



2021 AMBER Alert

Family Roundtable Interviews

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About the 2021 Family/Sibling Roundtable

The 2021 family roundtable project focused on the experiences of siblings of missing and abducted children. The four cases included in this report occurred between 1999 and 2012, and were drawn from across the nation. One family member from each case participated in an interview conducted by a doctorate-level social scientist with more than two decades of experience in working with victims of crime and conducting qualitative interviews and focus groups.

Family members shared details on the experience of their sibling being abducted and later found deceased,

and revisiting and describing their experiences of loss and sadness. They provided invaluable information for law enforcement and all of those involved with cases of abducted and murdered children to carefully consider toward better work with and support of families, and more effective investigation of missing child cases.

The AMBER Alert Training and Technical Assistance Program (AATTAP) dedicates this report to the siblings who generously gave of their time and emotions in sharing their experiences, insights and practitioner recommendations for the 2021 Family Roundtable Interview project.





Purpose and Objectives

Purpose

The purpose of this report is to present information that can be helpful for law enforcement in building a better understanding of the experiences siblings have during the abduction, recovery, and criminal justice process for their abducted and murdered family member. The sibling interviews sought to achieve the following outcomes.

- Identify specific law enforcement and criminal justice challenges presented by family members of missing and abducted children.
- Integrate these challenges into future trainings developed and provided by AATTAP.

Interview participants shared their experiences about a number of dynamics.

- Their interactions with first responders
- The AMBER Alert process
- Their sibling's case investigation
- Notification of their sibling's death
- Their experience with the criminal justice process
- Working with victim advocates
- Working with prosecutors and their staff
- The complexity of court actions and resolutions

The interviews resulted in identifying numerous recommendations for law enforcement, criminal justice professionals, school personnel, media, and community members regarding how to better serve and support siblings of abducted and murdered children.

Interview Objectives

1. Through individual interviews, gather information about the sibling perspective on the missing and abducted child case and investigation.
2. Identify the siblings' experiences with the media, schools and communities; the siblings' involvement with the investigation and trial; and how information was shared with the siblings about their abducted siblings' case and investigation.
3. Identify specific recommendations for law enforcement, criminal justice professionals, school professionals, the media, and community members regarding the experiences of siblings with missing and abducted child cases.
4. Make recommendations to integrate the voices and experiences of victims, their siblings and other family members into AATTAP courses.

AATTAP's History of Working With Families of Missing and Abducted Children

AATTAP began working with surviving parents of missing or abducted children in 2007. The purpose of these roundtable events has been to gain insight regarding case dynamics, family impact, victimization concerns and other related issues involving missing and abducted children. After 13 years of continuous annual family roundtables, conducted in partnership with the National Center for Missing and Exploited Children (NCMEC), COVID-19 forced a change in process.

Beginning in 2020 and continuing in 2021, a one-on-one interview approach to the original family roundtable model was developed and effectively utilized to support and sustain this important program initiative. It also protects and preserves the needs and well-being of those family members who bravely and generously work with AATTAP to share their experiences. These interviews were conducted with individual family members via a secure virtual meeting session utilizing the Zoom platform.

Every situation where a child is missing is unique. Families of children who are abducted and murdered have their own relational dynamics, family histories, and challenges.

In every case, when a child is abducted and murdered, the family is forever changed. Other case influences can include the following:

- The size of the city where the abduction occurred
- The experience, preparedness and response of local law enforcement (and state/federal if involved)
- Communication and interactions actions between law enforcement agencies and other components of the criminal justice system; as well as with the family
- Engagement and skills provided by victim services
- Processes and approaches used by the criminal justice system (e.g., prosecution, sentencing)
- Response of the media in sharing information on the case through broadcast, print and web-based posts
- Response of the community as information about the case is shared; and unique to cases with siblings — other community participants often include schools, local counselors, extended family, friends, and family friends





Case Dynamics

The findings in this report are based on information from four interview participants — three sisters and one brother — representing four families. In each case, their sibling was abducted and murdered between 1999 and 2012. In each case, some details have been redacted to safeguard the families' privacy.

