

Facebook posts seeking missing Black children get much less attention than posts of white kids

October 4 2022, by Doug Caruso, USA Today



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Social media could be an equalizer for finding missing children, highlighting posts about kids from all backgrounds without the filters of

traditional media and police gatekeepers.

But a USA TODAY analysis suggests social media audiences still pick favorites by bestowing more likes, shares and views on posts about missing [white children](#)—especially girls—than missing Black children.

In 375 videos featured on Facebook by The National Center for Missing & Exploited Children, the average views on posts about white girls was more than 63,000; for Black girls, it was 38,300.

Researchers have determined that [news media](#) and police pay less attention when people of color vanish, a phenomenon commonly known as "missing white woman syndrome." Social media managers at the center said they focus on the most vulnerable and those the news ignores; on the center's Facebook page—with nearly 1.2 million followers—they posted more videos about missing Black kids than other children.

USA TODAY analyzed the center's video posts between October 2019 and June of this year. Information about each post came from CrowdTangle, a social media tracking tool. Reporters reviewed the posts to determine each child's gender, race, age and the location and date of their disappearance.

This analysis is part of USA TODAY's series examining the disparate treatment of cases involving Black missing children. Previous stories compared the cases of two missing girls—one Black, one white—and detailed why a lack of diversity in DNA databases hinders investigations seeking missing Black children.

The new analysis found:

- The center posted most about Black missing kids. Those 139 posts outnumbered posts about white missing children (118) and

Hispanic missing children (91). Fewer posts featured children of other races and ethnicities.

- Posts about white girls attracted the most views, an average of 63,100 per post. That was followed closely by posts about Hispanic girls (62,000) and Hispanic boys (58,400). Posts about white boys (50,700) were fourth.
- Posts about Black girls and boys received significantly fewer views—38,300 and 37,600 respectively.

Michelle N. Jeanis, a criminal justice researcher at the University of Louisiana, Lafayette, observed similar disparities last year when she examined posts on another group's Facebook page dedicated to missing adults and children in the South.

She said it makes sense for the center to favor videos not just about Black children, but about Black girls, who researchers have found are in greater danger than others when they disappear. One 2018 comprehensive review of missing children's cases in New York state showed that Black girls were missing longer and more than twice as likely to remain missing than other children.

"They're the most frequently vulnerable or exploited in this capacity," Jeanis said.

Ideally, she said, that should cause people to engage more with posts about Black girls.

"I can get on my horse about the news media historically representing Black people as offenders and white people as victims of crime for all forms of crime," she said. "When we see a white victim, it's consistent with how we perceive the world. And so, we engage.

"The Black victim makes us think more, and so we don't engage as

much."

It's unclear whether more Black children would be found with greater social media attention.

In the Facebook items reviewed by USA TODAY, Facebook views were not a reliable predictor of success. The amount of time the child was missing before the center posted a video seemed a key factor. White children tended to be missing longer before the videos went online, and their overall recovery rate was lower than for Black children.

But advocates say getting more people to interact with social media posts about missing kids remains an important goal. One unpublished study of missing adults, which is still undergoing review, indicated that paying to boost the number of impressions on Facebook could improve the odds of recovery.

"For NCMEC, although we like the engagement, it's not as important as getting the image in front of the correct people," said Rebecca Steinbach, a senior producer at the National Center for Missing & Exploited Children. A higher recovery rate for Black missing children, despite lower audience numbers for videos about them, she said, could show that the center is doing a good job finding an audience who can help them.

Mother begs police to make her daughter a priority

Tanesha Howard pleaded with Milwaukee police this summer to classify her missing daughter, Joniah Walker, as a "critical" case. She pointed to the 15-year-old Black girl's documented history of depression and post-traumatic stress disorder.

When she felt officers wouldn't make the case a priority, she turned to

the missing children's center.

The center produced a video with a message from Howard to her daughter, released new posters and distributed an "urgent alert" about Joniah's case on its social media platforms and to news media outlets.

"I believe it helped put the word out about her being missing and other kids like her," Howard said. "It's helpful just in case someone sees them or sees her."

Joniah disappeared June 23. A neighbor's doorbell camera showed her leaving her house with a large backpack that afternoon.

According to CrowdTangle data, the center first posted about her on July 15, linking to her missing poster. That post had 1,185 interactions, including shares, likes and comments. The center posted a video about Joniah twice, on Aug. 6 and 8. By Sept. 12, the second video post had received the most views: 13,864.

Although that put Joniah's story in front of thousands of people who might otherwise not have seen it, it's a level of engagement well below average for video posts about missing Black girls, USA TODAY found, and about one-fifth the average number of views for posts about missing white girls.

Milwaukee news media also covered the case, including two stories about Joniah that appeared on the website of the Milwaukee Journal Sentinel, a member of the USA TODAY Network. The websites of local TV stations affiliated with ABC, Fox and NBC also carried her story, according to a Google search. There was no national media coverage.

Joniah has not been found, and Howard said she worries that the social media attention could have backfired, prompting Joniah or others with

her to try to hide even more diligently. The spotlight has also brought disturbing calls.

"I haven't gotten any real tips," she said. "I have gotten a lot of harassing tips or extortion where they say they know who had her, or she's been raped but she's still alive, and then asking me to send money."

'A runaway child is a missing child'

The evening of the day Joniah disappeared, phone records show she sent a text to her therapist indicating that she had run away, according to her mother.

