

“Projeto Caminho de Volta”: A Brazilian DNA program for missing kids

G.J.F. Gattás^{a,*}, C. Figaro-Garcia^a, C. Fridman^a, M.M. Neumann^b,
L.F. Lopez^a, A.S. Barini^a, A.P.H. Souza^a, T.M.Q.R. Boccia^a,
P. Kohler^a, L.R. Battistella^a, C.L. Wen^c, E. Massad^a

^a *Department of Legal Medicine, Bioethics and Occupational Health, Medical School,
University of Sao Paulo, Brazil*

^b *Social Politics and Prevention and Research Center, Sao Paulo, Brazil*

^c *Telemedicine, Department of Pathology, Medical School, University of Sao Paulo, Brazil*

Abstract. The main goal of the Brazilian missing kids project called “Projeto Caminho de Volta” (that means “the way to come back home”) is to contribute to find children under 18 years old using methodologies as molecular biology, genetics, psychology, bioinformatics and telemedicine. Each year, 8000 kids disappear from their homes in São Paulo State and about 20,000 per year in the whole country. This project was designed to follow four main goals: (1) to identify, through an epidemiological study, the reasons of so many cases of missing kids; (2) to develop an identification process of recovered missing kids after years through a DNA database; (3) to offer psychological support to missing kids’ families during the entire process; (4) to expand the project to other police departments in our state and in the future to the entire country. © 2006 Elsevier B.V. All rights reserved.

Keywords: Missing kids; DNA database; Psychological attendance

1. Introduction

The missing kids problem has been discussed seriously in many countries like USA [1] and Canada [2]. In Brazil, the Caminho de Volta Project was initiated in 2004 and it was designed to help elucidate missing children cases in the State of São Paulo, since there is no DNA databank in Brazil, not even for criminal intends. According to the official data of

* Corresponding author. Departamento de Medicina Legal, Ética Médica e Medicina Social e do Trabalho FMUSP. R. Teodoro Sampaio, 115. Cerqueira César. São Paulo - SP. 05405-000, Brazil. Tel.: +55 11 3085 9677.

E-mail address: gfgattas@usp.br (G.J.F. Gattás).

the Missing Persons Police Section, ~8000 children and teenagers under age of 18 go missing every year, only in the State of São Paulo.

2. Objective

Caminho de Volta has four main goals: (a) psychosocial support to the families of missing children and teenagers: intends to diagnosis the family's dynamic and follow it during the search period. Furthermore, the psychological support works preventively towards new possibilities of kids being exposed again to situations at home in which they are vulnerable; (b) creating the parents DNA Data Bank (Reference Bank) allows quick evaluation of the genetic association between found children and teenagers (Research Bank) and the families. This procedure excludes the effects of time considering the aging processes. It is also useful considering the migration of these kids to other cities, as well as in helping define the identity of children found dead or in any condition that makes the recognition difficult. Also, the information collected on the missing child and the family, and the description of the situation in which he/she disappeared will compose a Data Bank [3]; (c) identifying the causes of the disappearance of children and teenagers, analyzing the familial organization they belong to, considering that negligence, domestic violence, sexual abuse within the family, poverty and contravention are aspects that can facilitate the running away, kidnapping and child abduction [4]; (d) training professionals of the child and teenager's rights network (law enforcement, psychologists, social workers, governmental and non-governmental organizations), through live lectures or teleconferences.

3. Materials and methods

A team of psychologists assists every weekday all the families who report to the Missing Persons Police Section their missing children. In case the family agrees to give biological material as well as the information on the form, they must sign an informed consent in order to be registered in the project.

4. Results

There are 184 families in the project and a preliminary analysis of the collected data showed there is a predominance of missing cases after the age of 10 (50% of those cases the ages vary between 14 and 17 years old). Within the main types of missing, runaways have the mayor frequency (76%). Physical abuse is the main cause of the runaways (35%), following by alcoholism (24%), domestic violence (21%), drugs (15%), sexual abuse (9%) and neglect (7%). About 54% of the cases corresponded to the child's first missing episode, but for some cases from 10 up to 23 times of runaway episodes were notified.

5. Conclusion

Different issues can be discussed about missing kids problem such as family conflicts including domestic violence, maternity and paternity responsible, questions referred to adoption and sheltered children with no identity. The Caminho de Volta Project gives a great contribution to the population offering high technology through DNA analysis and psychological support.

References

- [1] National Centre of Missing and Exploited Children. <<http://www.missingkids.com>> 2005.
- [2] National Missing Children Services. <<http://www.ourmissingchildren.ca>> 2005.
- [3] J.A. Lorente, et al., Social benefits of non-criminal genetic databases: missing persons and human remains identification, *Int. J. Leg. Med.* 116 (3) (2002) 187–190.
- [4] R.M.C. Libório, S.M.G. Sousa, *A exploração sexual de crianças e adolescentes no Brasil. Reflexões teóricas, relatos de pesquisa e intervenções psicossociais*, Casa do Psicólogo, São Paulo, 2004.