Demography of Our Missing Children

What is the issue?

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- Instigating Whatsapp forwards against stereotyped child kidnappers is already creating havoc across rural pockets in the nation.
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- Further, it a serious distraction from the actual statistics of missing children in India, which currently stands at about 174 per day.
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What is the current scenario?

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- **Statistics -** "National Crime Records Bureau" (NCRB) states that 63,407 children went missing in 2016 alone, which implies an average of 174 per day.
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- More disquietingly, about 50% of the children who have gone missing until 2016 have stayed untraced thus far.
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- But the stories behind the statistics are complex, sometimes counterintuitive, and vastly different from what 'child lifting' rumours on social media claim.
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- **The Stories -** It could be a 17-year-old girl who elopes with her lover, and her family back home reports her as 'kidnapped'.
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- It could be a neighbour promising a job for a young boy but instead enslaving him in a factory, or a kid who runs away from an abusive father.
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- Sometimes, it could just be a star-struck girl boarding a train to see her favourite actor in a big city and getting lost there.
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- Fear of exams, family fights and corporal punishments are also other significant aspects that cause children to go missing.
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What is the general flow of a kidnapping case (through an example)?

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- **Job Lure -** A 12 year old boy was offered a decent job in Delhi by his neighbour in rural Bihar, and the boy set out for it with his parent's consent.
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- But soon, the parents lost trace of the boy and their neighbour and decided to file a police complaint in this regard.
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- **Official Nexus -** While the investigations got along, the parents were initially persuaded to withdraw the case for a monetary compensation by some people.
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- When the parents of the boy stayed insistent on tracing their ward, the police too started getting uncooperative and even threatened them.
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- **Persistence –** Nonetheless, the parents persisted and set out for Delhi to get clues of about their boy, and subsequently sought the help of NGOs.
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- Pressure from Delhi-based NGO "Bachpan Bachao Andolan" (BBA), forced a police crackdown on child traffickers and led to the rescue of 16 children.
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- While the missing kid wasn't traced in Delhi, subsequent massive search efforts led to his rescue from Haridwar.
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- **Trauma -** He is now back home with his parents, but continues to be deeply traumatised by the experience.
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- He hasn't been able to say how he reached Haridwar or what transpired at the factory except that he saw other children being beaten.
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- Nonetheless, this was a case of happy ending, but many of those abducted disappear without a trace.
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How is police apathy affecting investigations?

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- The longer the police take to trace the lost child, the less likely is the

chances of locating him and hence investigations need to start off swiftly if a child is lost.
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- Supreme Court ordered in 2013 that the police should mandatorily register an FIR of kidnapping when they receive a missing child complaint.
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- But police continue to remain hesitant and the parents are persuaded to by them to believe that the kid has merely run away and would come back.
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- Due to such attitudes, precious lead time is waste and the child could well be out of the State before investigation begins.
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- **Case -** A 14 year old girl from rural Maharashtra went missing and the parents had approached the police immediately.
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- Further, they even spelt out the name of a suspect, but the police did paltry little to trace the girl or to interrogate the suspect.
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- While the girl had left indeed left willingly with the person suspected by her parents, she was then subjected to intense sexual and physical abuse by him.
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- After 8 months of the ordeal, the girl finally managed to get hold of a mobile phone to ring back home and convey her whereabouts.
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What are the other interesting aspects of the statistics?

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- Girls between 12 and 18 accounts for 66% of the 54,328 children reported as kidnapped in 2016, but this is likely to be an overestimation.
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- This is because a lot of romantic relationships are reported as kidnapping by parents who don’t approve of the relationship.
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- A study of 2,000 cases in Delhi and Mumbai under the POCSO Act found a significant number of cases were consensual sexual relationships.
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- Courts in such cases tend to acquit the accused on charges of rape, but convict them for kidnapping, which is adding to the pile of kidnapping cases.
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- In a case in Tamil Nadu, a 15 year old boy ran away from home to liberate himself from the harsh and problematic family members.

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- Hence, it can be said that not all children in the ‘missing’ database have been trafficked and some step out of their homes voluntarily to lead a different life.
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- Nonetheless, it is the duty of the state to ensure that the child is safe and secure in his/her newly chosen environment and gets her due childhood.
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What is the way ahead?

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- Greater coordination between child welfare bodies and police is vital to bring down the rate of disappearances and increase the percentage of retracing kids.
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- Police reform, capacity building and trained human resources to crack these cases and effective tracking of distress calls could also better the cause.
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- Delhi police have commissioned facial recognition features to identify and track missing kids, and nationwide database has been setup for the same.
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- While these are positives, educating our children on safety and counselling parents for bettering their parenting techniques also needs to be furthered.
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Source: The Hindu

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