

## Understanding the Factors of Children Missing/Running Away from Home in Malaysia

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### Abstract

Statistics issued by the Royal Malaysian Police show that the number of missing children cases in 2009 was 53, while the figure increased to 54 cases in 2010. The increase in the number of missing children from 2009 to 2010 remains unexplained. The main purpose of this paper is to explore the factors and reasons why children go missing in Malaysia. The study was conducted using qualitative methods. Data were collected through in-depth interviews using semi-structure questions. Respondents were selected from the missing children list obtained from the Criminal Investigation Department, Royal Malaysian Police (RMP), Bukit Aman, for the years 2009 and 2010. Findings of the study classify the reasons into two main factors, the push factors and the pull factors, that cause children to go missing from home. Push factors consist of three main components: the individual, the family and the living environment. While the pull factors were divided into two components: peers influence and the community environment. We conclude that the majority of missing/run away children come from family conflicts. Thus, we propose well-structured prevention and interventions programs in order to protect and prevent children from running away from home.

*Keywords:* Missing/runaway children; push and pull factors; dysfunctional family and peer pressure

### Abstrak

Statistik yang dilaporkan oleh Polis Diraja Malaysia menunjukkan bahawa jumlah kes kanak-kanak yang hilang pada tahun 2009 ialah sebanyak 53 orang dan jumlah ini meningkat kepada 54 orang pada tahun 2010. Peningkatan jumlah kanak-kanak yang hilang daripada tahun 2009 kepada 2010 tidak diketahui puncanya. Tujuan utama kajian ini ialah meneroka faktor mengapa kanak-kanak hilang di Malaysia. Kajian ini telah dikendalikan menggunakan pendekatan kualitatif. Pengumpulan data melalui temu bual mendalam dengan menggunakan soal selidik semi-struktur. Kanak-kanak yang dikenal pasti dalam kajian ini adalah berdasarkan kes yang dilaporkan kepada Jabatan Siasatan Jenayah, Polis Diraja Malaysia, Bukit Aman pada tahun 2009 dan 2010. Dapatan kajian menunjukkan bahawa terdapat dua faktor utama yang menyebabkan kanak-kanak hilang daripada rumah, iaitu faktor penolak dan faktor penarik. Faktor penolak merangkumi tiga komponen: individu, keluarga dan persekitaran tempat tinggal. Manakala faktor penarik dibahagikan kepada dua komponen, iaitu pengaruh rakan sebaya dan persekitaran komuniti setempat. Rumusan kajian ini ialah majoriti kanak-kanak hilang/lari daripada rumah berpunca masalah konflik keluarga. Oleh itu, kajian ini mencadangkan program pencegahan dan intervensi yang berstruktur dapat melindungi dan mencegah kanak-kanak hilang/lari daripada rumah.

*Kata kunci:* Kanak-kanak hilang/lari daripada rumah; faktor penolak dan penarik; ketidakfungsian keluarga dan pengaruh rakan sebaya

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### 1.0 INTRODUCTION

Cases of missing children as reported by the media are worrying many individuals in Malaysia. The statistics from Royal Malaysian Police show that the number of missing children cases in 2009 was 50; and increased to 54 cases in 2010. Although only

a modest increase, the difference for the increase from the year 2009 to 2010 remains unknown. Past studies on missing children indicate that there are many factors contributing to the phenomenon. Among the reasons that children go missing/run away from home include the death of family members, parents' separation or divorce (Rotheram-Borus, 1996), and violence at

home (Milburn *et al.*, 2006). Springer's (2001) findings further suggest that children run away from home to escape from physical abuse by family members. Exposures to family members' bad habits like substance abuse or alcoholism tend to pressure children to run away from home (Teare, Authier & Peterson, 1994).

