



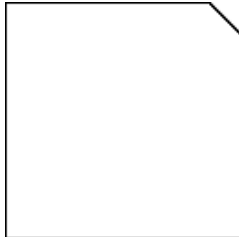
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**NATIONAL NEWS**



**Double Standard: Missing Black Women Still Get Less Media Than Whites**

by Jan Ransom  
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Originally posted 4/1/2009

Tamika Huston  
Credit: NNPA

WASHINGTON (NNPA) - Average looking men, women and children from a variety of economic, social and ethnic backgrounds made up the more than 105,000 active missing persons in America last year, according to the National Crime Information Center. However, national media operations often fail to present what is in fact a very diverse missing persons population – African-Americans. And some observers believe race is the factor.

"There is a culture in America that tends to sympathize with the blond White woman instead of the braided black woman," said Ernie Suggs, vice president of print for the National Association of Black Journalists. "There has always been a certain level of interest, a certain fascination with White missing persons ... Americans identify with who they want to be."

For example, Latasha Norman, a 20-year-old, Jackson State University honor student from the Mississippi Delta city of Greenville, had been missing for more than two weeks when her body was found on Nov. 29, 2007, in a wooded area in Jackson. Norman's boyfriend, Stanley Cole, 24, was charged with her murder. Her story received little national coverage and was quickly glossed over by CNN.

Thousands of miles away, the disappearance of Stacey Peterson, a 23-year-old, mother of two from Bolingbrook Ill., whose police officer husband is a primary suspect in her Oct. 28, 2007, received national media attention for weeks. Her case was updated regularly on CNN, MSNBC and other major news stations in great detail. Peterson's story was featured in a number of major newspapers including the Washington Post, Los Angeles Times and New York Newsday.

Stacey Peterson nearly became a household name, producing 723,000 results on Google, a world-wide web search engine. Norman's name produced 177,000 results.

What's the difference between the two women?

Race is the difference, according to Jackson Police Chief Malcolm McMillin, who is White.

"As far as the interest by the national media in the story, I think race probably had an impact," the police chief said in a story by David Schoetz, posted on ABCnews.go.com while Norman was still missing.

"It's a small college in the South. It's the daughter of simple people who maybe are not important outside of their circle, and maybe we don't attach the same importance to them that we do for other people," said McMillin in the article.

According to FBI statistics, in 2007, a total of 814,967 missing person records were entered into the National Crime Information Center's Missing Person File. Over 25 percent of those missing are African-Americans and they are only 12 percent of the U.S. population. Whites make-up 66 percent of the U.S. population and account for nearly 63 percent of the missing persons. Others include Latinos. "There is a whole

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lot of brown and Black people (missing)," said Rebekah Howard, partner and founder of Image Pro, a public relations marketing firm, in Miami.

In May 2004, Howard's niece, Tamika Huston, then 24, disappeared from Spartanburg, S.C. A year later her case received national media attention, not as the story of a missing person but a missing person who was ignored by mainstream media because of her race. Huston was missing for over a year.

Huston and her boyfriend, Christopher Hampton, 25, were arguing about money when Hampton threw a hot iron at Huston hitting her in the head. He panicked after killing her and drove around with her body for hours until he buried her in a wooded area in Duncan, S.C., marking the spot with a cross made from tree branches, he told the Herald-Journal of Spartanburg.

In August 2005, Hampton was charged with Huston's murder.

Media outlets such as "America's Most Wanted" helped authorities by airing Huston's story in March 2005. After the broadcast, an anonymous tipster provided Spartanburg officers with the essential details needed to solve the case.

"Media serves two purposes," Howard said in an interview. "Not only for attention and new information, but it puts pressure on law enforcement in addition to putting pressure on the perpetrator."

The color within the missing persons population is often overlooked because "national networks in particular, have found a formula for producing miniature soap operas," said Howard, citing the 2002 Laci Peterson case involving a missing White, pregnant 27-year old, who was killed by her husband.

Howard speculates that stories involving White females raise ratings for the networks.

"Media drives the story. There are a lot of juicy tidbits but no one knows that because the media didn't put the story in the spotlight," Howard said.

Early media attention is crucial, Howard says.

Sgt. Noel Leader agrees. "It sounds a public alarm," says the police retiree and co-founder of 100 Blacks in Law Enforcement Who Care. That's a Brooklyn, N.Y.-based organization, founded in 1995 to serve as a voice for the Black community in the justice system.

Around the time Huston's story was acknowledged by the media, Natalie Holloway, 18, a White female, vanished during her trip to Aruba in May 2005. Her story immediately took over local and national news stations.

"You would see another family going through the same pain, and you can't fault them," Howard said. "It just makes you so angry. Why do they (missing White females ) get around-the-world coverage? What about those other women?"

Howard said that in her attempts to reach out, she found that she was being strung along by editors and producers.

The issue, Suggs and Leader agree, has to do with the lack of diversity in the newsroom. "We need to develop our own media outlets. Stop supporting those that don't support the things that are important to us," Leader says.

According to the Radio-Television News Directors' 2007 annual study of diversity, Blacks represent 9.5 percent of those in TV newsrooms and are 4.2 percent of TV news directors.

Leader advocates more media ownership among African-Americans as another solution.

Meanwhile, families of missing persons must deal with other issues besides the lack of media attention.

Leader advises that families must constantly ask questions regarding the objectives and strategies as well as continue to check up on the status of cases with officers. "Don't be intimidated," he said.

As a result of Howard's efforts, NBC producer Josh Mingelwoods committed to the 2005 story that posed the question why Holloway became a household name and Huston did not. USA Today reporter Mark Memmott also wrote an article on the case.

Howard now uses her experiences and expertise to help others. She and her family are launching the Tamika Huston Foundation for the Missing, which will assist and support families, particularly minorities with the process associated with finding and solving the cases of missing loved ones.

The Foundation Web site, [www.TamikaHuston.com](http://www.TamikaHuston.com), is under construction. Howard says it will provide media relations and teach families how to interact with law enforcement in missing persons cases.

The foundation was launched on Dec. 11, Howard said. "That would have been Tamika's 28th birthday."

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