for the rest of his or her life. So if recovered, not only will they be able to read all about it, but so will friends, colleges, and employers. One dad explains that when you search for his daughter, sexual predator references are at top of the list. He explains,” all the other stories were roughly that type of thing. It is hard to get rid of the stories. You have to do a lot of stories that are that are positive to push those stories down” (Matt)

5) **Comparison of High Versus Low-profile Cases**

Stress levels reach high levels for all families of missing persons. Every family member went in great detail about how devastating it is to have a loved one go missing. Family members lose sleep and battle depression and guilt. Lives are turned upside-down and everything is suddenly different. The families of the highest-profile cases also mention very high stress levels that come with managing
extremely large amount of media coverage. The cousin of a missing woman shares, “Actually, I did break down at one point. It got so crazy answering the phone. Well, part of it was the family dynamics, but I was in the hospital. I thought I had a heart attack about 3 to 4 weeks after she went missing” (Jill). The sister in another high-profile case reports similar stresses:

The media was calling me out left and right, left and right. I wasn’t sleeping. I was wide awake. I felt like I was running on drugs or running on adrenaline, well Mountain Dew, but it was just so strenuous, so stressful that I was like go outside, do an interview, go in her house, throw up, take a hot bath, relax for 5 minutes, get back dressed, go back outside, and do it again (Susie).

Family members of high-profile cases make note that maintaining coverage is a full-time job that requires time, money, and energy. One relative explains, “I was a stay-at-home mom, I have the time to answer the phone and I was willing to do it” (Jill). A cousin of a missing man believes it was beneficial that she was next to her computer all day and had the freedom to check every hour for new updates. She could then put it out on the three platforms they were using: Facebook, Tumblr, and Twitter. She elaborates, “What I ended up doing was to keep my sanity I would set like every hour on the hour I would go on local news and see if anything new came up” (Maria). Families of lower-profile cases express frustration over the time commitment. Some do not have the means to take time away from their jobs. They talk about how hard it is to find the time and energy to commit to generating media after a full day of work, or for some, two jobs. The most frustrating thing for them was that when they were able to make time, it did not pay off.

High-profile families tend to describe more organized attempts at getting coverage. Many used media logs to keep track of which reporters attended each event. They would ask reporters to sign in and include contact information. These families then used that list to send press releases. It was effective because they were reaching a group of reporters that already had a vested interest in the case.
They also created a group of media contacts in their emails so that they could blast out information through email with just one click in their address book. Families of low-profile cases had to do more cold-calling of news stations. They would spend hours calling news stations asking for interviews. The people they got on the phone were rarely receptive to their pleas.

Having the luxury of time allows one to organize fundraisers, plan events, and secure donations. The money and donations secured can be used to promote the missing person case. People with time (all of the high-profile cases) were able to call around looking for billboard space donations. All of them were successful. Low-profile families have different experiences. Without as much time to commit to these efforts they often have to take “no” for an answer. The sister in the lowest-profile case talks about how she called for billboard space and was told she would have to purchase the space. She explains that she just gave up after that because they didn’t have that kind of money (Nicole).

All of the high-profile cases had the time and personnel to make phone calls inquiring about unique ways to advertise their case. One family had a sign at Wrigley Field; one had balloon flyovers; one found space on the back of Jewel receipts; and another found space on the IRS tax forms. Time affords one the luxury to brainstorm and research ideas for events to bring attention to the case. One of the highest-profile family members thought to pass out hand warmers with tip line information near the cabin the person of interest frequented. That family also passed out carnations at a restaurant on Mother’s Day (Jill).

The previous examples suggest the presence of a sort of media cycle in missing persons cases. High-profile families are doing more work, so they are seeing more results, so they are doing more work. Low-profile families are seeing fewer results and are getting discouraged and limiting their future attempts. With all of the aforementioned examples, it should be noted that some cases do take on lives of their own, separate from family efforts. When a missing person fits the mold as an “ideal victim”, 
media outlets may get interested quickly and make unprompted attempts to contact the family in the interest of getting a story. Likewise, there are cases on the other side of the “ideal missing person” spectrum that generate no media coverage on their own nor with the best efforts of family members during the initial days of the case. So in some cases, the media frenzy, or lack thereof, at the beginning of a case may spark or discourage the efforts of a family. Thus, in some instances the cycle is begun not through family efforts, but rather by the initial media coverage as initiated and maintained by media outlets.

b. Many Types of Media are Being Used

1) Introduction

Many different media outlets are being used to bring attention to missing person cases.

The type of media being used differs across families but seems to generally fall into two distinct categories: “traditional media” and “new media”. Traditional media consists of newspaper, magazine, and television coverage, as well as the use of paper fliers. New media encompasses most online media sources, including but not limited to: Facebook, personal websites, Twitter, Myspace, and Craigslist.

2) “Traditional Media”

The most common use of traditional media is handing out fliers. Fliers for missing persons generally include a picture of the missing persons, physical descriptions including clothes last seen in, law enforcement or tip line contact information, and other pertinent details of the disappearance. Every family member interviewed acknowledged using paper fliers at some point in their search. Most families walked neighborhoods or stood on busy corners handing out the fliers. One family put fliers in busses all over different towns while another hung fliers on every post coming into town. Many families
posted fliers in truck stops. The sister of a missing man explains that handing out fliers was the first thing she did and believes it to be one of the most important. She elaborates:

I figured that everyday life would be the best place to put it cause not a lot of people search missing persons websites and they aren’t gonna be on YouTube and go search my brother’s name. They’d really have to go out and look for it that way. But if I went, hey, you walk in the grocery store you always see those boards there’s my brothers face. You are in the Laundromat you’re doing your laundry you go to the Fourth of July festival and there’s my brother. You catch them in everyday life and that’s when you’re gonna be able to hit them the people who don’t do that stuff like watch the news. (Marilyn)

The most popular and sought after media outlets are newspaper and television coverage. Families seek front page articles immediately after their loved one goes missing. They want specific details and photos included. The stories that do make the paper usually take up most of the front page.

In terms of television coverage, most families have an understanding that local TV news coverage comes first, then national news coverage, and then possibly prime time programs or cable news shows. All families that received prime time and cable coverage first received large amounts of local coverage.

Many families created press releases that they sent to media agents. The typical press release consisted of any new developments in the case and schedule of upcoming events. One family always included their logo on top along with a list of which family members would be in attendance at the event.

Billboards are a type of media used by many of the families as well. With the exception of one family who purchased the billboard space, all billboards were donated. The billboards tend to be located on highways surrounding the site of the disappearance. Other traditional media sources used to
highlight missing person cases are radio shows, grocery store receipts, bus stop benches, and IRS tax forms.

3) “New Media”

New media outlets comprise the bulk of efforts in garnering coverage for missing person cases. Internet and social media sites can spread information very quickly. Families often begin a social media campaign by creating a website for the missing person. That website will be cited frequently on fliers, in interviews, and on other social media sites.

The most frequent social media outlet used is Facebook. Families create a Facebook page to bring attention to their case and keep followers abreast of what is going on in the case. The father of a missing girl is excited to share that the Facebook page he created to help find his daughter had 2500 followers in just seven days (Matt). The cousin of a missing man explains how Facebook allows one to create a page for a cause. People follow the page instead of like it. Administrators of the page can see how many people are following and where they are from. There is also an option to pay money to promote a post so that it pops up on a specified number of people in the target area (Maria). A daughter explains how she uses Facebook, “I only get on that stuff for my mom. Facebook is what I’m doing mainly now. Just going in Facebook and updating the status since I’m doing this for my mom. Mom loved to dance. I always just put little statuses on her Facebook” (Nicole).

Twitter is another social media site that families are using. Families believe it reaches a different audience than Facebook. A dad used twitter to retweet articles about the case and had over 800 followers the first week (Matt). Maria explains the effective way she used twitter after she would find articles about her missing cousin, “I would retweet it on mine and thank the reporter. So it would be like @reporter from whichever station thanks for helping search for Blake. And then they would see our page. So it was a way of actually engaging with the media and kind of encouraging them” (Maria). She
also used twitter to connect with her cousin’s university because the university had a twitter account of its own.

Families are also reaching out to online editions of newspapers and television shows. The idea is that there is often unlimited space to fill, so less stringent criteria to meet. The father of a missing girl used his local patch often. He explains that it is nice because it covers local issues and provides a link that you can use on other social media sites. He explains that it is very easy, that they portray things in a positive light, and that they come back for more information often. He likes the idea of local coverage because it is the best way to gather community support in the search (Matt).

Family member have created YouTube videos detailing the case, and asking for help. These videos are usually then put on the websites and Facebook pages. Families put ads on Craigslist describing their missing loved one and asking if anyone has information to share. Families have used Reddit to ask local residents to look for their loved one and Tumbler to blog about developments. Before Facebook became mainstream, Myspace was a preferred social media option for bringing attention to a case. One mother, whose son went missing in 2002, had a simpler way of using the internet to help find her son, she explains, “It was before Facebook I think. We just sent out a lot of emails, I think my nephew wrote something on Myspace maybe” (Nancy). Often families link all of their social media sites together so that when they put an update on one site, it goes out to all the sites.

4) Comparison of High Versus Low-profile Cases

Families of high-profile missing persons report more examples of all types of traditional media coverage (other than fliers) than families of low-profile missing persons. Newspaper articles and local television broadcasts tend to be used early in high-profile cases. Media agents were camped out in front of the house begging for interviews in the highest-profile cases. All of the families in higher-profile cases remember instances of phone calls asking for interviews. Lower-profile cases have less
newspaper and television coverage. As previously mentioned, the families in lower-profile cases tend to have to work very hard for the little coverage that they do have. The daughter of a missing woman shares her frustration that her mother’s case received no media coverage at all in the 1990’s:

I have been in there from the Nancy grace to America’s Most Wanted to Unsolved Mysteries to Oprah. I contacted everyone you can imagine to no avail. If I hear from them, first of all, or it’s there are so many missing persons cases they can’t take the case they can’t handle them all. But most of all, most of the time, it’s not even hearing from them. Or there’s just something short and sweet. (Nicole)

The mother of a missing young man was told by the newspaper that the only way to get her story in the paper was to put an editorial. She explains, “So every month I put out an editorial in the paper because you’re only allowed one a month” (Terry). The family who receive zero coverage in the 1990’s was finally able to get an interview for the front page of the local paper. However, it did not turn out as hoped. “The reporter said it was important to him. He wanted on the front page. Well, he went back and forth back and forth with the editor. And of course it ended up in the community section of the newspaper” (Nicole). Although press releases are sent out by families on both ends of the coverage spectrum, only the lowest-profile cases remember instances where no one from the media showed up to an event.