The period where the child goes missing poses dangers and risks to the child and can affect their well-being. During the missing period the children may be exposed to drugs, alcohol, sexual violence, and physical violence that may result in poor mental health (Chun & Springer, 2005; Taylor *et al.*, 2004; Kidd & Carroll, 2007). In addition, the children may feel the direct impact of physical and emotional distress due to lack of family support, or financial constraints. There are 3 theoretical framework applied in this study based on the definition of missing children by Wilson (2000), Sedlak *et al.* (2002) and Biehal *et al.* (2003). According to Wilson (2000), there are eight categories of missing children/runaways, they are: 1) missing from home or chased out from the house, 2) abduction by strangers, 3) abduction in the family, 4) oppression from guardians, 5) leaving without permission, 6) missing due to catastrophes, 7) "false alarm" disappearances, and 8) sexual harassment. However, Sedlak *et al.* (2002) categorizes missing children/runaways into four types, namely: 1) kidnapping within the family, 2) abduction by strangers, 3) children running away from home and 4) children chased out from the house. On the other hand, Biehal *et al.* (2003) suggests a continuum in defining missing children ranging from children missing willingly to those missing unintentionally. Thus, an in-depth study of the factors contributing to missing children is needed to help the government and the parties concerned to resolve these issues.

## ■2.0 OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

The main objective of this study is to explore the factors why children missing and run aways from home in Malaysia.

## ■3.0 METHOD

This study used qualitative methods to analyse why children go missing/run aways from home. The descriptive approach is used based on the following question: "what are the contributing factors and backgrounds of children who go missing/running away from home?" The phenomenological approach was deemed most suited to draw out responses to the question of the study. Phenomenology approach focuses on the subjective experience of respondents (Creswell, 2008). The experiences and information collected were then aggregated. This study examined 104 missing children aged 12 years and below, whose cases have been reported to the Royal Malaysian Police in 2009 and 2010. However, for this study carried out in 2011, face to face interviews were conducted only on respondents for 53 of the cases. We were not able to identify respondents for the other 51 cases as they have moved out from the address which they provided to the police.

The researcher categorized the location of the study into four divisions i.e. Northern Zone (Perlis, Kedah, Pulau Pinang, and Perak); Central Zone (Selangor, Kuala Lumpur); Southern zone (Melaka and Johor); Eastern zone (Pahang and Terengganu) and East Malaysia zone (Sabah). Two sets of semi-structured interviews were conducted with the respondents. The first set of questions related to the respondents' background and that of their parents' or guardians'. The second set comprised verbatim interviews with the parents/care givers, verbatim interviews with the children, and the observer's remarks.

## ■4.0 FINDINGS

### 4.1 Profile of Respondents

Respondents of this study were comprised of 54.7 percent boys and 45.3 percent girls. Of the sample, 74 percent were Malays, 7 percent Chinese, 7 percent Indians, 8 percent Indonesians and 4 percent from the Iban tribe. As for the age breakdown, 45.3 percent were 12 years old, 13.2 percent were 13 years old and 11.3 percent were 14 years old. 81 percent of the respondents were still schooling at the time of the study except for 19 percent who were not in school. Among them were children with learning disabilities. Only 2 percent of children with learning disabilities were in special school, while 6 percent were waiting to meet the age requirement to attend school.

In terms of the children's setting, 23.4 percent stayed with their parents, 13.2 percent were staying with single mothers, 11.3 percent lived with foster parents, 9.4 percent lived with their grandmothers and 3.8 percent lived with their fathers and stepmothers. A total of 18.9 percent of the children were living in Child Care institutions; government run special schools and privately owned orphanages. Result of the study shows that most caretakers had incomes between RM 500 to RM 2000 per month. As much as 26.4 percent of the respondents lived in Projek Perumahan Rakyat Miskin Tegar (PPRT) flats provided by the local government. Nearly 25 percent of the respondents either stayed in a single storey terrace house or double storey terrace house, while 17 percent lived in villages and 5.7 percent lived in bungalows. Nearly 3.8 percent were living in traditional long houses. In addition, 40 percent lived in two bedroom houses and 30.2 percent lived in 3 bedroom houses. Only a handful stayed in 4 bedroom houses (3.8%) and 5 bedroom houses (7.5%). The rest, 18.9 percent of the children, were living in dormitories at the time of the study.