The information below touches on elemental case dynamics that participants experienced during and following their sibling's abduction, including the return to school. Also discussed are elements of the case investigation, actions taken by the media, and their experiences related to the prosecution of the perpetrator through the criminal justice process.

Other case elements:

- Victims' Age and Gender
 - The ages of the missing or abducted siblings ranged from age 7 to 18
 - Three of the victims were female and one was male
- Recovery
 - All of the victims were found deceased

- Perpetrators
 - Two of the children were abducted and murdered by a stranger (non-familial)
 - Two were abducted and murdered by a close family member (father and uncle, respectively)
 - All of the perpetrators were identified and sentenced for their crime
 - All of the perpetrators are currently in prison
 - Perpetrators were arrested at different points after the abduction in each case — three days, four days, four months, and five years afterward, respectively
- Geography and Population
 - Cases occurred in Arkansas, Colorado, Florida and Kansas
 - One abduction occurred in a very rural town with a population of just over 6,000
 - Two were in suburbs of larger towns
 - One was in an urban city with a population of more than 170,000

Case Summaries

Child Abduction Case 1

While walking home from school ahead of her siblings, a 7-year-old girl who was a second grader in a small suburb near Jacksonville, Florida, went missing. An AMBER Alert was quickly sent out to the community. The entire region began to look for her and the media was actively involved in finding her. Law enforcement tracked nine garbage trucks operating within her neighborhood, and three days later after sorting through hundreds of tons of trash, her body was found in the landfill. After an extensive investigation, a stranger not known to the family who lived on a street that was used by the girl to get home from school was the primary suspect. He was arrested in Mississippi four months after the abduction. The perpetrator was given six life sentences.

Child Abduction Case 2

A newly turned 18-year-old female failed to return from a solo shopping trip at a 'big box' store in a large urban Midwest city where she had planned to buy a friend a birthday gift. She didn't answer her phone and her family quickly became suspicious, began looking for her, and notified law enforcement. They quickly found her car at a nearby mall and a community-wide search began. Thousands of volunteers looked for her, flyers were printed, and grid searches were carried out. Video from the store where the victim was shopping showed a person (stranger) following her. After walking out of the store, the stranger violently assaulted and abducted the female using her own car. The perpetrator was later identified. The female's cellphone location eventually led law enforcement to her body 20 miles from the location of the abduction. The perpetrator pled guilty and was given a life sentence, with no option for appeal, in exchange for sharing details of the crime.

Child Abduction Case 3

A 12-year-old girl was reported missing from her grandparents' home in a very rural Midwestern town. She was living on the property along with her father. The family initially thought she ran away, as one family member suggested, but they quickly realized she was missing. There were many family and close family friends present during the first few days following the abduction. Search teams, including K-9 resources, were activated. On the third day, an uncle that lived nearby confessed to the abduction, rape, and strangulation of the girl. The media was intrusive and overwhelming to the family. Exactly one year later, the trial of the uncle began. He was convicted and sentenced to the death penalty.

Child Abduction Case 4

On the day a 13-year-old boy arrived to visit his father for a holiday far away from his home, he stopped responding to texts and calls from his mother and sibling. The father reported him missing the next day and law enforcement suspected he ran away. The boy went missing in a mountainous rural area that is a suburb of a larger city in the West. There were flyers made, local foot searches were conducted, and one initial large-scale effort was made to find him. Eventually, some of the boy's belongings were found on the mountain near the father's house, including a shoe. Three years later, his skull was found. Five years after the boy went missing, his father was indicted. After a long criminal justice process with multiple juries chosen, the father was convicted five years after he was originally indicted, and nine years after his abduction and murder of his son. He was sentenced to 48 years in prison.