New media is media that family can create themselves. They are not at the mercy of reporters or news organization. Families who have had little success at traditional media attempts find more success with new media routes. When frustrated with the lack of coverage, low-profile families tend to turn toward YouTube. A sister talks about a video she created explaining the case and asking for help (Marilyn). The daughter of a missing woman talks about a video she created called “10 Seconds for Mom” in which she tries to bring attention to her mom’s case (Nicole). With the exception of one father
who does not use internet very much, they all claim that social media sites are easily accessible and fairly simple to use.

Even though families of low-profile cases are using online media outlets, the families of high-profile cases are using more varieties of outlets and are using them more frequently and effectively. Low-profile families mention getting on Facebook just a few times a month or having other people maintain their accounts. On the other hand, high-profile families talk about keeping up with emerging media outlets like Reddit and Tumblr. They also are more likely to link all of their social media sites together.

c. **Police Involvement is Related to Media coverage**

1) **The Cycle**

Family members of missing persons believe that police involvement is directly related to media coverage. There appears to be a cycle happening. Police involvement leads to media coverage, which in turn lends pressure to more police involvement, and so on. In some cases it is hard to determine which comes first: the police involvement or the media coverage. However, for the most part, because the police tend to be the first point of contact in a missing person case, police involvement tends to lead the cycle.

Most missing person cases begin with a call to the police. In the best cases, media coverage starts immediately after. When Barb found out her sister was missing, she immediately called the police. Within 30 minutes, the police had the whole area taped off, a S.W.A.T team there, and a helicopter flying. Minutes after that, the media was there. A few hours after the police released the information that a young man was missing in the city, there were four news vans parked in front of the family’s home (Bart). It seems that when the police are active, so is the media. One father explains,
“We got very exclusive coverage that first maybe two or three weeks or months. As long as the police were active, like they were using sonar in the river and helicopters and divers “(Bart).

Police officers make judgment calls about the seriousness of the case that can affect a family’s media efforts. If the police do not take a case seriously, the families think it will be hard to convince the media to take it seriously. There are many reasons a person can go missing so sometimes the police may be hesitant in deciding whether to pursue it as a missing person case. One mom talks about dealing with the police when her son first went missing. They figured he could handle himself since he is a man and so they didn’t take the case until three days after she first approached them (Terry).

If police suspect the person is a runaway, then there is less interest, less movement from the police, and consequently less media coverage. Nancy ended her phone call with the police very discouraged. “The police didn’t care, said he ran away on his own and there was nothing they could do.” In his sister’s case, the police department turned down help from another department because they assumed she was a runaway and they could handle it (Brandon). A father of a missing girl shares an interaction he had with a police officer one of the first few days of the search, “One cop told me, how do you know, whether it’s a kid who has just run off and the kid is going to be okay, or whether it is something serious and needs to be dealt with and become a priority almost immediately” (Matt).

Law enforcement’s interest in a missing person case seems to dwindle over time, in the same way that media interest dwindles over time. A father explains, “We have learned that the police have a rather limited vision of missing persons. They’re going to look for your missing person actively for certain amount of time. If they don't find clues quickly then they will essentially kind of put you on the back burner” (Bart). The sister of a missing man adds to this that “The police they have other cases. They don't necessarily make this a priority. They don't have the resources. I think some people just have blind faith in them, that you know, the police are doing their job. And that they don't need to do anything. But
that is not the case” (Becky). A perfect example of having blind face in the police is in the case of a missing mom. The two daughters were young at the time their mother went missing. They went in to the station and filed a police report. They assumed that from that point on the police were searching for their mom. Media outlets need proof that a person is missing. So a few days later, after hearing nothing, they went back and were told that there was no record of any police report being filed (Nicole).

Just as police activity leads to media coverage, media attention keeps pressure on the police. “The public is watching so it puts pressure on the police not to just throw the file in a drawer. It’s like anyone could ask where they are at on solving that case” (Jill). When asked if she thinks the media and the police are two separate issues, one relative answers firmly, “They’re not, believe me. Because what I do, when I get the media on the police, the police move their asses” (Maureen). She goes on to describe what happened when she went to the police station to ask about progress on the case:

I was told they’re not in, and asked if had I called and told them I was coming. I don't have to make an appointment to discuss my relative's case. Bottom line I refuse to make an appointment. I should be free to walk in there and discuss what is going on. So what happened was no one was able to see me. So I called the media and they let me through with the women with their cameras. And the next day when I went back, I spoke to everybody I needed to about my relative’s case (Maureen).

2) Comparison of High versus Low-profile Cases

Although some families are satisfied with the amount of police involvement during the first couple of weeks, most families report frustration with the police department’s long term efforts, or in some cases, lack of efforts. The only glowing reports of a police department are from a relative in one of the highest-profile cases. She explains that the police instigated a lot of media coverage, especially when searches were planned. They had a press agent that worked with the family. The police helped
supervise community events and the police chief even helped organize volunteers and manage searches. Impressively, they even organized a large search event based on a tip a family member received from a psychic (Jill). The family of a missing boy also received great help from the police in getting media coverage. The police organized press conferences, invited the media, and had the family attend. The police department communicated with the Crime Stoppers website and put up the missing man’s information (Bart).

Most of the families, especially those of low-profile cases, complain of a lack of police involvement in their case. For some families the police were quick to categorize the missing person as a runaway and less worth of their attention. For other families, the police refused to take a report for days after the person went missing. The mother of a missing man shares:

They said he was a big guy 6 feet tall he can take care of himself. Being the family guy that he was we knew immediately that there was something wrong. But again they wouldn't listen so. And without police participation at that time was up to the family. So immediately we started hanging fliers and doing searches. They didn’t actually take the report until three days later” (Terry).

One of the biggest frustrations for families of low-profile cases is that the police never came to them with information. Rather, the families were constantly calling the investigators and visiting the police station to get answers. The father of a missing little girl explains, “They don't contact me. I've actually reached out to them through a letter about...well it was around the anniversary this year in January. It said that I was a little upset; I would like to be informed what is going on. That's another issue I have with the police though. Every time they find bones, nobody ever calls me. Even to say, don't worry James, it's not her” (James).
Families of low-profile cases speak frequently of police incompetence in the handling of their loved ones’ cases. The sister of a missing man was told by agencies specializing in searches for missing people that search dogs are often of great benefit in these types of cases. The sister went to the police asking for search dogs and had a frustrating exchange with them. “They were like no; we are not going to get dogs. Well why not? Well, we just don’t do that. Why not? Well we just don’t. But why not? Well we just don’t. You have no idea how many conversations I have with the police that go like that” (Becky).

A father also is unsatisfied with the police investigation. He is especially angry about how the police handled the person of interest and his home. He proclaims, “At some point in time, they realized that I leaked stuff to the press and therefore since then they have been kind of hesitant to clue me in on what is going on. But what are you going to do? I did what I....and I....I don’t want to criticize the Police Department, but they really F’d this case up from the beginning” (James). The brother of a missing girl had to constantly fight with the police to take his sister’s case seriously. Ironically, most of the press that his sister’s case received is about police mishandling the case (Brandon). The mother of a missing man summarizes how most families of low-profile cases feel about working with the police. She proclaims It is a “constant uphill battle” (Terry).

d. **Certain Events Lead to Spikes in Media Activity**

1) **Examples of Events**

When it comes to getting media coverage for a missing person, the general consensus is that there must be an event, to create a story, to create news. A mother explains that this phenomenon happens “because a lot of media do understand right now that you need a story. So whenever there was some kind of an occasion they would approach us so that they could get it into the news (Terry). All family members agree that certain events lead to spikes in media coverage.
The report of a missing person is considered to be the first event. Without exception, all families who received media coverage agreed that initial coverage is the highest and cannot be matched throughout the course of the investigation. The only time any families saw rivaling levels of attention was in the case that the person was found or the body recovered. Describing the first weeks of the case one father explains that the local newspaper and TV was interested the whole time at the beginning. They called him at home and work. News trucks even came to his work. His boss said “James you’ve gotta come down here, they’re like vultures.” Every single local station had a truck there (James). Another father reports that the media trucks were outside of his home every day for the first couple of weeks (Bart). But, inevitably the media’s focus wavered and the coverage dwindled. A sister shares that the media came to the family all of the time the first couple of weeks, but now it’s just birthdays, anniversaries, and events held in Jane’s name (Barb).

The most frequent spike creator is the anniversary of the disappearance. A brother tells, “The first could of weeks, it was an everyday thing, phone calls for an interview. Then it tapered off, and then only on anniversaries” (Brandon). Brandon believes one of the most extensive articles written about his sister was about the memorial on the 20th anniversary of her disappearance. One family made a point of organizing large events on the first few anniversaries, which generated a high amount of media attention (Jill).

Holidays, including birthdays, also generate interest from the media. Many families use a birthday as a reason to reach out to their media contacts and ask for an article. Others use the birthday as a time to hold a vigil, which the media often attends. As one mother clearly states, “Holding a vigil usually attracts media attention, so we hold a vigil” (Terry). One family included a large picture of the missing woman on a cake at a prayer vigil held on her birthday (Jill). The same family also organized a carnation hand out at a restaurant on Mother’s day.
Organized and advertised searches draw media attention. One mother explains why she organized the first search, “So I talk to one of the local newspapers and I said can you just run something? In order to run something you have to have a news thing going on. So we had a huge search of about 300 people. So they did put something in the paper about that (Terry). She found that the only way to get her son’s story into the paper was to create an event around it. A brother talks about how his sister’s case was slow to pick up momentum in the media until they had a search. He says, “Then the next 3 days they had an intensive search probably 200 people a day. That’s when the news really picked up on it and um really started covering her story a lot” (Brandon).

