

Hearing by the Subcommittee on Civil Rights and Civil Liberties on

“The Neglected Epidemic of Missing BIPOC Women and Girls”

Thursday, March 3, 2022 at 10:00a.m. ET



Testimony of Natalie Wilson

Co-Founder of the Black and Missing Foundation

Good morning, Chairman Raskin and members of the Subcommittee on Civil Rights and Civil Liberties. I am Natalie Wilson, co-founder of the Black and Missing Foundation, a nonprofit organization that brings awareness to missing persons of color around the country. I am pleased to provide testimony today on the issue of missing women and girls of color.

My sister-in-law and I started the foundation after hearing about the case of Tamika Houston, who disappeared in Spartanburg, SC. It was disheartening to us that her family struggled to get national media coverage on her disappearance. Yet another missing young woman, Natalee Holloway, was dominating the national headlines. Was it a coincidence? We were on a mission to find out. What we discovered was eye opening. While missing persons of color made up 40% of the missing population, their stories were rarely told by the media, and they often struggled to get sufficient law enforcement resources to bring their loved ones home.

We are not naive enough to believe that every missing person's case will get media coverage. However, missing persons of color cases only get 7% of national media coverage. We can name Gabby Petito, Natalie Holloway, Chandra Levy and many other white women who have gone missing. But can you name any persons of color that have garnered national media coverage? We want our missing to be household names too.

At the heart of it, race is clearly an underlying factor in the disparity in these missing person cases. When we peel back the layers, we find that these families deal with several stereotypes that stigmatize and dehumanize missing persons of color and ultimately impact the resources and support they receive. Our missing deserves to be treated equally.

The three most common stereotypes for missing people of color are the runaway child, the thug or criminal and the undeserving poor.

The Runaway Child

When children of color go missing, they are often stereotyped by law enforcement as runaways. From our interactions with families, we find that nine out of 10 children of color reported missing are classified as runaways. If you are classified as a runaway, you don't get the amber alert or any media attention at all. There is no urgency to find them. This stigma further delays search efforts and steals precious time to collect evidence. So many clues may be lost that you can never get back. A great example is the case of Kennedy High. She was classified as a runaway when in fact she was a victim of sex trafficking.

We must remember that these children are minors and stop adultifying them. Even if they did run away, they are still children who must be found. Sadly, black girls are more often victims of sex trafficking and not runaways.

The Thug or Criminals

With missing adults, particularly black males, we often find them stereotyped as being involved in criminal activity. This stigma hampers efforts to find them because there is a mindset that their actions or deviant behavior led to their disappearance. These individuals are viewed as a burden to society and our tax dollars. We must not forget these are sons and daughters and mothers and fathers—their lives matter. This is the same case with women being labeled as prostitutes or promiscuous.

For example, in Cleveland there was a serial killer who went undetected for years because law enforcement didn't take these cases seriously. When loved ones reported a family member missing law enforcement was often dismissive and stereotyped their loved ones as drug addicts or prostitutes when in fact they had been murdered. Their bodies were eventually discovered buried on the serial killer's property. How disheartening is that?

Intentional and unintentional biases as well as insensitivity has led to stereotyping of missing people of color, which leads to these cases not being taken seriously.

The Undeserving Poor

There is also a stereotype that these individuals aren't worthy of news coverage or our attention because this type of activity is typical for low-income neighborhoods and is par for the course. Often the gatekeepers at the stations are middle to upper-class white males who don't have any connection to these communities. In our nearly 14 years as a nonprofit organization, we have seen firsthand how our nation has become desensitized to the plight of missing people of color who come from marginalized communities. The perception is that when someone of color is reported missing, no one will miss them, so why dedicate the resources to finding them. We are doing a disservice to this nation when we turn a blind eye to the most vulnerable among us.

Promising News

We've been sounding the alarm for 14 years and people are now starting to listen. Last year, HBO launched a four-part docuseries that provided an insider's look that families of color

face as well as the organization for getting media coverage and law enforcement assistance and resources.

The Black Press has been instrumental in providing visibility for our cases. The Black News Channel has a weekly missing persons series on their platform.

In 2021, the New York Times, CBS News and NBC Universal the black employees network reached out to us to start conversation with their staff.

Access Hollywood has launched a monthly missing person series.

As a result, we've been able to help find and bring closure to close to 400 families.

Challenges and Solutions

Race shouldn't be a barrier to media coverage and law enforcement support. Even though we've been sounding the alarm for 14 years, there is still more work to do. Here are the challenges and possible opportunities for change:

(1) Database and accurate reporting

The data available is not robust or reliable to paint a full picture of the magnitude of the problem. We believe the numbers are much higher based on the following info:

Causes of underreporting:

All missing Latinos are being classified as white although research has shown [at least 24% classify themselves as Afro-Latino](#), otherwise identifying as Black.

Immigrants don't always report their missing because of fear of deportation.

No one is keeping track of the whereabouts of those who are homeless, in foster care or part of the social services system.

(2) Law enforcement

There is no uniformity in policies across jurisdiction throughout the U.S. specifically for guidelines for reporting a missing person. In some cities there is no prohibition in reporting where in other localities it can be as much as 24 to 48 hours. We know that time is of the essence when a person goes missing to collect clues and evidence that could help bring a missing person home.

The classification of "Runaway" should be prohibited. When children are reported missing, resources should be dedicated to find them.

Law enforcement are the first gatekeepers to awareness or media coverage. They are typically the ones who would alert the media when a person goes missing to get coverage. It goes back to the classification of these individuals. How do they decide which cases they report to the media? There needs to be set criteria so that biases do not come into play.

Collectively, we need to review and modify the criteria for amber alerts.

(3) Media

I want to share examples of the power of media coverage. Within 14 minutes of a segment on The View airing we received a tip that led directly to the missing child.

I remember a time when a young woman went missing out of St. Louis and I called every single station and yet there was no interest.

Media coverage is important because it alerts the community that someone is missing but also adds pressure to law enforcement to put resources on the case, which increases the chances of a recovery.

(4) Legislation

Funding for organizations such as The Black and Missing Foundation to continue to support these families.

Sentencing guidelines for perpetrators of sex trafficking. Black girls are sex trafficked at a higher rate. They make up 40% of sex trafficked victims. Sadly, the perception of traffickers is if you traffic a Black girl you are less likely to get jail time.

In December, Montgomery County Police located a missing one-year-old from Silver Spring, Maryland and her 28-year-old father in New York City with the help of a subway passenger who recognized them from a press release that had been shared on our social media platform.

We need to care as a nation. It takes all of us, law enforcement, the media and community to help bring awareness to and find those missing from our communities.

Thank you.