

Missing Minorities Given Short Shrift By Media

Experts blame it partly on lack of diversity among decision makers

By AMBER ELLIS
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Twiggy Damy, could not understand why her pregnant friend's disappearance and ultimate death did not make national headlines.

Evelyn Hernandez's disappearance was eerily similar to the case of Laci Peterson, which caught the national spotlight.

The two California women were both eight months pregnant when they disappeared. Their bodies washed ashore within the same year. And in both cases, police suspected the men in their lives of murder.

But while Peterson — a Latina who was often presumed to be white — received nonstop coverage until her husband was



Evelyn Hernandez

sentenced to death this year, little attention was paid to Hernandez.

"I ask myself why every single day," said Damy, one of the few people Hernandez befriended after coming to the U.S. from El Salvador. "Maybe Evelyn wasn't as beautiful as Laci Peterson, maybe this wasn't a Prince Charming story. But no matter what, I think the same — it isn't right."

The issue has caused some irritation: stories about missing young, pretty white women get covered. The tales of those who are missing but don't fit that category are largely ignored.

Television drives much of the coverage, but newspapers also are part of the chase.

Sidmel Estes-Sumpter, an executive producer at the Atlanta Fox station, said the

networks are drawn to what increases ratings.

"There is a tendency on the part of the networks to do the sexier cases that can draw in viewers," she said. "We tend to cover young, pretty white women on networks. Part of it is because we don't have as many people of color making those decisions."

Few can forget the faces of Peterson, Chandra Levy and

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Friend of Evelyn Hernandez

Natalee Holloway, all of whom were white. Little attention was paid to missing women of color like Hernandez, Tamika Huston or Dymashal Cullins.

Huston, 24, disappeared from her South Carolina home last year. Cullins, a 32-year-old mother of five, was last seen two years ago in Atlanta.

But the case of missing high school graduate Natalee Holloway has received extensive coverage since her disappearance during a trip to Aruba in May.

"The tipping point was Ms. Holloway in Aruba," said Dori Maynard, president of the Maynard Institute for Journalism. "There

have been too many missing white women in a concentrated period of time for this not to seep out ... and raise eyebrows."

Some critics say a lack of diversity in newsrooms has led

to uneven coverage. People tend to gravitate toward what is familiar to them, which may lead some journalists to cover missing persons who remind them of their wives, mothers and daughters, Maynard added.

The San Francisco Chronicle has published almost 400 pieces on Peterson, including several front-page stories.

About Hernandez, there are a dozen.

While the two cases appear to be very similar, Trapper Byrne, a Chronicle deputy metro editor, noted critical differences: Hernandez wasn't reported missing until almost a month after her disappearance, and no one has been arrested for her murder.

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—Keith Woods
Dean of faculty for the Poynter Institute

a fact of life. If your competition shapes a major story, you're pulled along like everybody else," said Byrne.

The Philadelphia Daily News

runs stories about nearly all of the missing persons cases reported to the paper, said Mike Days, an editor.

What can differ though is the amount of coverage. Recently, the case of a missing pregnant woman, Latoyia Figueroa — who is black and disappeared last month, leaving her 7-year-old daughter behind — has attracted attention.

It doesn't hurt to be blond and blue-eyed, said Days, but other factors affect coverage as well such as having strong support. Figueroa's case is

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unique because a local blogger pushed the story forward.

"It helps to have muscle behind you," Days said. "When a city councilman calls a meeting and says one of his relatives is missing, it makes a difference."

Another African-American woman, Taneke Daniels, has not received nearly the same attention. The Philadelphia woman disappeared in May, and local outlets, including the Daily News, have not followed her case closely.

Erin Bruno at the National Center for Missing Adults sends out five press releases a day. If she's lucky, she says one will grab the media's attention.

"The media often times look for twists and turns, and most people just don't have that," said Bruno, a lead case manager.

"No one wants Laci or Natalee to receive any less

coverage. But families begin to think, 'What about my loved

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Executive producer at Fox Atlanta station

one? They're just as important. Why don't they matter?"

At the beginning of May, the Federal Bureau of Investigation reported 47,580 people missing. Of these, 47 percent were women and 38 percent were minorities.

Because Hispanics are included in the same category as whites, it is unclear how much the number of missing minorities would increase if they were included.

The first step is acknowledging the problem, said Keith Woods, dean of faculty for the Poynter Institute. The next, he said, is action.

"Leaders (in the media) are aghast that they could be guilty of making these choices," said Woods, who acknowledged that newsroom diversity was an issue, but not key to reaching the goal of equal coverage. "Yet, indignation is no match for the proof on the page or on the screen," Woods said. "Journalists need to act, do something and stop waiting for the next Aruba story or Jon Benet Ramsey case to come along."



Laci Peterson



Latoyia Figueroa



Natalee Holloway