Large community events also attract media attention. Families hold pancake breakfasts and spaghetti dinners as fundraisers and invite media to attend. One family held a walk in the community in the missing person’s name. One mother has learned to turn the vigils for her son into large events. She invites mayors, legislators, and police. Sometimes singers are showcased. She also has included a search dog demonstration because people love to watch police dogs in action (Terry).

Six of the families interviewed speak of increased interest in their own cases when the three girls were found in Ohio. One sister says that as soon as news broke about the girls being found, she had two news anchors call her for an interview. The father of a missing little girl says three channels called him. The same thing happened when Elizabeth Smart was found (James). On the occasion of the girls being found alive in Ohio, the reporters usually asked the family to briefly describe their own case. They also asked if the discovery gave them hope for their own loved one.

It should be noted that the impact certain events will have on coverage is contingent on there being no other major news at the time. As one relative explains, “They may have room for it today, but if some big fire happens in the city they are not going to drive out here” (Jill). A sister tells of a big television program focusing on her sister that was planned for February one year. It ended up
getting postponed until April because a little girl went missing in the area and it was a bigger news story. (Barb).

2) **Comparison of High versus Low-profile Cases**

Although most families are seeing some spikes in coverage, there are definitely differences between high and low-profile families. The high-profile cases are seeing television time during their spikes. Their interviews are airing on local and national news programs. The low-profile cases are seeing more newspaper coverage rather than television coverage. Families of low-profile cases tended to talk more about increased Facebook activity around birthday and anniversary time. Families of higher-profile cases also claim the spikes can last for days. In low-profile cases, it is usually just during the hours of a scheduled event.

Another difference surrounds the amount of effort a family has to put in to get the coverage on certain occasions. Low-profile families see more response to an event if they prompt the media by sending invites and reminders. In the higher-profile cases, media agents often contact the family for an update or anniversary story a couple of days before the occasion or event.

When it comes to searches, multiple family searches tend to be even more effective than single family searches, for low-profile cases. Combining efforts among families of the missing tends to generate a great deal more coverage than searching alone. One relative explains, “When you go out and help others who are missing, then you support them. You bring your media to attend their event and they will invite their media to attend yours” (Maureen). All families have different media contacts, so it makes sense that combining those resources would lead to a higher turnout. The sister of a missing man says she was often encouraged to host searches with the families of other local missing men. She says,” They wanted to put all the local cases together to draw attention” (Marilyn).
e. **Media People are Good People**

1) **Initial Contact**

The consensus is that media people are good people. Without exception, all families have at least a couple positive things to say about media people, mainly reporters. Within a couple days of his son’s disappearance, a father came home to media vans camped out in his front yard. When asked what the reporters were like that first day he says, “They were very polite and very nice asked if they could interview me and went one at a time. They were very thoughtful “(Bart).

The families find reporters to be very empathetic to what the family is going through. “They were very congenial and very sensitive to the families of missing people” (Jill). James says, “I've found virtually all of them, although some are more prepared than others, they all care. They all care. They're interviewing you for 20-30 minutes. You only see 30 seconds on TV. But they really do conversate with you, they empathize with you, they're alright in my opinion.” The sister of a missing man reiterates that feeling claiming that the reporters she has worked with are really compassionate for the most part. They seem genuinely interested and empathetic (Becky).

Reporters in missing person cases exhibit ethical journalistic behaviors. They focus on the missing person rather than the family member they are interviewing. A sister elaborates, “I'm just an advocate for Chris. They don't go to my personal background in my life. They are not like what is up with you and what do you do. It is all about Chris and that is how it should be” (Becky). And in the instances that they make a mistake or misquote it seems that they quickly clear up those mistakes (Marilyn)

Reporters go beyond what is expected of them from the families. “They have all been wonderful. I can’t even think of one negative, even a few guys with tears in their eyes. They all reach out and say, ‘here’s my business card” (Barb). The reporter who finally did a story after 20 years of no coverage, told the family she was shocked it took so long. She said she would have done the story 20
years earlier if she had heard anything about it. The cousin of a missing woman definitely believes the reporters care. She shares, “I remember this one reporter I can't remember what she had to tell me, but we were at a prayer vigil and she had to tell me some horrible news. Maybe it was that there had been a body found. And she was like crying, she wanted to do it off camera. And she came in to break something to me, they really do care” (Jill).

2) Lasting Relationships

Family members of the missing are forming relationships with reporters that last long after the initial contact. One of the main reasons is because it seems like the same reporters get assigned to the same topics and so often families are seeing reporters that they are familiar with. The sister of a missing woman goes on to explain, “They became like a family to me because they don't care just about the story, they actually care about your well-being. They're good people, and I'm actually good friends with a lot of people there” (Susie). One family member had a favorite reporter that she liked the demeanor of so she recommended her to correspond for a national news host who was covering the case (Maureen).

A few families refer to specific reporters who have been very loyal to them. The sister of a missing man has made certain media contacts who will always have her on their programs or write the story no matter how little the update is (Becky). Another woman talks about how there is a radio host who always tries to mention her relative whenever possible. She will hear from other people that the case was featured on the radio that day (Andrea). One mom reports the large-scale impact one reporter’s efforts are making, “I do see an interest in some of the reporters. Like there is one in our local newspaper. A reporter has taken missing persons under her wing. She does reports whenever there is a missing person and she does a Facebook page whenever there's a missing person. So she single-handedly is making a huge difference” (Terry.)
f. **An Ideal Missing Person does Exist**

1) **Introduction**

Families of missing persons offer a unique perspective into what is going on with media coverage. They live with the reality of a missing loved one every day. They are more aware and receptive to similar stories in the news. They attend conferences for missing persons and work with missing person advocacy groups. They talk to other families of missing persons and share and compare experiences. They conduct their own research and form their own opinions. Thus, they offer a very different viewpoint than what might come from an interview of a news reporter or editor. It would be naïve to assume a simple analysis of media content could fully portray what is going on with missing persons coverage. Families of missing persons are arguably a type of expert in the field of missing persons, as it is a topic that consumes many hours, days, months, and years of their lives. Their opinions are significant. This section shares their opinions on who gets covered and who does not. They identify very specific criteria that make a person more or less likely to receive media coverage as a missing person. This finding aligns with Study’1 application of Nils Christie’s (1986) idea of “ideal victims” to missing persons cases. The combined opinions of the family members suggest that an ideal missing person does exist in media. She is female, White, young, attractive, has a pleasant back-story, and comes from a strong family.

2) **The Ideal Missing Person**

A) **Female**

Gender seems to be the most important characteristic that determines a person’s worthiness of coverage. Being female significantly increases the chances that person will receive coverage. Every person asked, cited being female as beneficial. When asked if he agrees that women get the most coverage one father responded, “I would say that’s the case, girls definitely get more coverage” (James).
Women seem to summon a great deal of publicity because they are more vulnerable and fragile than men. A father believes that women garner a great deal of publicity because “they are very sensitive topics I think. Because well women are victimized in many different aspects of life” (Bart). When a woman vanishes people tend to assume an injury or something bad happened (Marilyn).

One father has read many research articles about the phenomenon of missing women. He explains that according to research, “its white girls from upper middle class and middle class families. And that's just research numbers. And if you really want to do a non-bias confirmation, set a Google search for missing children and runaway children you will see a lot of white young girls” (Matt). It is frustrating for families of missing men. The mother of a missing man vents, “If only media could understand that everyone is important. There are no exceptions. When it comes to a beautiful woman they’re at the forefront. And I know it's all about ratings” (Terry)

B) White People

About two thirds of people interviewed agree that being White is almost as important as being female. They feel that the main reason White missing persons get so much coverage is because it is what the viewers want to see. Most viewers of the news programs are White so they probably relate better to stories of missing White people. One relative of a missing woman says she knows exactly why her loved one got so much coverage. She holds up a picture of her and says “Look at her. She's a young, White, attractive suburban mom” and everyone knows one of those (Jill).

C) Young

Age is an important factor in determining likelihood to receive coverage. It is not so much that being old will hurt you, but rather that being young really helps your chances. A father has done a search online of missing persons and runaways and informs of the ones who get coverage, “They are all young, like thirteen, or mostly under thirteen. Where they clearly are victims in this and they don’t have
a hand in the decision making process to leave” (Matt). It is undeniable the viewers would have sympathy for a missing child. A father explains, “young children, everyone has a feel for that” (Bart).

Some families are understanding of the reality that children receive greater amounts of coverage, but become frustrated when coverage is so extensive that it comes at the expense of all other cases. It is frustrating for the family of an older woman. They feel like they are seeing mostly young girls getting coverage. While they try to get any type of coverage for their mom, newscasters are going on and on about the missing younger women (Nicole).

D) Attractive

Families believe appearance is important. Attractive people are going to receive more television coverage. One father puts it bluntly that “It helps to be cute and smart” (James). Another father goes on to say that “Anybody who looks like anybody who was in a television sitcom” is who viewers are gonna see on television coverage of missing persons (Matt). One sister believes that this need for beauty can hurt men’s chances at coverage and she is frustrated. When asked why two similar stories received such different amounts of media time she answers, “Because he is a man and it is not sexy enough. He is not some cute young vulnerable woman (Becky).

E) Pleasant Back Story

People are drawn to stories about good people living good lives who go missing. They appreciate a pleasant back story. There have to be details about the missing person’s personality or personal life that make them relatable. A sister informs, “I’ve noticed that there’s only certain cases get publicity like someone has kids or is married and they are this wonderful person”(Marilyn). When asked why his son’s case got so much coverage at the beginning, a dad explains that it is because he was “a bright young man with a great future” (Bart). One sister believes that her brother’s pleasant back
story is the only reason he got any coverage at all. She describes him as “A good guy, not a drug addict. Not into alcohol, not crazy, no criminal record. This was an upstanding businessman who had a lot of passions and was an interesting human being. He wasn't just an average Joe. He wasn't famous or anything but he was an interesting individual” (Becky).