Insights and Recommendations From the Siblings

Information from law enforcement should be shared directly and clearly to all members of the family.

A participant shared that a law enforcement officer notified her mother — in a separate room from the other family members — that her sibling's body had been recovered; they could only hear their mother's scream. The officer brought teddy bears for all of the siblings and was obviously distraught and told them he had two small children of his own.

Another participant recalled how whenever law enforcement would share information about the case, officers would ask all of the siblings to leave the room. This left the sibling feeling disconnected and shut out of the process. That family later learned about their sibling's body being found while watching the nightly news together. The participant felt it was clear law enforcement was trying to protect her, but that they should have given her the option to be part of learning what happened, as it may have made things better for her and her other siblings. She noted that her mother became less and less connected to her surviving children during this time.

"If you want to know what is happening with a child, what is really going on, ask their siblings — not their parents."

– Participant Recommendation

Siblings are important sources of information about an abducted child.

One participant stated, “If you want to know what is happening with a child, what is really going on, ask their siblings — not their parents.”

Another participant said she and her step-siblings (ages 10 and under) tried unsuccessfully to talk with law enforcement about who they thought had abducted their sibling (they were correct,) but an adult family member (the participant’s aunt, who was the wife of the perpetrator/murderer,) repeatedly told law enforcement to disregard them.

Some cases are extraordinarily complex for law enforcement.

One participant described having four different police departments involved in the search. Her sibling’s body was ultimately found in another state. Two of the cases involved perpetrators who were family members of the missing and abducted child, and who also inserted themselves into search activities for the child.

Every family experiencing the trauma of an abducted and murdered child is different.

Not only are the elements of abduction and murder different, but the relationships and dynamics within the families are often complex as well. Each child in a family can be, and often is, at a different developmental stage. Additionally, the relationships between the parents can be complicated. In three of this report’s cases, the parents of the abducted and murdered child were divorced. Two of the divorces involved great contention and stress. Further, the relationships between siblings and parents — and amongst siblings themselves — can be multifaceted. All of this is important to consider over the course of the investigation and criminal justice process.

Not all families are comfortable with law enforcement.

Some families have had negative experiences with law enforcement and systems designed to protect them. One participant’s father was a sworn law enforcement officer, and the family had affection and admiration for the law enforcement officers who helped with the abduction and murder investigation.

Another participant recalled that child protective services had been in and out of her family’s life throughout her childhood due to her father’s violence and emotional abuse. She reported that her father was not trustworthy or safe. At ten years old, she did not want to be around him throughout the experience of her sibling’s abduction and murder. The participant shared how she had been let down repeatedly by law enforcement and child protective services for not protecting her from her father’s abuse, including when her sibling was abducted. As such, when law enforcement was engaged with the case, she felt scared and overwhelmed.

One participant described family court as a place that wouldn’t listen to their family’s concerns about the father (who later murdered his child) and even proceeded to order the sibling’s visitation with the father. Both the participant and his mother had orders of protection against the father **before** the court ordered visitations. Authorities need to carefully listen to each family member, including the siblings of the missing child.

A participant shared that their father (also the father of the abducted and murdered child) is currently in prison for drawing a gun on a police officer.

A participant spoke about a situation during the search for her abducted sibling when K-9s were brought to where the victim was last seen. She was 10-years-old and reached out to pet the dog; she was loudly scolded for going near the dog. The participant said this created a seminal, painful memory — and it could have been avoided by law enforcement if they would have communicated with her and explained to her and the other children at the scene how to interact with the dogs.

Law enforcement may be seen/experienced as protectors.

One participant recalled how two police officers were stationed in her front yard during the search for her twin sibling, continuing for a while after her sibling was found, and even while the perpetrator was being identified. One of the officers was a male homicide detective who really connected to the sibling, and provided a 'father figure' that was lacking in the family. The participant shared that he made her feel safe and didn't pass any judgement about their family. The other officer who was stationed

in their driveway allowed all of the siblings to sit in the police car, use the sirens, and talk with them at length. The family would bring him meals. Both of these officers are still in the lives of the siblings thirteen years later as family friends, and continue to help them feel safe and protected. She noted that law enforcement also provided support and protection during the first month and half after she went back to school and helped her feel safe there as well.



