

Missing White Woman Syndrome

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Missing white woman syndrome (MWWS) or missing pretty girl syndrome is a vernacular term for the disproportionately greater degree of coverage in television, radio, newspaper and magazine reporting of a misfortune, most often a missing person case, involving a young, attractive, white, upper-middle class woman or girl. This degree of coverage is contrasted with cases concerning a missing male, or missing females of other ethnicities, socioeconomic classes or physical attractiveness.

Media coverage

United States

Kim Pasqualini, president of the National Center for Missing Adults, says the media tends to focus on "damsels in distress" - typically, affluent young white women and teenagers. The media's dilemma is that government research shows that victims of non-family abductions and stereotypical kidnappings are most at risk of injury, sexual assault or death. "Damsel" cases may be the exception, but they often are the most urgent.

While the disappearance of Laci Peterson (see list below) became a huge news story, a pregnant black woman named LaToyia Figueroa disappeared from Philadelphia around the same time and attracted no national attention, despite efforts by her family to enlist the media to help find her. (Figueroa was later found murdered.) Some observers also saw contrasts between the attention received by Peterson and Evelyn Hernandez who was nine months pregnant when she disappeared in 2002.

Missing People (National Missing Persons Helpline) report

Two cases of missing pretty girl syndrome are given as contrasting examples: the murder of Hannah Williams and the murder of Danielle Jones. Although both victims were white female teenagers, Jones received more coverage than Williams. It is suggested that this is because Jones was a middle-class schoolgirl, whilst Williams was from a working-class background with a stud in her nose and estranged parents.

In 2011, the case of the murder of Jia Ashton received minimal coverage in the national press (most notably being restricted to the Derby section of the BBC News website, and appearing on the BBC National News only once), whereas the Murder of Sian O'Callaghan sparked national coverage for some weeks, including extensive coverage by the BBC.

Yvonne Jewkes cites the murder of Amanda Dowler, the murder of Sarah Payne, and the Soham murders as examples of "eminently newsworthy stories" about girls from "respectable" middle-class families and backgrounds whose parents used the news media effectively. She claims that in

contrast, the street murder of Damilola Taylor initially received little news coverage, with reports initially concentrating upon street crime levels and community policing, and largely ignoring the victim.

Even when the victim's father flew into the UK from Nigeria to make press statements and television appearances, the level of public outcry did not, Jewkes asserts, reach "the near hysterical outpourings of anger and sadness that accompanied the deaths of Sarah, Milly, Holly, and Jessica".

Cited instances

The following missing person cases have been cited as examples of missing white woman syndrome:

United Kingdom

Joanna Yeates (December 17, 2010)

Sian O'Callaghan

Portugal

Madeleine McCann (May 3, 2007)

Japan

Lucie Blackman (July 21, 2000) - A hostess in the Roppongi area of Tokyo who went missing. Her decomposed body was discovered later, widely suspected to have died from a reaction to date rape drug. But due to the state of decomposition, this fact could not be established scientifically. The suspect was found not guilty but was charged and found guilty of separate case of manslaughter resulting from attempted rape with drug.

Lindsay Hawker (March 24, 2007)

United States

Polly Klaas (October 1, 1993) - found murdered; murderer convicted.

Chandra Levy (May 1, 2001) - missing for several months; skeletal remains found. In February 2011, the killer was sentenced. The death of a young Asian woman, Joyce Chiang, who was alleged to have been killed by the same man in the same area, was largely ignored, though the Congressman-in-sex-scandal aspect of Levy's case contributed to media interest.

Elizabeth Smart (June 5, 2002) - found alive; kidnapper currently on trial as of November 17, 2010.

Laci Peterson (December 23, 2002) - found murdered; suspected murderer convicted (reliability of

conviction in dispute); prompted Unborn Victims of Violence Act.

Dru Sjodin (November 22, 2003) - found murdered; murderer convicted; prompted Dru Sjodin National Sex Offender Public Registry.

Brooke Wilberger (May 24, 2004) - abducted, murderer revealed location of body and convicted.

Jennifer Wilbanks (April 26, 2005) - "The Runaway Bride." Went out for a jog and did not return; there was much media speculation that her fiancé had killed her. Found she had staged her own kidnapping when she was discovered alive several days later and admitted what she had done.

Natalee Holloway (May 30, 2005) - still missing and presumed dead, last known location in Aruba, investigation closed, then reopened on February 1, 2008.

Taylor Behl (September 5, 2005) - 17-year-old Virginia Commonwealth University freshman disappeared and was later found dead; murderer convicted.

Michelle Gardner-Quinn (October 7, 2006) - 21-year-old undergraduate at the University of Vermont who disappeared and was later found dead; murderer convicted.

Jessie Marie Davis (June 14, 2007) - reported missing and later found murdered; murderer convicted.

In the Iraq War

Critics have also pointed to media bias in the coverage of soldier Jessica Lynch versus that of her fellow soldiers, Shoshana Johnson and Lori Piestewa. All three were ambushed in the same attack during the Iraq War on March 23, 2003, with Piestewa being killed and Lynch and Johnson being injured and taken prisoner. Lynch, a young, blonde, white woman, received far more media coverage than Johnson (a black woman and a single mother) and Piestewa (a Hopi from an impoverished background, and also a single mother), with media critics suggesting that the media gave more attention to the woman with whom audiences would more readily identify.

Indeed, Lynch herself leveled harsh criticism at this disproportionate coverage that focused only on her, stating in a congressional testimony before the United States House Committee on Oversight and Government Reform:

" I am still confused as to why they chose to lie and tried to make me a legend when the real heroics of my fellow soldiers that day were, in fact, legendary. People like Lori Piestewa and First Sergeant Dowdy who picked up fellow soldiers in harm's way. Or people like Patrick Miller and Sergeant Donald Walters who actually fought until the very end. The bottom line is the American people are capable of determining their own ideals of heroes and they don't need to be told elaborate tales.