In general, children believed to be runaways receive less attention from police and media than children who are thought to have been abducted. Recognizing that, the National Center for Missing & Exploited Children scrubbed the word "runaway" from its public communications a decade ago. That term did not appear in any of the center's posts reviewed by USA TODAY.

The difference between the two realities may be negligible anyway since, once out on the street, kids who run away often face the same dangers as those abducted, said Michael Hill, the center's director of digital and social media.

"A runaway child is a missing child," he said. "To us, they're a child and they're missing, and we need to help them."

Both race and runaway status influence interaction with social media posts seeking missing children, Jeanis and her colleagues discovered in their 2021 study of posts to the Facebook page of RAMP, the Resource Association for Missing People, a Louisiana-based group.

They found interactions were highest with posts about white missing youths who had not run away. Next were children of color who had not run away, followed closely by white runaways, then children of color who had run away.

"Many missing persons' cases involve juveniles who are suspected to have left home voluntarily," Jeanis wrote. "This may make the victim seem less vulnerable and their behavior may be regarded as deviant, both of which may decrease engagement."

Kamaria Johnson's father reported her as a runaway when she left their house south of Louisville, Kentucky, one night in May 2021, said her mother, Consuela Jobe. That made it difficult to interest local media in the 16-year-old Black girl's story.

So Jobe started her own Facebook page to spread the word, and eventually contacted the center for help.

On May 31, about a year after Kamaria vanished, the center posted a video about her disappearance that said, in part: "Kamaria Johnson, now 17, has been #missing for a year but to her mom it seems like eternity." The video received about 18,000 views, fewer than most posts, but near average for posts about Black children missing more than a year.

It was only then, a year later, that Kamaria's case began attracting the attention her mother had hoped for at the outset. Other missing children's organizations began to share posts about Kamaria, strangers reached out, and Kamaria's photo appeared on local news channels.

Around the time Kamaria had disappeared, two white teenagers had run away from an amusement park in a nearby town. Jobe said she saw their photos on television that night. Both girls were found.

Jobe wonders whether faster action could have helped her find her daughter, too.

"It's very hurtful," she said. "I was struggling to even try to get her picture out there."

Attention wanes as time passes, but dad doesn't give up hope

No matter the race of the child, the average number of views on the center's videos dropped as time passed.

Posts about Black children missing more than a year on average received half the number of views as posts about Black children missing a year or less. For posts about white children, views dropped by nearly a third after a year.

"When people think there's a time-sensitive nature, they're more likely to engage," Jeanis said. Months later, they're less likely to interact with a post, "because what can I do to help with the cold case?"

In the 2 1/2 years since John Rex began searching for his daughters, audiences have dwindled for videos about their disappearance. Hanna Lee was 7 and Skye Rex was 5 when their mother took them on March 17, 2020, the same day a Pennsylvania judge granted John Rex custody. The judge listened to reports from a court-appointed psychiatrist and a child-advocate lawyer, Rex said, and noted that the children's mother had violated court orders during the custody battle.

Police told John Rex they wouldn't issue an Amber Alert—emergency information about a missing child sent directly to phones, electronic signs and the media—because their mother took them, the father said. In

some states, that's a policy.

Rex started using his own Facebook page and, three weeks after the girls disappeared, the center posted a 39-second video on its page. That video has received more than 72,000 views, according to CrowdTangle, an above-average response.

A new post on the first anniversary of the girls' disappearance drew just over 20,000 views and another in February, nearly two years after Hanna and Skye disappeared, slightly more than 14,000.

Now, the center is trying to keep hope alive for Rex, with new age-projected photos of the girls, new pictures of their mother and video that features Rex pleading for his children's return. Still, TV stations have turned down the story, according to Angeline Hartmann, the center's media director.

"U.S. marshals believe they're in D.C., and we can find them," she said. "It's not a cold case."

Media outlets also often decline to pursue stories about cases of domestic abduction, Steinbach said.

"It's frustrating on our end," she said.

Kelly McBride, a media ethics expert and senior vice president at the Poynter Institute, said editors often take cues from the police about which cases to feature and filter crime stories by asking whether there's a broader danger to the public.

"It's hard to scare the crap out of people when you say, "They kidnapped their own children,"" McBride said.

Those choices can distort the nature of events, she said, creating the incorrect impression, for example, that strangers are the most common abductors.

Most commenters on the social media posts about his children's case offer prayers for their return, Rex said—but not all of them.

"You got other people who just leave a comment like 'go mom,'" he said. "This isn't Team Mom or Team Dad. This is, 'help find my children.'"

'Boosting' posts may bring more children home

This year, Jeanis experimented with methods to help Facebook posts about missing people of color reach more people.

She found that paying to boost posts about missing nonwhite people—in essence, advertising the post to a specific audience—helped bring interaction numbers into parity. Boosting posts for white women and girls had little to no effect.

"They already had such high engagement that they didn't need boosts," Jeanis said.

CrowdTangle does not indicate whether posts received a paid boost, so it's unclear whether boosting affected the posts USA TODAY examined. Hill, the center's director of digital and [social media](#), said the group does regularly boost its videos.

"Generally, when we're targeting a boost, it's a 25-mile radius of where the child might be," he said.

In Jeanis' experiment, she created missing-person posts for 24 pairs of demographically similar missing people. One of each pair got a boost in

the state where they disappeared and in all surrounding states, the other did not.

The paper on that test is still in peer review, and the sample sizes are small, but there's another finding that gives Jeanis hope that finding ways to increase exposure for all missing people will bring more of them home: Out of the 48 people she posted about in her study, five of them have been found. All five were in the boosted group.

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