Independent® Women's Forum

Testimony to the United States House of Representatives
Committee on the Oversight and Reform
Subcommittee on Civil Rights and Civil Liberties

Hearing: "The Neglected Epidemic of Missing BIPOC Women and Girls"

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Chairman Raskin, Ranking Member Mace, and Members of the Committee thank you for inviting me to appear today.

My name is Patrice Onwuka, and I am the director of the Center for Economic Opportunity at Independent Women's Forum. We are a nonprofit organization, committed to increasing the number of women who value free markets and personal liberty. We advance policies that enhance people's freedom, opportunities, and well-being. My work focuses on expanding opportunities for women, particularly women of color.

However, we cannot begin to discuss the solutions to economic mobility and personal liberty and freedom when so many of our daughters, granddaughters, sisters, and students disappear into the darkness every year.

According to missing person and unidentified person data provided by the National Crime Information Center, 2020 closed with 89,637 people still missing. Of the 543,018 missing person cases that were opened, thankfully 88% were purged because the missing person was located by law enforcement, returned home, or the file was determined to be invalid.

When we examine the demographics of the 543,000 reported missing person cases, trends appear. Two out of three (67%) of them are juveniles under the age of 17. About half are female (49.5%) and just over a third (37.3%) are people of color including Black, Asian, and Indian (Hispanics are included among white individuals). This is a noticeably higher proportion than in the larger **U.S. population**,

where non-White and non-Hispanic populations comprise a combined 20.6%. Among missing persons of color, the lion's share is black. Black females comprise 16.6% of all reported missing persons and a third of juvenile cases.

Of the 89,637 cases still open by the end of 2020, 35% were people of color (not including Hispanics) and 17% were females of color (not including Hispanics). A third (31.4%) were black and 15.5% were black females.

The circumstances under which a person went missing are available for just under half of the reported cases in 2020. The data signal that among juveniles–the largest share of reported missings persons–a significant majority were coded as runaways (94.8%). Just 1% were coded as abductions by a non-custodial parent while abductions by strangers were extremely rare (.11%).

Missing black, Asian, and Indian women and girls is a serious challenge, and while I've gone through a lot of data, it's important to remember that the disappearance of just one child or one teenager can be devastating to a family and a community. Consider the example of Asha Degree, a 9-year-old girl from Shelby, North Carolina, who is still missing 22 years after her appearance on February 14, 2000. Today she would be 31 years old.

But thankfully, most missing persons are found or return home within a short period of time. However, that is little solace to the loved ones still waiting for their child, friend, or family member to be found.

Experts tell us that the first 48 hours following the disappearance of a child or individual are the most critical to finding her and returning her home. It's important to explore the role that families, communities, law enforcement, and the media play in helping to find that missing person.

We should also explore what causes juveniles to run away from home. We find that the home environment plays a significant role. Juveniles in vulnerable situations may perceive that fleeing is their best option, even if it is more dangerous. Abuse and socio-economic hardship contribute to the destabilization of the home. Public policy can only go so far in strengthening families. This is where civil society–churches and grassroots organizations that build human capital and empower individuals to be good parents, gainfully employed, and productive citizens–can help families to be strong.

Education is also key for many reasons. One of the negative impacts of pandemic lockdowns and school closures was that these policies kept more women and girls in vulnerable home situations. Virtual learning meant that students in abusive environments or situations were not detected and reported by adults such as teachers, guidance counselors, and nurses. A **study** analyzing data on over 39,000 kids found that physical abuse of school-aged children tripled between March and September of 2020. By comparison, other studies have found no increase in child abuse of younger children as daycares and preschools largely remained open. Any discussion of missing, abused, or exploited women and girls must also start with the role that a good education and in-person learning provides.

Finding all missing persons, but especially girls and women of color should be a top priority. However, we should also engage in solutions that prevent them from disappearing.