Child abduction and murder cases require a flexible mindset.

The two participants whose siblings were abducted and murdered by a family member both shared that law enforcement officers investigating the case did not listen to them regarding suggestions the perpetrator was a family member who was participating in the searches for the child. In one case, the perpetrator confessed after three days. In the other case, the perpetrator was included in the case investigation **for years** before being arrested and charged.

In the latter case, the initial investigator believed the child ran away and there were no changes in the overseeing sheriff or new investigators for a number of years, so investigative decisions continued to be made from this mindset. The sibling felt that law enforcement should have had multiple personnel involved in the case — not just one investigator making all of the decisions. There should be many voices included in a case investigation, so all aspects are considered and not filtered or otherwise limited by one mindset.

Communication and building trust is critical.

A participant described a situation with a detective regarding a recovered backpack during the search for the perpetrator of her sibling's abduction and murder. The detective showed her the bag, which looked like her sister's. The participant insisted it was not her sister's, and the detective was relentless, trying to coach her to say that it was. This led her to believe that law enforcement was not truly trying to search and process information in the case; they were not doing their best.

Another participant shared how the investigator assigned to the case did not have previous training or experience with missing children and immediately sided with the offending parent. Early in the search, the sibling and mother were not allowed to be part of things, were not sure what and where law enforcement was searching, and were excluded from information shared with the father (later found guilty of the abduction and murder). Law enforcement stopped listening to the sibling and the mother. The participant recalled how the investigator was not interested in learning about the family history with the father, and believed the narrative that the 13-year-old just left and ran away.

Understand the family's frustration with a search and finding their own tools.

One participant described the family finding psychics and dog search teams on their own (using their own money,) but the investigator and other law enforcement involved were resistant and not interested in assisting. The family was acting out of desperation, a feeling that investigators were not doing enough, and that they did not have the skills to find a missing child. The family had daily battles with law enforcement to do more, and to consider their opinion. The department in charge of the investigation decided to exclude all other agencies that could have potentially assisted. Eventually, a new investigator took over and wanted to be involved in the searches coordinated by the family — and listened to the information they shared. This led to searches that resulted in recovery of the missing child's belongings, and the case began to build momentum and produce valuable evidence.

Siblings experience a sense of lacking control.

All participants described feeling that they had no control over anything about the case, including what was released to the public, and how to deal with the media. They shared how the criminal justice system felt very lopsided — more supportive of perpetrators and their rights.

Siblings are impacted very differently than parents or grandparents.

All participants described their unique experience as a sibling of an abducted and murdered child. In two cases, the siblings were adults (ages 20 and 21) and were often included with their parent(s) from the start of the case, throughout the investigation, and into the subsequent arrest and prosecution. One participant said it was rare to be left out of important conversations along with their parent. The other adult sibling shared that information was filtered through her parents to her and her younger siblings, and they were given options about whether or not they wanted to hear or see more (such as photos of their sibling at the crime scene).

The two participants who were in grade school when their siblings were abducted and murdered had vastly different experiences. One lived in a state different than where her sister was abducted, and remembered feeling ignored, overlooked, and scolded by law enforcement. She and her step-siblings all tried to tell law enforcement who had abducted her sibling (their uncle) but were not interviewed or heard. She said she felt "totally overlooked" and it was never really clear what was happening. Her mother didn't really want to talk about it with her, and was withdrawn.

Recognize this type of crime can happen to anyone.

While each case of child abduction and murder had different elements, each sibling commented that their family wasn't unique in becoming victim to this horrible crime. Both families and law enforcement have to realize this can happen to anyone, and thus law enforcement should never to pre-judge the backgrounds, relationships or needs of families who find themselves in the nightmare of an abducted child or sibling.