### 4.2 Factors of Children Missing/Run Away from Home

This study identified two factors that caused children to go missing/run away from home, which are the push and pull factors. The three main push factors were the individual, the family and the neighborhood. On the other hand, the pull factors comprised peers' influence and community environment (such as shopping complex and cyber café). These factors were derived from thematic analysis from the interview transcripts (verbatim). Table 1 shows the rank of main factors leading to children go missing/run away from home in Malaysia.

The individual and family seemed to be the most powerful push factor. More respondents reported that parental conflict and divorce are the main reasons that children go missing/running away from home. Some children have turned to excessive entertainment and hanging out with friends when they don't get enough attention and affection at home.

Other studies from developed and developing countries have suggested the same push factors for children going missing/running away from home (Achakzai, 2011; Man, 2000; Matchindaa, 1999). Mercer (2009) suggested that the push factors can be controlled, as many lie within the family. Examples of controllable push factor are poverty, lack of parental guidance, large family size and lack of communication among family members. Apart from the push factors, there are pull factors that relate to children missing/running away from home, as listed in Table 1. The two main pull factors are peers and community environment (such as shopping complex and cyber café). Many children interviewed in the current study admitted that they left their houses without parents'/guardians' consent; just to be with their friends. Often they hang around with bad company and

spend their time playing video games at cyber cafes. Some children disclosed that they loiter around shopping complexes to pass time. Only a handful of them admitted running away with

their boyfriends. The two critical factors are discussed in more detail below.

**Table 1** Critical factors leading to children go missing/run aways

Critical factors	Category Factors	Frequency
<b>Push Factors</b>		
The Individual	• Enjoys excessive entertainment	17
	• Disobeys advice	14
	• Mischievous (steal/gamble) and moody	13
	• Fear of being remanded by parents upon returning home.	10
Family	• Conflict between parents	24
	• Parent's divorce	17
	• Lack of compassion among family members	15
	• Poverty within families (financial issues)	11
	• Physical and emotional abuse from parents	10
Residential atmosphere	• Unhealthy neighborhood	15
	• Lack of facilities in the house	14
<b>Pull Factors</b>		
Community environment	• Cyber Cafes and video games	15
	• Shopping Complexes	9
Fellow peers	• With bad company	27
	• Fleeing with boyfriend	5
	• Involved in drugs and pornographic materials	4

### 4.3 Push Factors - Family Factors

The current study shows that family factors seemed to be the main reason for children missing /running away. Based on Table 1, children run away from home due to family conflict (24 cases), and parents' divorce (17 cases). These findings agree with past studies (e.g., Doughty, 2011; Rees & Lees, 2005) who found that in many families, children go missing/running away from home due to domestic distresses. The following statement shows how parental conflict can cause children to run away from home.

*"Emmm ... when I see mom and dad quarrelling... I feel depress ... after that mom ends up crying ... I have my emotions too ... I feel angry and feel like scolding mom ... But I can't ... so I decide to run away from home ..." (child)*

Parental divorce seemed to put great pressure on children to leave the house.

*"From there, indeed it started from there ... I don't want to hate anyone ... But I have that feeling for one person...my father ... He caused everything - he is the cause to all that happened ... " (child)*

Many children felt deprived of parental affection (15 cases) as a result of family disputes. Busy single parents fail to provide the love and affection yearned for by their children as they are busy working hard to generate income for the family:

*"Indeed, father, love me less, as my parents are divorced, he stays very far ... near Klebang" (child)*

Many single mothers, especially, tend to work hard to supplement the family income. As such, they don't spend much time with their children. Children in such situations feel

neglected and desire to leave home. A single father shares this scenario as below.

*"Hmmm ... she ran away when there's no one at home ... I'm at work and get back around 7/8pm, or around 9.15 or 10.00pm when there's traffic jam. When I'm back she's already sleeping. Next morning she's out by 5am. We rarely see each other." (Father)*

In addition, poverty (11 cases) sometimes drives children out of their homes. Families with meager incomes find it hard to fulfil their children's wishes, such as getting a computer. The following conversation illustrates how children are willing to leave the house in order to get what they desire.