Missing From the Headlines

Some missing person cases undoubtedly attract great national media attention, such as the case of Gabby Petito, a young white woman whose disappearance sparked a nationwide manhunt. Gabby's father **implored** that just as much coverage be given "for other people, too. This same type of heightened awareness should be continued for everyone —everyone." Many non-white disappearances do not garner the same national attention as Elizabeth Smart or Petito. These missed opportunities could be the key to closing more cases and reuniting missing girls with their families.

It is also important to recognize that at the local level, some missing person cases do get attention and are solved. For example, **Jashyah Moore**, a 14-year-old New Jersey girl, vanished on October 14, 2021. She was found in New York City one month later according to news reports. A **12-year-old Bronx girl** who went missing around January 10, 2022, was found a few days later while doing a Facebook live on the famous red stairs in Times Square.

These stories of minority girls who disappeared may not have made national headlines, but they did make local headlines. By acting quickly to report the missing children, law enforcement and authorities working with the family and community were able to track the minors down and reunite them with their families. They also illustrate that–contrary to popular belief–most missing cases are resolved.

Reasons Behind Disappearances

Missing people tend to be juveniles who are leaving home by choice. According to **data** among runaway youth, girls tend to run away more often than boys. Youth of color also are overrepresented among runaway youth. The **National Runaway Safeline** found that about a quarter (23%) identified as black or African American.

Rising crime, violence, and abuse in homes, schools, and communities have a harsh negative impact on American children. The **Justice Department** reported on a national study of children finding that "almost 40 percent of American children were direct victims of 2 or more violent acts and 1 in 10 were victims of violence 5 or more times." Children are also exposed to violence at home as nearly 1 in 10 saw one family member assault another family member, and more than a quarter had been exposed to family violence during their life.

Abuse at home is a common reason that juveniles go missing. According to the **Center for Diseases Control**, "8.5 million women (7% of all U.S. women) reported experiencing physical violence, rape (or being made to penetrate someone else), or stalking from an intimate partner in their lifetime and that they first experienced these or other forms of violence by that partner before the age of 18." Among children, about **1 in 4** girls will experience child sexual abuse at some point in childhood. Overwhelmingly, child sexual abuse is perpetrated by someone the child or child's family knows.

According to a **report** from the Justice Department, black teens are three times more likely to be victims of reported child abuse or neglect, and over 40% of runaway and homeless youth are sexually abused before they leave their homes.

Other factors contributing to adolescents being exposed to abuse and violence include intimate partner violence, alcohol problems and drug abuse in the family, not living with both biological parents, associating with deviant or delinquent peers, and low household income and educational attainment.

Pandemic-related educational and economic disruption exacerbated factors that lead to abuse and domestic violence. A recent **study** by the Council on Criminal Justice estimated that the imposition of lockdowns early in the pandemic led to an 8% increase in domestic violence. Victims found themselves at home for extended periods of time with perpetrators. Factors such as unemployment, the stress of childcare and homeschooling, increased financial insecurity, and increased use of alcohol and other substances as coping mechanisms contributed to increasingly more violent environments.

Importantly, as juveniles and adults were confined at home, they were disconnected from family members, friends, colleagues, neighbors, and others who might have spotted the signs of abuse and reported it or intervened. This is especially true for students in abusive households. Prolonged virtual learning allowed many juveniles to not only fall behind, but to fall through the cracks. They were isolated from the teachers, coaches, counselors, and other adults who would normally be able to observe signs of abuse and report them.

Sex Trafficking

Missing girls and women may end up in the dark world of sex trafficking, where they may be forced to sell access to their bodies, or they may be sold or traded to other traffickers. Some women are lured into sex trafficking in hopes of escaping their homes and current lives, for what they think will be a better life, for the offer of protection, and even adventure. According to **Polaris Project**, there are two important facts about child sex trafficking. First, most victims know and trust their traffickers, such as family members, friends and romantic partners. Second, victims with the vulnerabilities discussed earlier are targets for human trafficking.

Federally funded human trafficking task forces opened a total of **2,515** suspected incidents of human trafficking for investigation between January 1, 2008, and June 30, 2010. Some 40% percent involved prostitution of a child or child sexual exploitation. Blacks and black girls comprised a **significant proportion** of sex trafficking victims and in some specific counties, nearly all of the girls in the juvenile justice systems who are sex trafficked are blacks.