Schools are not prepared. They need better training, support and resources.

Two of the siblings were school age (both 10 years old) when their siblings were abducted and murdered. One returned to the school where she and her murdered sibling had previously attended. Initially, law enforcement recommended not returning to school for a couple of months (the perpetrator had not been identified and was not identified and arrested for four months). Then, for the first month and a half upon her return, law enforcement was at the school with her and walked her and her other siblings to their classes.

She shared, however, that the even though she and her siblings took two months off from school, despite having attended for many years, returning was difficult. She said she knew things were never going to be the same. Students started treating her really differently and some kids were really concerned and sympathetic, while others were nose-y and mean. Those students asked her questions like, "Why didn't you do something?" and "What did you do to make her run off?" or asked specific questions about the case. She felt the school could have better prepared the other students, and that other students became increasingly aggressive towards her, with the cruel statements lasting for years.

The other participant lived in a different state from her murdered sibling. She was forced to return to school two weeks after the abduction and murder to take her fourth-grade final exams so she could move up to the next grade. The next school year, students in her fifth-grade classroom and others in the hallways and on the playground said to her, "You have a dead sister," and "Your sister is dead," and "I don't believe you about your sister." A handful of students continued this behavior toward

her for three years. She recalled how the school had her fellow students write her cards about the death of her sister, but they were insensitive and hurtful.

Law enforcement needs specialized training on child abductions.

One participant spoke extensively about the lead investigator of their sibling's case not having any training on missing child cases. The lack of training on this specific type of crime significantly and negatively impacted how the investigator worked with the family and approached the case.

When other helpers don't help.

One of the participants described her interaction with a therapist a year after her sibling was abducted and murdered. After a few sessions, the therapist asked her, "What if it was your fault?" The participant spoke about how harmful that was and how she thinks about it still.

Recognize the impact on the family.

Both of the participants who were children when their siblings were murdered and abducted said they felt like they lost more than just a sibling. One participant said her mother was completely unavailable for years, and she wished someone had worked with her mother to, "stay present for the surviving children and remember that the other kids were worth living for." During this time, she remembered, her mother was "really preoccupied"

and mostly stayed in her room. For three years after her sibling's abduction and murder, the participant recalled how she really struggled with her emotions and had self-harming thoughts, behaviors and suicidal ideations. She eventually told her school social worker and was hospitalized. This helped her talk about what was happening, and she and mother were forced to connect. She then began to heal.

The other participant who was a child when her sibling was abducted and murdered said, "I lost my mother for four years. She dug into the internet and started working in the field of child abduction, but she wasn't here with us." As a result, she felt responsible for her younger siblings over those four years.

Extra support is needed for the family to stay connected.

Not having the tools to help the family stay connected was described by one participant. Her siblings had very different views of talking about their abducted and murdered sibling. Some siblings drifted from the family, as the mother was distant and disconnected from them. A participant described feelings about being lost in or consumed by the abduction event, noting there were very few times during the search and subsequent criminal justice system involvement where they felt acknowledged as having experienced a loss just as deep and painful as their parents.

The search and correctional system process has financial costs for families.

One participant whose sibling was not found for three years after the abduction described the high cost to his own development. The participant was an adult when his minor sibling was abducted. Initially, he spent five months in the town where the sibling went missing, coordinating searches and meeting with investigators daily along with his mother. This prevented him from working and paying his bills. For five months he participated in searches every weekend. He had to spend the family's money for professionals to help with the searches as they felt law enforcement wasn't doing enough.