F) **Bizarre Circumstances**

A person is more likely to be covered if the circumstances surrounding his or her disappearance are bizarre in some way. If a person disappears and there is no activity on his or her bank account and the cell phone hasn’t been used, that is bizarre. If the person has plans for the next week and disappears, that is bizarre. If there is a history of marital strife or talk of abuse or divorce, that is bizarre. A father adds, “When there is a preponderance of evidence that there was a crime you get more coverage, because it’s more interesting to viewers, like there was in Jean’s case (James). Sometimes a certain type of person going missing can be bizarre in itself. A brother gives his sister’s case in example. He explains that she received so much coverage because “her case was just so bizarre I mean we have a girl who has no criminal history whatsoever. I mean she wouldn’t even think about doing anything criminally ya know. Our family was well respected in the community” (Brandon).

G) **Strong Families**

It has been established that a huge responsibility for getting coverage falls on the shoulders of the family members of missing persons. It is thus no surprise that having a strong family behind him or her helps a missing person’s chances of receiving media coverage. Families have to have a “willingness to say yes” when reporters call or knock on their doors (Jill). A sister attributes the coverage her sister’s case to her own hard work. She explains, “Part of that reason was because I pounded the pavement and made so many calls” (Barb). Families have to have the means and ability to keep up the efforts for
media attention. A father thinks “it takes the diligence of some family members to keep media
coverage” (James).

3) The Non-ideal Missing Person

A) Males

The other side of gender impacting coverage is that being male puts one at a significant
disadvantage. One sister notes that there are multiple missing men in the same area, yet none of them
are getting very much coverage. She says, “Men, ya know you look at the three guys we have, they are
all three healthy big guys, so you are not thinking something bad happened to them. For some reason
the public doesn’t look at our guys like, oh we have to go find them” (Marilyn). One mother agrees. The
police told her that a 6 foot tall guy should be able to take care of himself (Terry). One relative believes
it to be a part of our culture. “We raise these young boys, these male children to believe you’re strong.
You don’t have to cry. So when a man becomes missing, it’s like a man can take care of themselves...but
a man can be killed just like a woman can be killed. They’re missing” (Maureen).

In many instances the police, and consequently the media, assume that if a man is missing it is
because he chose to go missing. They assume he left to avoid money problems or ran off with another
woman. He may be assumed to be drunk and out of touch, or gone because he committed suicide. One
sister says in agreement “If it’s a man they assume he ran off or that it was a drinking or drugs thing (Jill).

B) Non-White Persons

Being Black or Hispanic lessens one’s chance of coverage. Families cannot understand why or
really even speculate toward the reason. These families have trouble justifying this specific criteria but
the almost all acknowledge its existence. Some of the families are now advocates for other families of
missing persons and they admit that the same media tactics do not work across races. One woman
explains that she gives the same advice of how to get media attention to non-white families and it just does not work for some reason. They aren’t seeing the same results (Jill).

C) **Criminal/Questionable Past**

A person’s past behaviors can work against them when it comes to receiving media coverage. Police and media agents latch on to details about previous drug use, addictions, or criminal behavior. They look for reasons to justify why the person is missing. “They say oh, he was a business man, his business goes bad, he had it coming” (James). Or if there’s anything in the past they automatically think the worst, like maybe he got in a fight or something (Marilyn). One father has a theory about this, he shares, “I always say if kids don't have the advocates and you can’t relate those kids as being essentially perfect individuals, or near perfect individuals, if you cannot tell that story it is hard to get media coverage for them” (Matt).

People have less sympathy for someone with a not so clean past. Viewers may feel like there is nothing bizarre about the situation, but rather a person got something he deserved. A brother clarifies, “Not saying anyone deserves to die, but they definitely put themselves in jeopardy when they are running drugs and other things” (Brandon). One mom speaks from experience about when her son, who had been in trouble before, disappeared. “They didn’t care, because he was a teenage boy with a history of drug problems” (Nancy). No matter what their pasts look like, most missing people have family members who love and miss them and want them found. One daughter shares, “We all live our lives the way we want to live them. We are adults. But you can't judge people. And she was a human being and she was my mother to me and I don't see all the extra stuff you know what I'm saying’’ (Nicole).
D) Runaways

Many families mentioned runaways as a population that gets neglected in the media. Often times it is assumed that someone ran away even when they didn’t. One dad provides an example; he says “I also think that the police are too quick to dismiss cases as runaways. Like the girl in Ohio, everybody thought she was a runaway, and she was locked up in that monster’s house for, she was locked up there for longer than anybody” (James). Even if it is confirmed a person is a runaway, there are still many reasons to look for him or her and many people who want that person found. A brother shares why it is crucial to look for runaways. “Runaways are not treated with that same regard that a regular missing person is. However, you know with a lot of these young girls that do runaway; they find themselves in trouble after they run away. We need to look just as hard for them” (Brandon).

When his daughter ran away, the media told one father that thousands of kids runaway so they don’t cover runaways. It took a lot of work to get coverage for his daughter’s case. Much of the media he had to create himself through social media outlets. He does have thoughts as to what people are thinking about runaways and why they don’t get the media attention they deserve and desperately need:

So there’s a reason why the kid ran away. They think the parents just weren’t paying attention so that’s why the kid ran away. Or they think the kid made a really stupid mistake and that is why the kid ran away. And none of that is anything that generates people really caring about the kid. It’s not that there’s nothing bizarre about it, but there is somebody at fault. Whatever the problem is, somebody created their own problem (Matt).
E) **Quiet Families**

Because family efforts are so important in getting coverage for missing person cases, people with quiet families tend to see less coverage. There are many reasons why a family may not be pursuing coverage. Some may be too devastated. The may be too emotionally drained with the reality of their loved one being missing to put forth any efforts to obtain media attention. One sister can’t understand why all families don’t put forth the effort but speculates that “some people must be paralyzed with it” (Becky). Some families are in shock by their situation. One relative explains, “Unfortunately for many family members they are like deer in headlights, they cannot move they cannot talk” (Maureen).

There are families who do not trust the police or the media and so they shy away from both. In the worst case scenarios, a family member may be involved in the disappearance of the loved one and thus does not want to draw any more attention to the case. One sister shares that a witness in her brother’s case refused to talk to the police because he had skeletons he wanted to hide. She states, “People don’t talk because they there are things they don’t want police to find out or even their spouses. He wouldn’t participate in anything. He didn’t want any media attention on him at all. And I know that is because he is not a nice guy and there is stuff that he didn’t want his wife to know. And he freaked out. And maybe that is the factor for a lot of people” (Becky).

Other families may not have the time, money, or means to pursue coverage. One relative asks “If you are working two jobs do you have the time to be holding press conferences? Do you have the time to be gathering a huge reward?” (Jill). Some family members tell from their own experiences that it often seemed like there was not enough time in the day to pursue media coverage. They still had to work to pay their bills and still take care of other family members. One father gives advice to families of missing people. But he admits that “there are a set of people who it won’t help at all. They are not comfortable writing, so social media stuff is difficult. They will struggle to find, to create a sympathetic
face for themselves to have people think that they are like them. That everyone should help find that kid” (Matt).

It should also be noted that there is also a population of missing persons no one is fighting for. “There are kids for whom there is no advocate. Kids who run away from group care homes or foster homes they don’t get reported” (Matt). Families also mention homeless persons and people who are victims of human trafficking as part of the population of missing persons not being fought for by any loved ones.

g. Media Coverage Matters

1) Why do they Want it?

Families of missing people want media coverage for many reasons. One of the main goals of media coverage is to bring attention to the case; to let the world know that a loved one is missing. The families are trying to get as much pertinent information as possible out to the public, so people can keep their eyes open and help find the loved one. Matt has a clear explanation of why public awareness of a case is so important. “The more people that are searching for a child, the more likely you are to find them. It is relatively simple and straightforward. We visited private detectives before we started and basically all they can do is put boots on the ground. If you use social media you can get more boots on the ground than if you hire someone to do it for you” (Matt). Another relative agrees that the same goal applies to social media campaigns. She explains, “But mostly I guess a specific point of social media is trying to get more eyes. It’s just like if one more person or 10 more people or 100 more people see his picture, we will be more likely to find him or have a report of what had happened” (Maria).

One family wanted to make it as easy as possible for people to follow the case once they heard about it. That is why they spent so much time maintaining the website. Maria explains, “But you have to think, if somebody sees the news report and they think they know something or sees a news report and
they are interested, the next thing they are going to do is search online. And if our website is the first thing that pops up then maybe we can serve as a repository for all that” (Maria). Drawing attention to the case can serve a purpose besides making the general public more knowledgeable. It may reach the person who is missing. One dad admits, “I think the first couple of days we were just hoping that she would see it and see that we missed her and wanted her back” (Matt).

A crucial goal of media coverage is that someone who knows something or saw something will come forward. Ideally you want to “Jolt someone's memory or catch that one person who was walking or driving by when something happened” (Marilyn). With no other ideas of where to go to find her son, one mom “emailed all his friends. Hoping they might know where he is or forward the email to someone who did” (Nancy). During the initial stages of an investigation, tips from people who may be able to help are crucial. A sister explains, “Ya know 48 hours is the most important time to keep it in the news. Put out an APB and try to get on the internet or something. You might save a life or find somebody before something bad happens” (Marilyn).

One relative gives a specific example of the importance of reaching potential informants, “Imagine if a 10 year old may have seen something 12 years ago and they’re now 21. And they happen to hear that story and somewhere in their subconscious, they think...I remember that...oh yeah I remember seeing them walking down the street. It might be the one tip we need” (Maureen). She goes on to acknowledge that in an investigation, all tips are important, “I don’t care if it’s a homeless person living under the viaduct or if its Donald Trump living in Trump Towers, that tip has no boundaries. It’s not discriminative in race, creed, color, sexual preference, or anything else. The tip is what it is” (Maureen).

