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ANNALS OF THE MEDIA -- What about the missing men?

By MEGAN SCOTT - *The Associated Press*

It has the makings of a classic Lifetime drama: A young, attractive white woman vanishes under mysterious circumstances, and the nation watches the massive search effort under way to find her.

Chandra Levy. Laci Peterson. Natalee Holloway. Jennifer Wilbanks, aka the "runaway bride." Most recently, Jessie Davis, the missing pregnant woman in Ohio whose body was found Saturday.

But where is the media frenzy when men disappear?

Keith Gores, a banker in Wisconsin, has been missing since March. John Fiocco Jr., a student at The College of New Jersey, had been missing for a month when his body was found in a landfill last year. Michael Negrete, a freshman at UCLA, disappeared from his dorm room in 1999; his body has never been found.

These men remain relatively unknown - in fact, outside of hikers, soldiers and Jimmy Hoffa, the disappearance of men rarely makes a big splash. This despite the fact that, as of May 1, 2005, FBI figures showed that 53 percent of the 47,591 missing adults were male.

CRIMINAL ACTS

So why do missing men get so little of the attention?

"When a woman goes missing, there's usually some type of foul play," says Tod Burke, criminal justice professor at Radford University in Virginia, and a former Maryland police officer. "A guy who runs off - the first thing we suspect, were they in trouble? Are they running from a relationship or personal problem? Is there an investigation that is taking place where he feels he has to hide from the police?"

Gores' wife, Sara, says several people have made false assumptions about her banker husband's disappearance. She thinks her husband became lost after suffering confusion or amnesia that developed after he slipped and struck his



Ric Feld

The "runaway bride," before she reappeared.



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head. On the morning of his disappearance, his vision was blurred and he lounged on the couch, thinking it was Saturday, she says. She had to remind him it was Thursday.

Sara Gores says because of her husband's prominence, she was able to get some media attention when he first disappeared. But the interest has waned.

"People assume that a man runs away, that he kills himself," she says. "They make all those assumptions without knowing the details. People who know him and know the situation know that's not the case."

Of course, men can encounter foul play, too, and women have been known to batter men. But even when a woman kills a spouse, she is generally acting out of self defense, says Timothy Dimoff, owner of SACS Consulting and Investigative Services in Ohio. She is also less likely to drag the body and dump it somewhere, he says.

MEDIA FACTOR

What about how missing-person cases are covered?

Perhaps the disappearance of women simply makes for a better story than a man who vanished to avoid paying child support. Throw in blonde hair, blue eyes, some crying family members and a middle- or upper-class background (more valued in our society and more savvy when it comes to accessing media), and the story really begins to pull at our heartstrings.

"The media sees its role as really presenting, 'Look at what they are doing to our women. We must cover this endlessly,'" says Elayne Rapping, professor of American studies at University at Buffalo, State University of New York. "When you think about the way in which the media present these stories, they do have a narrative arc."

"What would the story be if a man disappeared?" she asks. "If your husband goes missing, and you go to the police and say, 'He's missing,' the police will say, 'He probably left you.' There's no heart-wrenching story. There's nothing to sympathize with."

Keep in mind, Burke says, the average person who goes missing is not considered newsworthy.

The Ohio case escalated because of the unusual details: a woman pregnant with a married cop's child, her 2-year-old found alone in the house, saying, "Mommy broke the table, and Mommy's in the rug."

But it's not like there aren't missing-man cases with fascinating details. Take the case of Fiocco: Last seen alive in a campus dorm room, his blood was found in a trash bin outside the dorm and authorities spent weeks searching a Pennsylvania landfill before discovering his body. There are still no suspects and authorities aren't sure if what happened to Fiocco was a crime.

It's an interesting case - and you probably had never heard of it until now.

DAMSELS IN DISTRESS?

Media outlets are aware of the discrepancy, says Kristal Brent Zook, who teaches at Columbia University Graduate School of Journalism. Dozens of stories have been done on the Missing White Woman Syndrome - excessive coverage of Damsels in Distress, as a Washington Post columnist called them.

In fact, MWWS has gotten more media attention than stories on actual men and nonwhite women who are missing, says Zook, who two years ago profiled missing black women for an Essence magazine article.

Men and nonwhite women as victims don't resonate with the masses, Rapping says.

"It has to be a story that appeals to moral outrage," she says. "We feel moral outrage more for certain kinds of people and certain kinds of women."

The whole thing is unfortunate, says James Alan Fox, a criminal justice professor at Northeastern University.

"The more media attention, the more exposure, the more people who come forward to volunteer information," he says. "The police response seems to be greater. And the chance of a happy ending may depend on all that as well."

Megan Scott is an asap reporter based in New York.