Once the perpetrator was arrested and charged, he recalled how the perpetrator did everything possible to delay the trial, causing more regular disruptions of work for him. He shared how he lost three jobs due to having to make time for summons, only to have them cancelled despite having already requested the time off. Multiple places of employment expressed frustration with his constant need for time off or schedule adjustments to attend hearings. Each time it happened, "It would shake me," he said. He found it hard to stay working and actively participate in the prosecution of his father over a grueling five-year period. The court did not make an effort to schedule hearings when he and his mother could attend, and he felt the court system was focused on the perpetrator's rights; the family's voice was muted and they often had no say in any decisions.



Assign officers and detectives who will stay on the case and provide consistent engagement with the family.

By assigning the same officer and detectives to the family, one participant recalled building strong and caring relationships with them, which provided the family with much needed adult support (the parent was totally emotionally unavailable) and feelings of safety.

"One participant shared how she and her family were watching TV a few nights after the abduction and that is how they found out their sibling's body was found."

Greater awareness of the importance of managing the media is needed.

The four interview participants had widely different experiences with the media following the abduction of their siblings. One participant shared how she and her family were watching TV a few nights after the abduction and that is how they found out their sibling's body was found.

Another participant recalled that while she was told face-to-face, with her parents and law enforcement, when they learned her sibling's body was found, her 12-year-old sister found out via the news before they could tell her.

Another participant went on national television multiple times with their parents, appealing to the public to help search for their sibling. Yet, when the local media asked questions outside the family's house, questions included, "Do you think your sister is dead?" and, "Your daughter is most likely dead, why are you still parading around?"

One participant described a photo that was taken of her and published on the front page of the newspaper, in print and online. The photo was of her with her aunt and uncle comforting her while she was crying during the search for her sister. She was 10 years old when her sibling was abducted and murdered. She said she felt the photo was intrusive, and haunts her even today. She believes photos including siblings of missing children should require consent.

Support and safeguard sibling participation in the sentencing phase.

One participant shared that after many years of having no power over the search or criminal justice system timelines, they were finally able to speak with their own voice during the sentencing. The participant said the experiences of having to fight to have their sibling searched for, to be believed by law enforcement about who should be a suspect, years of searching and coordinating search assistance, four years of court delays and two jury selections due to a postponement one week into the initial trial, along with losing a sibling — all of this simply drains everything out of you.

Improve understanding of the victim advocate's role, and involve them sooner and more fully.

One participant shared how a victim advocate helped pay for rent while they were searching for their missing sibling. Another described how their interactions with a victim advocate directly related to the trial and trial preparations.

There are limited supports, especially — and specifically — for siblings.

Three of the four participants stated there were no real support groups or activities specifically for siblings of abducted and murdered children. One described being involved in NCMEC Facebook page for siblings where they connect, and provide support and understanding to one another. The participants spoke about the importance of reaching out to other siblings of abducted and murdered children and providing support, including being with them during court proceedings. Law enforcement, communities and child advocacy centers should work together, proactively, to develop resources, groups and opportunities for those faced with a missing or abducted sibling.

Summary

The purpose of this report is to build training that informs law enforcement and the criminal justice system about the experiences of siblings of abducted and murdered children. The recommendations from the siblings interviewed for this report illustrate the importance of continued development and delivery of training for law enforcement, AMBER Alert partners, the criminal justice community and others involved in the response to missing and abducted children.

The use of case information in adult learning methods and curriculum development, such as that provided by the siblings for this report, can improve overall child protection and response strategies.

The following guiding principles can inform an action plan for enhancing training and outreach efforts:

- A flexible mindset regarding the perpetrator in a missing child event is critical.
- Consider the complex dynamics and relationships in families of missing children.
- Balance protecting the siblings of a missing child with including them so they do not feel excluded.

The AMBER Alert Training and Technical Assistance Program extends deep gratitude to the four siblings who bravely shared their experiences to support improved training, resources and readiness for law enforcement, schools, communities, and the criminal justice system. Each participant's strength in revisiting these lived experiences provided knowledge and insights that are truly invaluable to AATTAP's mission. We recognize that talking about these experiences has a deep emotional cost, and we are incredibly grateful for their participation.