There is hope that even hesitant witnesses may come forward. Maybe the ex-girlfriend of the person involved is no longer scared to share what she knows. Maybe someone in trouble with the law
can receive leniency if they share what they know. A brother explains this hope, “Eventually someone’s conscience may get to them if they know something....loyalties with people waiver.... They squeal just to get themselves out of trouble” (Brandon). A sister has a similar hope “that the one person who has to know something will get a conscience or soften their heart when they see how great of a lady and how much she did for community and will call and say I know where she is” (Barb). A father hoped that his media campaign would reach someone with his daughter. He hoped that that person would “realize how many people were looking for her and send her back” (Matt).

Another prominent goal of media coverage is to keep pressure on the suspect or person of interest. The more media attention there is the more pressure there is on the subject. The ideal hope is that the media coverage gets to be unbearable and the guilty person confesses. A sister shares, “What I hope is that he crumbles. That people who know what happened feel the pressure because of all the media attention this is getting. I don't want them getting comfortable. Thinking I got away with it” (Becky). Another sister agrees. She doesn't want the suspect to keep living his life as if nothing happened (Susie). One relative tells of a sort of secondary pressure on the suspect that comes from his daily surroundings. With increased media coverage more people will learn about the case, and care about the missing person. They may work with the person responsible and come to work talking about the case. This kind of thing can make the guilty person’s daily life quite uncomfortable (Jill).

Families also want to keep pressure on the police. They want to keep their loved ones’ cases in the forefront of the investigators minds. One relative explains, “The other thing is pressure on the police, that this just doesn't fade away over time. That became the majority of the reason for continuing to do it. You force the media to knock on the door of the police and ask for a statement. To ask, 'Is someone still on the case, is it a cold case?” (Jill). The brother of a missing woman now works with other families of missing persons. He thinks that media coverage definitely impacts police efforts. He shares,
“I found in cases, um, where the family didn’t go out to the media, that the case died really fast in the police’s eye and the public’s eye” (Brandon).

At the end of the day, every family wants resolution in their case. Getting closure is the ultimate goal of media coverage. They all want to find their loved ones. One relative puts it realistically, “The reporters asked me what do we want? The family wants closure, we want closure. I know she's dead. I'm not holding out hope that she's going to be found in Barbados or something. I know she's dead, but we would like to be able to mourn her and have a funeral, a real funeral. And grieve in the proper way. And then justice as well” (Jill). The father of a little girl feels the same way. There is nothing he wants more than to know the truth about what happened to his daughter. He shares, “And every time an Elizabeth Smart or Shawn Hornbeck or these girls, every time one of them gets found. I always say, someday...someday maybe I'll get my answers. And that's all I want. But that's the hardest part” (James).

With or without official closure of the case, one more important goal of media coverage is to remember the missing or deceased person. A father shares his heartfelt reason for wanting to keep attention on his daughter’s case, “I want to keep Jean's name out there. Not so much that I think that anything is going to come of it, more that I want people to remember Jean. That's my passion right now. I want people to remember Jean and to miss Jean” (James). The cousin of a missing man explains how the goal of the social media campaign shifted after her cousin’s body was found. The search page was turned into a memorial page. She says, “And I have to say it was really, I have just been involved in Facebook in my daily life, but being able to transition from the finding pages to the remembering pages really helped the morning process a lot” (Maria).
2) **Does it even Matter?**

Families of missing persons believe very strongly that media coverage is important and produces results. Jill shares that all of the initial media coverage had a direct impact on their search efforts. She explains, “What it did lead to, the day that we had that search, over 700 people showed up. It was 97 degrees and over 700 people showed up. That was our very largest” (Jill). When Terry’s son’s case was aired on the Discovery ID program it brought a lot of new attention to the case as evidenced by the giant increase in website hits. She believes that when a show is aired nationally, it ends up being shared across the internet as well as by word of mouth, and that makes a huge difference in a case (Terry).

Many families found that after media coverage, people started coming from everywhere volunteering to help in any way they could or offering to donate money toward events or reward funds. One relative believes that her social media campaign was very successful. She talks of people coming up to the family in the street and hugging as well as people offering them food. She says, “All I would say is that the time that I put into it ended up paying back to all of us in terms of just kind of seeing the support that people provide in the case” (Maria). Matt found that media coverage reminded people that his family was going through crises and needed help. People then donated their time and talents. There were free fliers and places to set up search parties offered.

Media coverage can also make a difference in the investigation. The daughter of a missing woman says that a lady emailed her MySpace page letting her know that the sheriffs have had an unidentified body for 20 years. The daughter immediately went to the sheriff, and now firmly believes that the body is her mother (Nicole). One father explains that his online connections helped him secure his son’s case a spot on a television program. When the program was being made, the TV people found
a woman in Michigan who was with Sean right before he went missing. She had a lot to say, yet the police had not made contact with her (Bart).

The strongest example of media coverage that matters is evident in the case of Matt’s daughter. He created a Facebook page, which lead to a newspaper article. The newspaper article led to television news coverage. Someone saw the television coverage and recognized his daughter’s picture and lead authorities to her. That outcome met one of the biggest goals of media coverage: finding the missing person and the closure that comes with that find.

Just the act of pursuing media coverage, especially creating and maintaining an online presence, serves an important purpose. A father explains, “This isn’t a media coverage thing but the act of actually using social media and using regular media is that it gives the parents something to do while they are searching. So it keeps hope within the parents. And that is also a mental health issue. A lot of what I think media coverage is, is helping parents just maintain some sanity during a very difficult time in their lives” (Matt). Maria agrees. She enjoyed handling the social media piece. It gave her something to do and made her feel like she was helping out. It also helped her grieve once the body was found. A mother admits of this purpose of media, she shares, “So in Sean’s case a lot of these things, the billboards, the things we do, it is because it’s all that we can do” (Terry). As Susie says, it “keeps hope alive and lets people know that you’re still looking for your loved one.”

3) **Networks and Support Systems**

The media connects families of missing persons with other families of missing persons. Family members acknowledge that some of the greatest emotional support they received was from other families going through the same thing. A father shares, “Just personally we've come to know a great number of people who have been a great source of strength for us and we are a source of strength for them, sort of a family. And this family is Internet connected” (Bart). The sister of a missing man tells of
many connections she made through the internet and social media. It began when she posted a flier of her brother and someone in the media saw it and connected her with a few other families of missing me. She shares, “The media kinda connected all the people that I knew. Like when we found out about each other’s cases and it kind of gives you a resource to know you are not by yourself. When I met Marcy after dealing with this for a little while, she had stopped and said exactly what I was thinking ‘I feel like I’m crazy’ and I said ‘no you’re not crazy, we’re just in a crazy position. We are in a position we never chose to be in’ (Marilyn).

Watching television and seeing other people going through the same thing, lets families members know that they are not alone and that it gets better. One mother explains that knowing that other people are out there struggling is actually a great resource. She explains, “Well you know we fumbled through this when Kevin went missing. There was no one around to help us in the area. So we, if we could just join hands and get to the public, if something happens to someone else like this they will know exactly what to do” (Terry).

Once a case gets some kind of media coverage, people with experience may volunteer to help the families. Numerous family members mentioned phone calls from advocates in the field who helped them get organized and formulate a plan of action. Maureen talks about a woman who helps families of missing persons who contacted her and “took her under her wing.” She guided her on what needed to be done (Maureen). Social media outlets also help many families connected with organizations that help with missing person cases, like Project Jason and the National Center for Missing and Exploited Children. One father explains that a woman who runs an organization dedicated to missing persons invited his family to travel to a ceremony for missing persons and gave them advice on how to generate press (Bart).
h. **Families have Advice to Give**

1) **To Other Families**

One of the most meaningful and beneficial findings from the case studies is that families of missing persons have advice to give to other families regarding working with the media during a missing person case. They believe that the media is one of the strongest tools at a family’s disposal. Regardless of their own experiences with the media, these families are confident that their suggestions will give other families going through similar experiences a fighting chance at receiving adequate media coverage for their loved ones.

First of all, the families reiterate that the bulk of the responsibility for getting media coverage falls on the families. It is important to get the story out there quickly and to be persistent in one’s efforts. Do not rely on anyone else to do the work. A father says, “Contact the authorities and make sure they are on the ball. Don’t let them tell you that you have to wait 48 hours or anything like that. They have an obligation to immediately investigate a missing person. The faster that you are on this the more hope that you have. You cannot always count on the police to move quickly” (Bart). A cousin agrees that time is of the essence, not to wait, and just get the information out. She shares her family’s dilemma of whether or not to keep their case low key until more information was available. They decided that “the worst thing that can happen is say that Blake just ended up going for a 23 mile walk, that he liked to do occasionally. The worst that could have happened was he would've been embarrassed and we would've been relieved. But given the situation I think you would rather have the word out soon, early, when people's memories are most fresh” (Maria). The families need to get out immediately with useful information (description, location, and photo) and get it to the media (Marilyn).

It is important to get out in the community and bring attention to the case. “Get out knock on doors, have you seen this person? Go to your local churches; speak about your missing person, tell
somebody” (Maureen). A sister agrees, “Keep pounding the pavement. Talk. Get out there. Don’t let anyone stop you from saying what you need to say “(Barb). One mother believes that it is better to show up to news stations than to just call on the phone. She imparts,” Face-to-face is better than the phone. Because looking at someone in the face affects someone more than just talking on the phone” (Terry). Media people have a harder time ignoring the story when they see firsthand the emotional turmoil of the loved ones. The sister of a missing man sums up the feelings of most families, “You have to be so vocal. And you cannot take no for an answer. And you have to be a bulldog. And it is all on you. Nobody is going to do this for you. It is all on you. You have got to do it. You have to get the resources. You have to get the word out. You have to keep the word out. It's all up to you. It is difficult and it takes energy and effort but it is worth it” (Becky).

