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Statement Before the U.S. House Judiciary Committee “Member Day Hearing”
Friday, October 22, 2021

Thank you Mr. Chairman/Ms. Chairwoman for giving non-committee members the opportunity to testify. I come before the Judiciary Committee today to share with you an issue that the federal government, and frankly, American society, does not give enough attention.

Congress’s Missing and Exploited Children’s programs, overseen by the U.S. Department of Justice, makes America a safer place for our children. In the late 1970s, nearly 1.8 million children were reported missing annually. In 2020, that number had fallen to 540,000, according to the Congressional Research Service.

This data shows that, thanks to this program’s improved policing tactics, recovery rates for missing children have exponentially increased.

Unfortunately, this program falls short of serving people of color. Existing data indicates minority children are reported missing at a disproportionately higher rate than white children - and stay missing longer. In fact, a longitudinal study found that racial differences significantly affect rates of recovery for missing minority children, with black children remaining missing the longest.

These disparities are largely attributed to socio-economic background, police resources, and media attention. In areas with low community engagement and limited police resources, children are more vulnerable and less likely to be recovered. It’s a fact – and it’s why movements like “Defund the Police” are so dangerous.

Quality media attention on missing persons cases is a proven key to recovery. According to the Department of Justice, “intense, early media coverage ensures that people will be looking for your child.” It is concerning to me that missing white girls receive disproportionately more media attention than their black counterparts.

Look no further than the Gabby Petito case, which continues to captivate a national audience. Over the last two months or so, you couldn’t turn on the news or scroll through Twitter without hearing about her. It continues to feel like she is the only missing person in America.

That is so far from the truth. There is no shortage of tragic stories about missing black folks that most people have never heard about. I’ll use an example from my district in East Tennessee.

A 26-year-old black female from Knoxville was reported missing on June 28, 2021 and the last time her family heard from her was June 18. This was weeks before Gabby Petito was reported missing on September 11. Thanks to national media coverage, Ms. Petito’s remains were found just eight days after she was reported missing.

Compare that to when the remains of the 26-year old black female from Knoxville were recovered. She was not found until September 28, three months after she was reported missing. I bet not once over those three months you heard about her on MSNBC, CNN, Fox News, or other national media outlets.

The sad reality is that there are thousands of other stories like the one I just described that go completely unnoticed. There is an epidemic of missing black children – missing black girls – that is unreported by the mainstream news media.

The news media is an echo chamber, solely focused on news that sells and the ratings of its target audience. Real news – unbiased news – important news – has been pushed aside and replaced by sensualized and biased perspectives. It is wrong and racist that the news media is failing to report on this epidemic.

Mr./Ms. Chairman, our federal, state, and local law enforcement agencies cannot do their job without the help of communities and the news media. We must strengthen our law enforcement’s capabilities so they can directly coordinate with the media to ensure fair and unbiased reporting of these missing black girls.