

Mikayla found dead next door



MAIN PICTURE: The crime scene in Swellendam where the body of Mikayla Rossouw (ABOVE) was found in a neighbour's shack. **BELOW LEFT:** Mikayla's mother, Elsabé Rossouw.

– but how could the little girl have disappeared in front of everyone and her body be hidden right under their noses?

Sadly Mikayla is the fifth SA child to be murdered in the past few months and dumped on her parents' doorstep.

"It's hard for the police to stop this kind of crime," MEC for safety and security in the Western Cape, Leonard Ramatlakane, said at a memorial service for Mikayla.

"We need your help. If you see a child walking with someone ask yourself, who is this man? Who is this child?"

Get to know your neighbours and if you hear screaming next door go over on the pretext of borrowing salt or sugar, Ramatlakane urged. You could prevent a murder.

How can it happen?

If the body of a murdered child is found in or near her home the question inevitably is, did the police and parents properly search the area? If people responded differently could the child have been saved?

More and more often children are found close to where they went missing long after they'd disappeared, SA's top detective Piet Byleveld says.

"The scene where the child was last seen is extremely important. Every centimetre must be checked. You have to do your homework properly," the Gauteng-based policeman says.

A crime scene near or in the parents' home is easily disturbed, adds Professor Herman Conradie of Unisa's

department of criminology.

"The parents may pick up things the child had touched and unwittingly destroy important clues. This makes a proper investigation of the crime scene nearly impossible."

When the murderer is known to the family the crime is committed in the perpetrator's comfort zone – which is why he leaves the victim in an area familiar to him.

It could sometimes be for practical reasons, Pretoria criminologist Dr Irma Labuschagne says, such as a lack of transport or because the crime wasn't planned but committed on the spur of the moment.

"Police are keen to find missing children alive. The thought the body could be right under their noses is too gruesome to immediately contemplate. But it seems police should first look under the beds, in the roof and in neighbours' homes."

But this kind of search is often complicated by legal requirements. A warrant to search a neighbour's house will be issued only on reasonable suspicion that the occupants are involved in the crime. This is why police need to get as much information as possible from the community.

In paedophile cases only about 10 per cent of perpetrators are strangers to their victims. In 60 per cent of crimes against children family members are involved. The rest are friends or neighbours – which means the perpetrators often live close by.

When to get involved

It was thanks to the public's involvement that six-year-old Steven Siebert's murderer didn't get away. The owner of the house suspected the man he'd employed to do tiling could be involved – he was indifferent about the boy's disappearance and had suddenly shaved off his beard. And someone had reported seeing Steven with a bearded man on the day he disappeared.

"Healthy paranoia can save you a lot of heartache,"

Conradie says.

"We encourage mutual responsibility," says Pieter Boshoff of the group missingchildren.co.za which has helped solve 16 cases since March. They assist the police by involving the public. "If you see children where they don't belong, say on the street during school time or in a nightclub or bar with an adult, you must inform someone," Boshoff says.

Details and photographs of missing children are posted on the group's website and forwarded to thousands of "friends" on www.myspace.com/missingchildren.za. "We also send an SMS to registered members of our internet community living in the area."

Labuschagne says parents should ensure their children aren't vulnerable by giving them love "so they don't go in search of it from people offering them sweets".

Children's environments must offer a safe haven. "Introduce them to a trustworthy woman in the neighbourhood they can run to for help if they're in trouble. There's someone like that in every community."

"Parents should be more aware of who their children befriend," Byleveld says. "And there must be open communication between parents and children. Children must be able to speak openly to their parents about anything, whether it's sex or their safety."

Parents shouldn't worry that they're being overprotective. "I've never counselled anyone who's been emotionally damaged because of a strict parent who was trying to protect them," Joburg traumatologist Dr Tessa van Wijk says. "If you as a parent feel in the slightest bit suspicious about something it's better to overreact than have regrets later on." □

MIKAYLA WASN'T THE FIRST

■ The body of **Stacie Wiese** (11) was discovered in the ceiling of her parents' home in Mitchell's Plain, Cape Town.



Stacie Wiese

■ The body of **Sheldean Human** (7) of Pretoria was found stuffed into a stormwater drain 4 km from her home 15 days after she'd disappeared.



Sheldean Human

■ On 9 March last year the body of **Makgabo Matlala** (4), the granddaughter of Judge Bernard Ngoepe, Judge President of the Transvaal, was found under a bed in her parents' home a day after she'd disappeared.



Makgabo Matlala

■ The body of **Steven Siebert** (6) was found on Christmas Eve 2005 in thick bushes 600 m from the house where the Gauteng family were holidaying in Plettenberg Bay.



Steven Siebert

■ **Elvandr  van Wyk** (9) of Upington was found in a metal drum in a neighbour's garden.

■ The body of **Celine Cowley** (4) of Ravensmead, Cape Town, was found three houses from her parents' home.