The family members give specific advice on how to make the most of the media opportunities they do receive. One relative in a high-profile case explains how to get more than just an anchor reading a blurb about your missing person. She says, “There’s b-roll, other visual things, they can do a table with pictures on it so that they do not just have an announcer sitting there reading something. They do a longer edited piece” (Jill). She says it is important that media people have multiple visuals to pull from when setting up a story. Families need to give the reporter and cameraman opportunities for pictures and videos. That way, when the story airs, the media can put together a longer edited video piece. She shares some visuals that her family has used: a balloon release that complemented the sunset, a table with candles and framed pictures of the missing person, and family members standing together holding pictures of the missing person (Jill). The father of a missing girl applies this same suggestion to using social media. He says, “So when you're trying to put together stuff for any communications thing, Twitter or Facebook, you need to have packages. They have to have done a package that allows you to put links and to give you some type of third-party validation for what happened (Matt). He specifically
promotes including links to newspaper articles and television clips in Facebook status updates and tweets.

The families agree that it is important to use as many details as possible to make the story appealing to viewers. The goal is to make viewers interested in the case. The main suggestion is to include as much personal information as possible to add that personal touch, thus making the person someone viewers can relate to. One sister commands, “Make your missing person interesting and someone people can empathize with” (Becky). Jill offers an example of how she helped show the personality of her missing loved one. The framed picture she gave the media showed baby hands around the missing woman’s neck. It showed the audience, without having to state it, that the missing woman is a mom of young children.

In the event that family members are interviewed on television, they are encouraged to be themselves and show emotion. One father shares, “I would advise them to be themselves. To be themselves and to just try to do these interviews as a one-on-one, like you’re talking to someone at a bar or a coffee shop or what have you. And forget the camera is there “(James).

All of the families used fliers at some point in their search for their missing loved one. They have advice on how to get the most out of fliers. Jill emphasizes the importance of using high quality photos so that they give a clear picture of whom and what people are looking for. The pictures need to look clear even in photo copies. She also suggests having fliers available on the internet. Have a link on the website that people can click to print fliers themselves (Jill). The daughter of a missing woman also suggests keeping a supply of fliers in the car. They can be handed out to reporters covering other stories in the area (Nicole). The families most successful in getting coverage also agree that a media log is essential. Get contact information from all media people and put together in a list in an email account anything of interest can easily be sent out. The media may do a story.
Families are realistic in their expectations and know that some families don’t have the means to secure every single type of media coverage. However they do believe some outlets should take precedence when determining where to focus one’s efforts. The consensus is that an online presence is essential. One relative says, “If you can’t do it all, you absolutely have to have an online presence and hold press conferences” (Jill). A cousin suggests that if they can’t do it all, they should do a website and Facebook and connect the two (Maria). In general, families should use whatever online media they can. Websites, Facebook, and Twitter seem to be the most preferred outlets.

With the suggestion to use more online media, one brother cautions families to be careful which information and opinions they put out there. He says it is tempting to vent about how the police are handling the case or about who the guilty party is. He says families “kinda need to walk really thin line, because there are legal repercussions that the person who is being accused, if they are not arrested, and you are slandering their name out there, they can come back and sue you. That’s just another injury to the family then” (Brandon).

Families suggest combining efforts with other families of missing persons to get more attention. It seems like the more people that get together, the more important the problem appears to be to the audience. It just seems like a bigger issue if something affects 20 people versus if it affects two. A mother agrees, she says, “My advice is, I know you’re looking for your loved one. Of course that is important. But in order to get media attention, you need to bring in other cases as well. That will sell the papers” (Terry).

The families advise not to be afraid to ask for, or accept, help from the people around them. The burden of handling everything with the media is absolutely too much for one person or one small family to handle. There are always people around the fringes that want to help like friends, neighbors, or cousins. Someone can handle the website, one can handle the email address, and one can make
phone calls to media. Other people can schedule fundraising and find donations. Delegating is important. “Never underestimate the power of people willing to help” (Jill). The father of a missing girl does not use the internet very often, so he has a friend who manages the website and Facebook page (James).

A good role for a trusted family member or friend is that of spokesperson. Most of the families mentioned the importance of having a strong, consistent spokesperson to get information out to the media. Very often, the job of spokesperson is to demanding for immediate family members. The immediate family is managing so many other aspects of life at the time. Jill explains that the immediate family is too “emotionally and psychologically crushed” to speak about the case. She says it is important to have a consistent spokesperson so that the immediate family doesn’t have to look for photos for a story and answer phones all day (Jill). A sister of a missing woman agrees from her own experience, “They need a spokesperson; it is very difficult for immediate family” (Susie).

Finally, these loved ones of missing persons are telling others to have hope. They need to have hope that their loved one will be found and hope that there will be resolution to their case. They have to have hope that their efforts will not be in vain. A mother shares, “They always have to have hope. A lot of times they lose hope and they need to keep hopeful. Like the Cleveland girls, it was 10 years and they are alive. My hope is to bring my son’s remains home. I know that he is gone. But I still have hope to bring him home. That he can have a resting place. But many families should have hope that their family members will come through the door and they can hug them. Hope is a great thing” (Terry). A sister agrees, “Keep her face out there. Keep hope alive and don’t ever give up. And any chance you can, keep your loved one’s face out there” (Susie).
2) **To the Media**

All of the families agree that media coverage for missing persons needs to expand and improve. They express frustrations in the unfair coverage of certain groups of people over other groups of people. Many family members feel hopeless that anything will change, but some family members have ideas and advice to give to media agents, to better the current state of media coverage for missing persons. One relative suggests a TV blackout for one day, in the name of fair coverage for missing persons (Maureen). The hope is that the lack of viewers will push media agents to make a change. The brother of a missing girl would like to see the government pay for one spot during each prime time commercial break to highlight a missing person or two. He thinks the same amount of time and money should be spent advertising our missing persons as on advertising commercial products (Bart).

Many families wish for a channel dedicated to missing persons. They picture a channel similar to the weather channel. Information is constantly being shared and short stories are being aired. Or on a smaller scale, pictures and names of missing persons could be scrolled across the bottom of a television program (Maureen). The daughter of a missing woman gets frustrated with the shows that spend hours and days covering one missing person case. She suggests putting a picture of another missing person in the bottom corner for just 10 second and doing it throughout the program (Nicole).
A. Conclusions

Are all missing people covered equally in the media? If a loved one goes missing can I be confident that his case will receive fair coverage? What can I do to make sure my missing loved one has the best chance at fair coverage in the media? These are all questions answered by the conclusion of this study. Previous research has all but ignored the current state of media coverage as it applies to missing persons. And families of the missing have not had a well-informed and organized chance to share their experiences and offer opinions and insight. This study helps fill those gaps by analyzing national newsmagazine programs and by giving a voice to a group previously unheard.

The first research question asks, “How is the issue of missing persons framed in the media?” The answer to that question actually tells us who goes missing in the United States and who is worth looking for, according to the media. Based on the results of the content analysis of 178 newsmagazine episodes, the answer to that question is disturbing to say the least. White missing persons are over-represented and Black missing persons are under-represented in television coverage of missing person cases. Also, female missing persons are over-represented and male missing persons are under-represented. These finding suggest that the media frames missing persons as a white and female issue.

Family members of missing persons agree with these findings. Every person asked cites being female as the most important factor for receiving media coverage. Women are considered more vulnerable and fragile. It is assumed that men can take care of themselves and that most go missing on purpose. Many of the family members think being White is almost as important as being female. They believe viewers relate better to white missing persons. They admit that even with the same amount of effort, families of black missing persons will get less coverage. Although the content analysis does not find young missing persons to be over-represented, the families of missing persons also believe that
being young increases one’s odds of receiving media coverage. They think that young people grab more sympathy from viewers.

This finding that the media frames missing persons as a White and female issue aligns with previous research of how victims are represented in the news. Dixon, Azocar, and Casas (2003) found that African Americans were underrepresented as crime victims on the news and Whites were overrepresented as victims on the news when compared to crime reports. Pritchard and Hughes (1997) found that newsworthiness increased when victims were White, female, or children. Crimes against children, those inherently pure and innocent, are deemed morally reproachable by society and thus generate high levels of newsworthiness (Min & Feaster, 2008).

These finding also support Nils Christie’s (1986) notion of the ideal victim as female and very young, as well as Madriz’s (1997) criteria of the ideal victim as White and female. Greer’s (2007) suggestion of a hierarchy of victimization coincides with family members’ suggestions that certain characteristics make people more worthy of media coverage.

The second research question asks, “Once a missing person is deemed media-worthy and receives media coverage, how is that missing person framed?” As Entman (1993) explains, framing involves selecting some aspects of a perceived reality and making them more prominent. Certain aspects of the missing person’s personality and personal life are accentuated in the coverage of his or her case as evidenced in the discourse analysis of newsmagazine transcripts. Study 1 finds that in the media, the missing person is framed in at least four ways: (1) She is attractive; (2) She is a good person who is missed; (3) She is a victim; and (4) She has secrets.

To frame the missing person as attractive in television coverage, flattering physical descriptions are often included. The person is described as pretty, sexy or beautiful. Mention is given to the missing person’s “beautiful smile” that “could light up a room”. Families of missing persons agree that physical
attractiveness is an important characteristic for determining amount of media coverage. They believe that being cute and all-American-looking betters one’s odds of getting media coverage. These findings support the suggestion that appearance is important in determining a victim’s, or missing person’s, worth. They align with previous studies that found participants responded least favorably to unattractive victims and tended to blame victims who dressed provocatively (Deitz, Littman & Bentley, 1984; Workman & Freeburg, 1999; Cassidy & Hurrell, 1995).

Framing the missing person as a good person who will be missed includes emphasizing the personality and personal life of the missing person as significant. In the episodes analyzed, a missing person may be described as intelligent, loving, dependable, and/or caring. There is talk of the person’s occupation or hobbies. He or she may be a teacher or financial analyst or even an “avid runner”. Often significant personal relationships are identified to help portray the missing person as someone viewers can identify with. The missing person is labeled a mother, child, sibling, and/or friend. Family members interviewed in Study 2 agree that a pleasant back story is essential for securing media coverage. They believe that viewers are drawn to stories about good people living good lives who go missing. One is most likely to get coverage if she is a mother or if he is a student with a bright future. These findings support Nils Christie’s description of the ideal victim as “deserving of sympathy” (1986). Cavender, Bond-Maupin, and Jurik (1999) explain that it is important to provide details about a person’s life in order to establish his or her worth in the eyes of the audience. Through the use of thick descriptions of personality traits and frequent reference to personal life details, it appears that establishing a missing person’s worth is very important and may help to grab and keep the audience’s attention as well as help form judgments that the missing person is worthy of our attention and sympathy.