*Negotiator: You mean you wouldn't have runaway if you had a computer?*

*Respondents: Ya, If there's a computer.*

*Negotiator: Are there any other reasons?*

*Respondent: Em ... only that. Bicycle is expensive, Picci bike is expensive around 300. Computers are expensive too. Costs around 2000 more. But my father cannot afford it.*

Some children leave home due to emotional distress (10 cases). There were cases where children were scolded and criticized by parents. The statement below is from a mother whose son is always scolded by his father.

*"Sometimes when I'm home, I'll tell my son that even though papa scolds you, he loves you, he doesn't hate you. Once he asked the father where he was going and the father replied he was going to die, that upset him." (mother)*

In some situations, children were physically abused (10 cases) and the circumstances made them run away from home. In the following quote a child relates his experience of physical abuse by his father:

*"I had arguments with my family ... My father slapped me ... I felt helpless. Now I don't speak to him, and I still have not spoken to him until today ... I can't think far and cannot see his face... "(child).*

*"First wife is divorced ... the stepmother hit him, that's all he remembers ... not the other good things." (father)*

Studies show that if parents lack skills in minding and showing their affection, are harsh and inconsistent, then the children will be prone to deviant behaviour such as running away from home (Nicole DeGarmo *et al.*, 2004). For example, in one case a child honestly revealed being scolded and beaten by his father often, and his mother feels that's the correct way of parenting:

*"Mmm ... the cane is always there, if they repeat the behaviour they gonna get it. My husband calls them and if proven wrong they'll get it ... All our three children have been trained this way." (mother)*

Children in childcare institutions also related how they were physically abused by their fellow mates. Usually children run away from childcare institutions to escape from bullies (Mitchell, 2002). A foster mother related how her child was bullied by fellow mates at the institution:

*"He said its terrible over there, they have fights ... he was punched badly ... They are naughty there ... he vomited blood upon coming home ... his face was swollen ... not able to walk ... nose was bleeding. He was kicked from the back and he fell on his face ... "(mother)*

Respondents in the current study also indicated that children run away from home to escape from sexual abuse (2 cases). In one unproven case, a relative was the abuser while in another case, the child was sexually abused after she left the house. In addition, there were cases of children being abducted by those known to them; grandmother or mother (3 cases), neighbours (2 cases) and others (2 cases). Some children left home upon discovering that they were adopted (5 cases).

*"Upon learning that he is adopted, he would sit by the lane outside the house and stop passers-by telling them that he has been adopted. One day a neighbour told me about what he has been doing. I was shocked to hear that. I did not ill treat him. When I confronted him, why he is doing that ... he replied 'simply'" (foster mother)*

As such, the authorities should pay more attention to factors relating to family issues and intervene when necessary to curb children who desire to run away from home.

#### 4.4 Individual Factors

Some children enjoy the freedom and fun away from their homes. They feel their freedom is restricted at home and prefer going out. In a related case a child went missing after being scolded by his father.

*"Ya, he is strange ... when I scold him he gets upset. He makes me angry. He even wrote a letter asking me to pardon him. He troubles mama and papa. When we got up in the morning the gate was opened and the bicycle was missing ... and a letter was there." (Father)*

In addition, some children are easily influenced by strangers with their sweet talk. They are easily persuaded to leave home without realizing the consequences.

*"Ha, he trust anyone whom he just befriended within five minutes ... He trust others indisputably."*

*"He's like that. If he meets someone and is coaxed to go out, he will definitely go. He has been brave with strangers since young."*

Some of the missing children engaged in delinquent behavior like stealing, truancy and unruliness. For example, they pretend to go to school or the mosque for prayers but then they go elsewhere.

*"He cycles to Jusco from here ... during school hours he used to take a public bus and go to Jusco and come back to school by the bus when school ends. He goes to school by school bus and comes home in school bus, who knows what he does in between? (father)*

*"My son plays truant, I send him to school, when I turn back, he come back as well heading to Cyber Cafe ... "(mother)*

*"He told me that he is going to the mosque to pray. I was pleased to hear that..as men should go to the mosque. But when I went to check for him at the mosque, he was not there" (mother)*

In several cases, children try to sneak out of the house. Although they have been reminded not to leave the house, they sneak out, without their parents knowing. A boy relates how he snuck out of the house when his parents were not at home.

