



## Where are They? Missing and Abandoned Children

### 1. Introduction<sup>1</sup>

Children have become increasingly vulnerable to all kinds of abuse and neglect during the lockdown, and what little oversight there was in terms of school and ECD centres has been interrupted. It is an environment where it is easy for children to go missing, with ideal opportunities for trafficking. Furthermore, the lockdown has seen an increase in the number of abandoned babies.

Human infants and small children are the most vulnerable of all young creatures, completely dependent on parents or caregivers to have their needs met. They remain dependent on carers throughout their childhood, while becoming increasingly independent during adolescence. The age of majority is eighteen and the International Centre for Missing and Exploited Children (ICMEC) considers any child under the age of eighteen whose whereabouts are unknown to be 'missing'. This includes children who have been abducted, abandoned, separated from their parents, or are running away from a home that is not safe.<sup>2</sup> The recently released crime statistics reveal an increase in crimes against children. Appallingly, 31.7% more children were murdered, compared to the previous year, while there was a 14.6% increase in attempts on children's lives. 287 children were murdered, compared to 218 children in the same quarter last year.<sup>3</sup> Children are also the most vulnerable victims of gender-based violence.<sup>4</sup>

### 2. Failure of Child Protection Services

According to a study that the Medical Research Council conducted in 2018, 3 500 children survive abandonment each year. The study revealed that for every child that was found alive, at least two were dead. The same research concluded that 65% of abandoned children were newborns, and 90% were under the age of one year.<sup>5</sup> These findings suggest that a child born in South Africa is at the highest risk of being killed during its first six days of life.<sup>6</sup> According to the child protection activist and change management consultant, Dee Blackie, "these statistics are supported by morgue statistics that indicate that South African children are most likely to die unnaturally in the first week of their lives."<sup>7</sup> Furthermore, Blackie found in her research, conducted in 2016/17, that there was an increase in anonymous abandonment where the parents were unknown, with the result that family reunification could not be considered.

It is probable that the number of abandoned infants is underestimated as some are left in landfills, bins, drains, gutters and other places where they are unlikely to be found.<sup>8</sup> In 2020, out of a total of 83 infants found unsafely abandoned, only 34 were found alive; the other 49 were dead. Currently in South Africa, no official statistics on the rate of infant abandonment exist. More recently, in 2021, through an informal gathering of news reports between the months of January and July, a total of 43 infants were found to have been unsafely abandoned, and only 23 of them were found alive.<sup>9</sup>

### 3. What drives Abandonment?

Child abandonment is regarded as a criminal offence, and a person who abandons a child after birth may be charged and prosecuted. Charges could include crimes such as concealment of birth and attempted murder. South Africa does not provide many safe alternatives for desperate mothers who see no other option but to unsafely abandon a baby. So, while the law punishes the crime of abandonment, it fails to provide a safe alternative that will prevent the act. Conversely, laws that facilitate safe alternatives would help to prevent abandonment and thereby save the lives of infants.<sup>10</sup>

There are a number of reasons for child abandonment in South Africa. These include restrictive legislation; poverty; high levels of violence, including rape; extreme gender inequality; a high incidence of teenage pregnancy; and diminishing family support.<sup>11</sup> Not all cases of missing and/or exploited children make headlines and a large percentage are never reported to the police or social workers.<sup>12</sup>

### 4. Baby Savers/Baby Safes

A baby saver or baby safe allows a mother or relinquishing person to anonymously and safely leave an infant in a box-like structure built into a wall at a place of care. However, in terms of existing legislation such baby savers are illegal in this country, as is any form of safe abandonment of babies. In spite of this, more of these places of safety are being opened up due to the increase in abandonment. Furthermore, many abandoned children do not even make it into the formal child protection system, as they are absorbed into communities through 'informal adoption', raising concerns around issues such as child trafficking.<sup>13</sup> Nadene Grabham, Operations Director at *Door of Hope*, which has a baby safe, says that it is not always the mother who abandons her baby: "For all we know it could be the father, the grandma or grandpa, the pimp, the druglord... Who knows?"<sup>14</sup>

Dee Blackie points out that child abandonment has been termed a problem that falls entirely within the domain of poor women, and frequently these women are young teenagers. Moreover, "a social behaviour that is not new is increasingly being defined in medical terms through the portrayal and labelling of the abandoning mother as

emotionally unstable and criminally insane".<sup>15</sup> Should the birthmother be found she will enter the criminal justice system!