Framing of the missing person as a victim is accomplished through the emphasis of the person’s defenselessness and vulnerabilities. Medical conditions like cerebral palsy and pregnancy are referred
to as vulnerabilities or risk factors. Simply being young is associated with defenselessness. Also highlighting a person’s defenselessness, are descriptions of terror felt at the time of abduction. Family members interviewed agree, that with young children, their lack of control makes them defenseless. According to Christie (1986), one of the most important ways to legitimize someone as an ideal crime victim is to prove him or her to be innocent and defenseless. Joel Best (1987) explains that, regarding missing children, it is an understanding that children are innocent and powerless and thus face great risks when they are missing. Thus, this frame aligns with previous notions of ideal victims.

The third research question seeks to describe the differences in the experiences of families of high-profile missing persons when compared to families of low-profile missing persons. High-profile families report having the time and resources to make informed and effective attempts at gaining media attention for their loved ones cases. They are able to organize search events and maintain a media presence. Lower-profile families report greater frustrations with the media. They have fewer resources at hand and so they are seeing less coverage. In turn, they are getting frustrated and limiting their future attempts. Even years after a disappearance, the experiences of the two types of families are still different. The high-profile cases see more spikes on anniversaries and at vigils. Family members of low-profile missing persons have to actively seek out media attention on these occasions. In contrast, the media sometimes contacts the families of high-profile cases prior to an event.

This all leads one to conclude that an “ideal missing person” really does exist, at least in terms of media coverage. That ideal missing person is female and White. She is likely attractive and has a pleasant personality and personal life. She is probably young and assumedly defenseless to her situation. Greer’s (2007) hierarchy of victimization also applies, as the most ideal missing persons receive the greatest amount of media coverage while those at the bottom of the hierarchy receive little, if any, media attention.
Other significant findings emerge from the interviews with the family members of missing persons. One of the most surprising revelations from the interviews is that getting media coverage for a missing person is a job that falls almost completely on the shoulders of the missing person’s family. No one is doing it for them. The police are not initiating coverage and reporters aren’t banging down their doors. Trying to get coverage for a loved one’s case is a full time job that brings many stresses and frustrations with it. This reality suggests that families of missing persons need help getting media coverage. They need knowledgeable advocates to help them fight for coverage. There also needs to be better support systems in place to help the families of missing persons as they navigate through the web of trying to find media coverage.

This research also suggests a connection between police involvement and media attention. There appears to be a cycle happening. Police involvement leads to media coverage, which in turn lends pressure to more police involvement, and so on. Thus, it is a responsibly for law enforcement agents and media agents to acknowledge that their efforts matter. Families of missing persons may be better served if some sort of liaison exists between police and media resources.

The finding with the most potential for immediate impact is that all the families have advice that they want to share with other families of missing persons. They want other families to know that it is important to act quickly and to demand media attention. They have tips on how to make the most out of any media coverage they do obtain. They rank media outlets by importance and tell of how to use those outlets efficiently and effectively. They suggest using the people around them for help and support. Most importantly, they remind the families to keep hope alive. These families’ voices and advice are important and they need to be heard by other families going through similar experiences. An educated and well-intentioned effort needs to be made to gather this advice and to make it easily available to other families struggling to find their ways through the media maze.
B. Limitations

There are some limitations of this research. In Study 1, only two categories of race were used for comparison to national statistics: Black and White/Hispanic/other. Specific details of the coverage of other races, including Hispanic, were not focused on during this study. This study aimed to align racial categories with those identified by the Federal Bureau of Investigation’s NCIC reports. Currently the FBI counts all Hispanic missing persons as white, and so national statistic comparison numbers were not available for this part of the population. It is likely that many unique patterns of coverage exist for Hispanic missing persons as well as other missing persons but were not uncovered in this study.

In Study 2, families of missing persons were interviewed regardless of what year their loved one went missing. It should be noted that experiences of families with a loved one who went missing in the 1990’s are likely very different from the experiences of families whose loved ones disappeared more recently. These sharp differences are due to the lack of social media options in decades past. Now families, high and low-profile, can make their own media campaigns using online and social media resources. Some of the lower-profile families may have seen different outcomes had they had access to social media.

Along the same lines, it should be noted that most families place less importance on television and newspaper coverage now that online and social media exists. Thus, a family from the 1990’s and a family from today may have seen the same number of hours of television coverage, but the earlier family may be more frustrated with the amount received. Without all the other media options, a lack of television or newspaper coverage was a great source of frustration for those families.

This research compared the experiences of high and low-profile cases. There is, however, a good possibility that a whole subset of missing persons are missing from this research: the no-profile cases. There may be missing people out there that literally no one knows are missing. I asked a woman
who does a lot of advocacy for missing persons if she thinks there are still people out there getting no coverage and she said: “Definitely”. She estimates as many as 25 percent of missing persons are getting no coverage at all. She believes this group consists mainly of people being human trafficked and drug dealers or prostitutes, in other words, people no one is looking for because no one knows they are missing. She knows there are some families out there without television or internet access who have not heard of all the organizations that are out there to help now. There are also families who avoid media attention because they are worried about how they will be perceived. They may have skeletons in their closet that they do not want the media to focus on. She also believes that the Black community is not making an effort to get their voices heard. They are hesitant to talk with or trust the media. On the positive side, she believes that the number of people receiving no coverage is getting smaller each year. This is due largely in part to organizations dedicated to the plight of the underrepresented missing person. Organizations like Black and Missing but Not Forgotten, and the Cue Center, as well as volunteers like herself, make it their mission to find and reach out to these lowest-profile families.

I also had the opportunity to speak with the founder of an organization dedicated to helping families of the missing. She agrees that there is a subset of missing persons out there receiving absolutely no media coverage. She predicts that population is made up of runaways, the elderly, and the mentally ill. She also agrees that the only way to get coverage for a case is to work hard for it and stay involved. Families need to be creative in their efforts. She believes that reputable organizations like her own are a great resource for families who do not know how to draw media attention or who are unfamiliar or uncomfortable with social media sites.

C. **Suggestions for Future Research**

Media coverage of missing persons cases is an area not frequently addressed in scholarly literature. Future studies expanding our knowledge base on this topic could greatly benefit those
working in the fields of criminal justice, social work, and communications, among others. The findings from this research project suggest many potential outlets for future research on media coverage of missing persons cases. As previously stated, this research was limited by the categorization of missing persons as White or Black. In alignment with FBI categories, Hispanic missing persons were lumped into the White category in this research. A future study could focus the effort on analyzing Hispanic missing persons as a separate population. Ideally, the FBI will eventually include Hispanic as its own category. In the meantime, interviews with family members of missing Hispanic persons could provide insight into the unique experience seeking media coverage for the Hispanic and missing in the United States.

One area only briefly addressed in this research is the role that physical attractiveness plays in obtaining media coverage. Families believe that a missing person’s physical appearance plays an important role in determining how much media coverage he or she gets. Future studies could explore this relationship. It may be useful to measure people’s perceptions of attractiveness of victims and then relate those scores to amount of coverage received.

This research did not specifically focus on class or social economic status of the missing persons or their families. But it would not be unreasonable to assume that class does play a role in how much coverage a case receives. Findings from the interviews with family members suggest that social media plays a huge role in media campaigns today. Family members need to have access to computers, the education to use them effectively, and the financial resources to maintain the campaign. These privileges tend to align more with the lifestyles of the middle and upper class. Many of the struggles that families of low-profile missing persons are experiencing may be directly related to class issues. A future study could seek to measure or elaborate upon the role that social economic status plays in media coverage of missing persons.
It was surprising to find that the media often frames the missing person as having secrets. It is the only frame that does not place the missing person in a positive light. Families of the missing felt strongly that having a questionable past, including a criminal history or previous drug use, severely hurt ones chances of receiving media coverage. It is possible that the knowledge of an unsavory lifestyle deters police and media from getting involved. On the other hand, if that information comes out further into an investigation or can be linked to the disappearance, maybe it increases the story’s newsworthiness. A future study could seek to identify when a secret goes from being a hindrance to becoming newsworthy.

Most importantly, we need to find out more about the completely “missing” missing: the no-coverage group of missing persons. It would be beneficial to find out what circumstances keep a person from receiving any media coverage at all. A future study could seek to identify what “types” of missing persons cases are falling into the no-coverage category. In-depth interviews with experts and advocates in the field may suggest potential routes for increasing awareness of non-covered cases.

D. Summary

Not all missing people are created equal in the United States, especially when it comes to media coverage. Through the selection of specific cases and the emphasis of certain personal attributes, the media frames the issue of missing persons. The media tells us who goes missing in the United States, and ultimately who is worth looking for. Nils Christie (1986) coined the term “ideal victim” suggesting that a person is most likely legitimized as a crime victim if they are female, very young, or very old. The ideal victim is innocent, defenseless, blameless, and deserving of sympathy. Previous research has neglected to apply the concept of the ideal victim to missing persons cases and it has ignored the experiences of the families of the missing. This research is the first of its kind in that it systematically
analyses how the media frames missing persons cases while also giving a voice to the family members left behind.

The analysis of 178 television newsmagazine episodes in Study 1 shows that White missing persons and female missing persons are over-represented and that Black missing persons and male missing persons are under-represented in television coverage of missing person cases. Thus, the media is framing missing persons as a White and female issue. In the case that a missing person case does make it onto TV, the media is also consistently framing the media-worthy missing person in the following very specific ways: (1) She is attractive; (2) She is a good person who is missed; (3) She is a victim; and (4) She has secrets. Fourteen family members of missing persons were interviewed in Study 2 and their Sentiments echo the findings from Study 1. Using specific examples from their own experiences they justify their beliefs that the media frames the ideal missing person as white, female, beautiful, relatable, defenseless, vulnerable, and an all-around good person deserving of our attention.