*"I just thought about it. Between 9:30–10pm I was watching TV, and suddenly I thought about leaving. I switched off the TV, went out, locked the door and threw the key in ... And I just left." (child)*

Parents have testified about their children stealing from their wallets. It is worrying that children develop the habit of taking money repeatedly without permission, though the amount stolen may not be much:

*"I didn't suspect anything amiss. I used to leave my money here and there. The 5 or 10 ringgit I give him is not enough. He wants 50 or 100 ringgit. When he needs more he starts to steal. At one time he stole 200 ringgit without me realizing." (father)*

There is a need to intervene children's personality factor. Children's personality can be molded to be resilient towards the negative push factor.

#### 4.5 Residential Atmosphere

The residential atmosphere also has an impact on children deciding to run away from home. Living environment comprises two factors: poor living conditions (15 cases) and also lack of privacy (14 Cases). Some children are unable to bear with not having the comforts their friends may have such as television, radio, and computers. They run away from home to places where they can find these comforts. In addition, children run away from home when they do not get privacy at home. The house they are living in may be small, with limited rooms. There may not be adequate space for family interaction or to do school work.

## 5.0 PULL FACTORS

### 5.1 Peer Influence

The majority of children run away from home due to the influence of peers. The results of this study are in agreement with a study undertaken by Achakzai (2011), that 89 percent of children run away from home due to peer influence. 27 children admitted that their peers persuaded them not to return home. Also, this study reports similar findings with a study by Brennan (2006), whereby most children run away from home, with their group, to stay at their peers' houses.

*"He recently left the house when he was in Form Two. Every night he goes out and talks with his friends. That night his friend told me that he has gone out to buy shirt. After that he did not return home.. His friend must have taken him... he just disappeared. With his friends he don't feel like coming home." (mom)*

During their absence from home these children were most likely exposed to bad habits like smoking and free mixing among themselves.

*"We sat near the waterfalls ... around 12 or 1 am we move to our friends' place. That night we didn't sleep. There were around 7 or 8 of us. We spent the night smoking and dancing to music." (child)*

In carrying out our research, we discovered that 4 children were involved in drug abuse and had access to pornographic materials. In fact, one of them confessed that he took the drug *ice*. Therefore, children involved in drug abuse should be addressed urgently before further damage is done to their health.

*"The second time, she joined the tomboy group. Every night they dress in black. She is the youngest member in that group, Std 5. The rest were teenagers. They reward members to recruit new members by giving them RM30." (mom)*

### 5.2 Community Environment

The study also revealed that children were missing from home because they were engrossed in cyber cafés and video games centers (15 cases), wandered around shopping complexes (9 cases), employed in part-time jobs (3 cases), were kidnapped by their maids (1 case) and engaged in mystical elements (1 case). Results of the study found that Cyber Cafes are the most popular places to be in, as there are many games for them to play. Most children revealed that they spent at least one to three hours a day at Cyber Cafes. Achakzai (2011) also found that the most interesting activity for children running away from home is video games.

## 6.0 CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATION

There are several factors that influence a child to leave home. Most of the children in the current study who went missing were from conflict between families and the influence of peers. The break-up of families brings about strings of other issues such as inadequate finances, inappropriate child rearing, lack of basic necessities and perhaps worst of all, the feeling of being neglected. This phenomenon has prompted children to take comfort in their peers of whom many have the same problems. Children look forward to having fun outside the house with

friends. Poor living conditions also make children want to spend time outside of their homes, especially at shopping complexes. Various parties should come together to tackle the issue of missing children/run aways from home. Parents, first and foremost, need to equip themselves with family therapy (counseling), parenting skills, stress management, communication and listening skills, as well as learning how to handle the threat of their children running away, in order to begin to address the nation's missing children problem. The researchers would like to recommend the social workers, community members and government should give more attention to these two critical factors for gradually reduced missing/runaway children from home. We also would like recommend the policy maker, stakeholders and local community could developed community care services. Managing care services for the children in community can encourage social interaction, intergenerational relationships and better monitoring system in the community setting. Thus community monitoring system enhances better future and wellbeing of missing children/run aways from home.

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