Changing the law will encourage more baby savers to be opened in areas where infant abandonment is at its worst. It will also allow these savers to be publicly advertised to reach more mothers in need. In spite of the present legislation there are over 40 baby safes/savers established and saving lives in South Africa in response to the overwhelming need.

### 5. Missing Children

Over the past 18 years, approximately 16 000 children have been reported missing, and 25% of these children have never been found. In effect, a child goes missing every five hours. Missing Children South Africa (MCSA) is an NGO which was established in March 2007 in response to the kidnapping and brutal murders of Sheldean Human (7) from Pretoria and Anestacia Wiese (12) from Mitchell's Plain, in an effort to assist and support families finding themselves in similar desperate situations. MCSA assists the South African Police Service (SAPS) in all missing person cases in South Africa; it exists to be responsive and to create awareness whenever a missing person case is reported. Bianca van Aswegen, MCSA's National Co-ordinator, stresses that the first 24 hours after a person goes missing are the most crucial, and a missing person case must be opened immediately. Some children do run away from home for different reasons as there are push and pull factors, and the reasons need to be established once the child has been found, and appropriate action taken. For example, a child may be kidnapped by a parent if there is a custody dispute, or children may be the victims of opportunistic kidnappings. Often, the perpetrator might be known to the child.

Human trafficking and forced labour is escalating, driven by poverty and the impact of COVID-19. Poor socioeconomic conditions are used by traffickers to recruit and exploit victims; traffickers also sometimes exploit certain social norms and familial backgrounds. There is also evidence of the sale of children. Robyn Wolfson Vorster's research indicates that victims include children as young as ten. Traffickers force children into labour in domestic service, mining, begging, street vending, food services, criminal activities, agriculture, the fishing sector, prostitution and

pornography.<sup>16</sup> Statistics provided by the Department of Labour indicated that in 2019, 571 000 children were involved in child labour in South Africa, 191 500 (34%) of whom were exposed to at least one hazardous working condition.

The Global Trafficking in Persons Report analyzed 99 child trafficking court cases and found that economic need was a factor in 40% of cases; that the child came from a dysfunctional or abusive family in 36% of cases; and that in 18% of cases the child was deprived of parental care – this included children in institutions. Immigration status was a factor in 9% of cases.<sup>17</sup>

In times of disaster and social upheaval such as COVID-19, there tends to be an increase in child labour. Furthermore, UN agencies warn that “additional economic shocks and school closures caused by the COVID-19 crisis mean that children already in child labour may be working longer hours and under worsening conditions.”<sup>18</sup> UNICEF chief Henrietta Fore stresses that “the Covid-19 crisis is making a bad situation even worse... Now, well into a second year of global lockdowns, school closures, economic disruptions, and shrinking national budgets, families are forced to make heart-breaking choices.”<sup>19</sup>

Children, as in the recent case of the Moti brothers in Limpopo, are sometimes kidnapped for ransom.<sup>20</sup> Children can disappear in a few seconds. MCSA advises that children should wear brightly coloured clothing which makes them more visible, and parents and caregivers should have a recent photograph of each of their children. Children should never go anywhere alone. Unfortunately, the compulsory wearing of masks makes children difficult to recognize. It is important that teenagers should always be in the company of others. Sadly, there has been a spike in the number of suicides amongst children and teens during the pandemic. It is also important to monitor the use and content of screen time. Depression and anxiety increase vulnerability to online predators.<sup>21</sup>

Distressingly, an increasing number of children have also been kidnapped and killed to be used as ‘muti’. A research project conducted by Wits University found that “some traditional healers have adopted the practice of using human body parts in ‘muti’” and that they believed “that different human body parts have different ‘powers’”.<sup>22</sup> Those with albinism are particularly vulnerable. Recently, three men, including a traditional healer, were found guilty of murdering 13-year-old Gabisile Shabane, who lived with albinism. The three have been handed life sentences.<sup>23</sup> Anecdotally, albinism has been termed the ‘new ivory’.<sup>24</sup>

## 6. The Pink Ladies

The Pink Ladies are another independent group of volunteers registered as a NGO. The organisation was “established for the primary purpose of reuniting missing and endangered children and loved ones with their families and/or caregivers. The group does not charge for its services [which are] rather performed for the love of children everywhere in South Africa regardless of colour, creed or circumstance.”<sup>25</sup> This is done in a variety of ways including raising awareness, assisting with the reporting of missing children and adults, and referring to specialist guidance as and when required. The organization works closely with South African Police Service.