Experiences with the media differ greatly between families of high-profile and families of low-profile cases. Families of high-profile cases are more actively seeking out media coverage and are receiving coverage across a greater variety of outlets. A cycle seems to be created where high-profile families are doing more work, so they are seeing more results, so they are doing more work. Low-profile families are seeing fewer results and are getting discouraged. Families of low-profile cases share more feelings of frustration with the police and are able to explain a link between police involvement and media coverage.

The interviews with the family members of missing persons also provide many other significant and impactful findings. All interviewees agree that getting media coverage for a missing person is a responsibility that falls most heavily on the family members. The only media attention most cases are getting is the media coverage the families are creating. Possibly the most influential finding of the
interviews with the family members is that these families have important advice to give to other families of missing persons. They offer specific suggestions on how to generate and keep media interest in a case, how to cope emotionally with media-related stressors, and where to find help when needed. The families believe that media coverage matters. They know its potential and have seen it work, and so they desperately want that coverage for their missing loved one.

Although the current state of affairs regarding coverage of missing persons is unequal, unfair, and sometimes discouraging, the findings of this study are hopeful. It is exciting to think of how many potential and impactful studies can be developed in the field that could contribute to our body of knowledge regarding media coverage of missing persons cases. What is most encouraging is that, even as they are suffering through their own personal tragedies, the families of the missing are willing and excited to share their experiences in an effort to help other families going through the same thing. I am optimistic that as more attention is drawn to the disparate state of media affairs for the missing, people will take notice and changes will be made.
APPENDIX A

University of Illinois at Chicago

Volunteers wanted for a research study

Media Experiences of Families of Missing Persons

The purpose of this study is to gather information in order to present and evaluate the experiences of families of low-profile missing persons as compared to the experiences of families of high-profile missing persons in regards to their interactions with media outlets. In-depth interviews with families of missing persons will provide insight into the phenomenon of the ideal missing person and its impact on the families of missing persons.

Persons 18 years of age and older who have a family member who is, or was at one time, considered a missing person are eligible for this study.

This research will be performed at a location agreed upon by subject and investigator. Possible venues include, but are not limited to, the UIC library private rooms, subject’s home, coffee shops, and public libraries. You will need to come to the study site 1-3 times over the next 12 months and each of those visits will take about 90 minutes.

This research is being conducted by Julie Mescher, a doctoral candidate from the department of Criminology, Law, and Justice, under the direction of her advisor John Hagedorn. For further information please contact Julie Mescher at burkh1@uic.edu or (815) 354-3969.
APPENDIX B

University of Illinois at Chicago
Research Information and Consent for Participation
in Social Behavioral Research

Media Experiences of Families of Missing Persons

Julie Mescher, a doctoral candidate from the department of Criminology, Law, and Justice, is doing research on the experiences of families of missing persons regarding experiences with media outlets. You have been asked to participate in the research because you are 18 years of age or older and are a family member of a person who is, or was, missing. Your participation in this research is voluntary. Your decision whether or not to participate will not affect your current or future dealings with the University of Illinois at Chicago. If you decide to participate, you are free to withdraw at any time without affecting that relationship. Approximately 20 subjects may be involved in this research at UIC.

This study will present and evaluate the experiences of families of missing persons in regards to their interactions with media outlets. In-depth interviews with families of missing persons will provide insight into the phenomenon of the ideal missing person and its impact on the families of missing persons.

This research will be performed at a location agreed upon by subject and investigator. Possible venues include, but are not limited to, the UIC library private rooms, subject’s home, coffee shops, and public libraries. You will need to come to the study site 1-3 times over the next 12 months and each of those visits will take about 90 minutes. The interviewer will audio-record interviews.

To the best of our knowledge, the things you will be doing in this study have no more risk of harm than you would experience in everyday life. However, there are the following potential risks for subjects: 1) The topic of interest for this research is a sensitive topic. The researcher will give referrals to counselors, agencies, or support groups if requested. 2) Family members may be hesitant to speak to specifics of the case if it is still an open case. The interviewer will make every effort to keep the focus on interactions with media agencies. 3) Maintaining privacy and confidentiality may be difficult because of the small population that is the focus of this study and because personal referrals from current participants will be used to gather more participants. Family members and missing persons will be referred to by pseudonyms and will be described realistically using race, gender, and geographical location (Midwest). Current participants will not be informed by the investigator whether or not their referrals join this study.

Taking part in this research study may not directly benefit you, but the researcher may learn new things that will help others. Ideally this research will draw attention to the current state of media coverage of missing person cases. These findings may serve as a guide for families, advocates, press agents, lawyers, and other people working with the media agencies during the course of a missing person investigation. Most importantly, this research may empower families of missing persons.

The people who will know that you are a research subject are members of the research team. Otherwise, information about you will only be disclosed to others with your written permission, or if necessary to protect your rights or welfare or if required by law. Study information which identifies you and the consent form signed by you will be looked at and/or copied for checking up on the research by: UIC OPRS and/or State of Illinois Auditors. All subject identifiers will be destroyed immediately after study completion.

If you decide to participate, you are free to withdraw your consent and discontinue participation at any time. The researchers also have the right to stop your participation in this study without your consent if they believe it is in your best interests. If you have any questions or concerns about this study or your part in it please contact the researcher Julie Mescher at (815)354-3969 or email address: jburkh1@uic.edu or her dissertation advisor John Hagedorn at (312) 413-2472 or email address: lhuk@uic.edu.

If you feel you have not been treated according to the descriptions in this form, or if you have any questions about your rights as a research subject, including questions, concerns, complaints, or to offer input, you may call the Office for the Protection of Research Subjects (OPRS) at 312-996-1711 or 1-866-789-6215 (toll-free) or e-mail OPRS at uicirb@uic.edu.

I have read (or someone has read to me) the above information. I have been given an opportunity to ask questions and my questions have been answered to my satisfaction. I agree to participate in this research. I will be given a copy of this signed and dated form.


Consent Document for Media Missing Persons, version 2, 11/18/12 page 1 of 1
APPENDIX C:

Media Experiences of Families of Missing Persons

Interview Guide

1. Demographic information
   - Date
   - Name of interviewee
   - Location
   - Relationship to missing person
   - More comfortable identifying missing family member as white or black as defined in study

2. Background information (circumstances surrounding disappearance)
   - Location
   - Date of disappearance
   - Give a brief description of disappearance (how, why, who, etc.)
   - Was reported to police or missing person agency? (when and how, or why not)

3. Quantity and quality of media attempts and interactions
   - Attempts at contact made by family
     - What media outlets (TV, paper, magazine, internet) did you try to contact (when and how)?
     - Any attempts that you know of by police or other agencies?
     - What was the result of attempts?
     - If interviewed, describe content of interview (questions asked, responses, general perceived demeanor/interest level of interviewer)
     - Were any pictures/videos offered/accepted? If so describe
   - Attempts at contact made by media outlets
     - What media outlets tried to contact you (when and how)?
     - Any attempts that you know of to contact police or other agencies?
     - What was the result of attempts?
     - If interviewed, describe content of interview (questions asked, responses, general perceived demeanor/interest level of interviewer)
     - Were any pictures/videos offered/accepted? If so describe

4. Impacts of coverage/non-coverage
   - Emotional responses of the family
   - Perceived impact on police investigation (interest level, search ad response, etc.)

5. Did you find alternative routes for publicity?

6. Additional information you would like to share that you feel would be beneficial to this line of research
REFERENCES


## VITA

**Juliane C. Mescher**

### EDUCATION/DEVELOPMENT

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>University</th>
<th>City, State</th>
<th>Date</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>University of Illinois at Chicago</td>
<td>Chicago, IL</td>
<td>July 2014</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ph.D. in Criminology, Law, &amp; Justice</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>University of Illinois at Chicago</td>
<td>Chicago, IL</td>
<td>May 2004</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Masters in Social Work</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bradley University</td>
<td>Peoria, IL</td>
<td>May 2002</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>BA, Psychology/Criminal Justice/Sociology</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Summa cum Laude</td>
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### CERTIFICATIONS

- Illinois Type 73 Certificate- School Service Personnel
- Illinois Licensed Social Worker

### EXPERIENCE

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<tr>
<th>Location</th>
<th>Position</th>
<th>Years</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>SANDRIDGE SCHOOL DISTRICT 172</td>
<td>School Social Worker EC-8</td>
<td>2004-2008</td>
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<tr>
<td>GUARDIAN ANGEL HOME</td>
<td>Foster Care Caseworker Intern</td>
<td>August 2002-May 2003</td>
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<tr>
<td>PEORIA JUVENILE COURT SERVICES</td>
<td>Juvenile Probation Intern</td>
<td>Peoria, IL 2001</td>
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### PRESENTATIONS

- Mescher, Julie (2011). Have you seen me?: Understanding how the “ideal victim” is framed in crime blog coverage of missing persons cases. Paper presented at the International Crime, Media, & Popular Culture Studies Conference at Indiana State University.

### PROFESSIONAL ASSOCIATIONS

- American Society of Criminology (ASC)
- Midwestern Criminal Justice Association (MCJA)
- Illinois Association of School Social Workers (IASSW)

### COMMUNITY INVOLVEMENT

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Location</th>
<th>Position</th>
<th>Years</th>
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<tr>
<td>SEARCH VOLUNTEER</td>
<td>Volunteer participant in ground search for missing person</td>
<td>Yorkville, IL July 2007</td>
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<tr>
<td>SEARCH VOLUNTEER</td>
<td>Volunteer participant in ground search for missing person</td>
<td>Romeoville, IL November 2007</td>
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<tr>
<td>RAINBOWS COORDINATOR</td>
<td>Coordinated and facilitated support groups for grieving children</td>
<td>Lynwood, IL 2004-2008</td>
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