Law enforcement confirms that missing minors who are recovered were at risk based on factors such as reported sexual and/or physical abuse as well as medical and mental health conditions. Often, they are not abducted by strangers.

Research by the **Urban Institute** that attempts to estimate the size of the underground commercial sex market in the United States, confirmed some of these troubling truths. For example, some prostitutes had family members or friends who exposed them to the sex trade at a young age. This is abusive by itself, but then strongly influences and normalizes the person's decision to participate in prostitution. Friends and acquaintances are also known to become pimps for those trafficked, and the victims may not realize they are being trafficked the right way until they are into sex work.

In addition, solicitation has moved online due to the proliferation of social media and websites. Vulnerable juveniles are even more accessible online.

Sadly, at our southern border, a significant number of girls and women are also trafficked as cartels and human traffickers exploit the weakness in our border security and immigration policies.

Solutions

Policing

Our criminal justice system is not perfect, but law enforcement still plays a significant role in this conversation. Police lead investigations into missing persons, but they act on the information and leads that family, friends, and community members can provide. It's important that there be trust between police and the community for that kind of information-sharing to occur early on.

Police can also provide preventive help by in how they respond to rape, assault, and violence allegations. As we know, women and girls who are victims of sexual abuse are at particularly high-risk of going missing. Research **shows** that by arresting offenders police can reduce the risk that they will re-abuse and can improve victims' safety. With the offender gone, a victim may be less likely to leave her home and find herself in a worse situation.

We must ensure that police department are fully funded and have the staffing and resources they need to prevent and investigate crimes. Defunding the police is not productive towards this goal. According to a 2019 **report**, police departments have struggled with hiring since the 2007-09 recession, and the anti-police rhetoric that exploded during the past two years has not helped police morale or recruitment.

Also, spiking violent crime across the United States today has implications for minority women and girls who are victims of domestic violence. Repeat offenders, many of whom are out on bail, probation, or parole, are frequently behind rising violence. Currently, **jail populations** and **prison populations** are down, leaving more violent criminals in homes and communities. Combined, violent offenses that include sexual assault comprised approximately one-third of rearrests. Unproductive justice reforms that effectively reduce criminal penalties and prosecutions of repeat offenders must be reconsidered.

Education

Preventing girls and women from leaving their homes is a difficult challenge that likely requires many solutions. Poverty, limited educational and work opportunities, alcoholism, and abuse all increase the likelihood that a young person will be exposed to violence and/or will become missing. On the flip side, greater educational opportunity and attachment can reduce the risk of many bad outcomes, including the risk of going missing. According to the **CDC**, attachment to school is a factor that protects a young person against dating violence along with good grades, high verbal IQ, and a positive relationship with one's mother. When in school, in person, vulnerable girls are also less likely to fall through the cracks as has happened during the pandemic.

The best way to ensure the maximum number of students find strong attachment to a school is to offer families and students the opportunity to choose the best school for them. A student from a poor neighborhood should not be confined to an underperforming school. School choice gives young people access to charter schools, parochial, private schools, and other options besides public schools that offer challenging curricula and safe environments where they can learn.

Civil Society

Civil society can be a great ally in strengthening families to address immediate needs as well as long term issues. The church, particularly the Black church, has been a force in communities, providing programming, mentorship, educational support, and moral guidance to young people. Other community-based, grassroots organizations aid individuals in challenging circumstances in developing the skills, knowledge, and tools to combat homelessness and unemployment, build economic independence, raise children, overcome substance abuse, build strong marriages, and contribute to their communities. They provide role models, often from the same communities, who serve as guides and mentors to young people.

The Media

Paying greater media attention to all stories of missing persons can help protect our vulnerable. Increasing TV segments may help solve more missing cases and new cases more quickly. However, exposure will not prevent our vulnerable from disappearing. Working to keep kids in school, strengthen families, and address the root causes of why they disappear requires public, private, and community commitment.