## 7. Conclusion

Research conducted by Emsor and van Watt suggests that as a new democracy, South Africa has had to grapple with high levels of interpersonal violence attributed to post-conflict societies. Furthermore, it has been suggested that “while the past still impacts on present forms of violence, new trends, targets and perpetrators have also emerged. We conclude that missing children cases are intricately intertwined with the layers of violence that have become embedded in South African society in the democratic era”.<sup>26</sup>

---

**Lois Law**  
**Project Co-ordinator**  
[lois@cplo.org.za](mailto:lois@cplo.org.za)

---

<sup>1</sup>On Friday, 29<sup>th</sup> October the Catholic Parliamentary Liaison Office hosted a Webinar Discussion on ‘Missing and Abandoned Children’. The Webinar was addressed by Bianca van Aswegen who is a qualified criminologist and the

---

National Coordinator for the organisation Missing Children South Africa (MCSA) and Robyn Wolfson Vorster who works as a children's rights activist and is a member of the child protection steering committee at the South African National Child Rights Coalition.

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.icmec.org/global-missing-childrens-center/imcd>

<sup>3</sup> <https://www.news24.com/news24/southafrica/news/crime-stats-child-murders-increase-by-317-year-on-year-sexual-offences-up-20211119>

<sup>4</sup> <https://missingchildren.org.za/wp-content/uploads/2020/02/Safety-Tips-For-Parents-A4-Poster-PDF.pdf>

<sup>5</sup> <https://www.iol.co.za/saturday-star/news/study-finds-65-of-abandoned-infants-are-newborns-28766384>

<sup>6</sup> <https://borgenproject.org/abandoned-babies-in-south-africa/>

<sup>7</sup> <https://www.iol.co.za/saturday-star/news/study-finds-65-of-abandoned-infants-are-newborns-28766384>

<sup>8</sup> <https://borgenproject.org/abandoned-babies-in-south-africa/>

<sup>9</sup> <https://theconversation.com/south-african-women-needing-to-abandon-their-babies-dont-have-safe-options-this-must-change-163992>

<sup>10</sup> <https://theconversation.com/south-african-women-needing-to-abandon-their-babies-dont-have-safe-options-this-must-change-163992>

<sup>11</sup> <https://phys.org/news/2021-07-south-african-women-abandon-babies.html>

<sup>12</sup> <https://southerncourier.co.za/93683/the-pink-ladies-assist-in-finding-missing-persons/>

<sup>13</sup> <https://www.news24.com/parent/family/parenting/its-not-only-mothers-who-abandon-babies-so-lets-stop-saying-that-20201005>

<sup>14</sup> <https://www.lawforall.co.za/family-relationships/child-abandonment-south-africa>

<sup>15</sup> <https://www.researchgate.net/profile/Dee-Blackie>

<sup>16</sup> See Endnote 1 above

<sup>17</sup> <https://www.unodc.org/unodc/data-and-analysis/glotip.html>

<sup>18</sup> <https://www.france24.com/en/live-news/20210610-child-labour-swells-for-first-time-in-two-decades-un>

<sup>19</sup> <https://www.france24.com/en/live-news/20210610-child-labour-swells-for-first-time-in-two-decades-un>

<sup>20</sup> <https://www.timeslive.co.za/news/south-africa/2021-10-28-life-sentences-for-trio-who-murdered-child-with-albinism-for-muti/>

<sup>21</sup> See Endnote 1 above

<sup>22</sup> <https://www.dailymaverick.co.za/opinionista/2021-11-17-south-africans-would-do-well-to-advance-modernism-an>

<sup>23</sup> <https://www.timeslive.co.za/news/south-africa/2021-10-28-life-sentences-for-trio-who-murdered-child-with-albinism-for-muti/>

<sup>24</sup> The writer of this paper attended a Workshop on Human Trafficking in Southern Africa and this perhaps insensitive term was used.

<sup>25</sup> <http://thepinkladiesza.weebly.com/>

<sup>26</sup> [https://www.researchgate.net/publication/339092591\\_Stillnotfound\\_Missing\\_Children\\_in\\_South\\_Africa/citation/download](https://www.researchgate.net/publication/339092591_Stillnotfound_Missing_Children_in_South_Africa/citation/download)

This Briefing Paper, or parts thereof, may be reproduced with acknowledgement.