

## Despite pleas, missing SC boy falls by wayside

By MEG KINNARD | Associated Press – 23 hrs ago

COLUMBIA, S.C. (AP) — Despite detectives' pleas to national media, the disappearance of an 18-month-old black boy with the wide smile has yet to grab the widespread attention given to other missing children's cases. Some advocates say the reason why may be as simple as the toddler's gender — and his race.

From the still-unsolved slaying of 6-year-old JonBenet Ramsey more than 15 years ago to the disappearance and killing of 2-year-old Caylee Anthony, the public has watched with rapt attention as many cases involving young children unfolded, often over many months. Yet Amir Jennings, the little boy who hasn't been seen since he was captured on surveillance video with his mother in South Carolina nearly a year ago, has registered as scarcely a blip on the nation's consciousness.

"Media has always leaned toward the cute little kids," said Monica Caison of the Wilmington, N.C.-based CUE Center for Missing Persons. "And unfortunately, a lot of times they think cute little kids are white."

Amir's mother, Zinah Jennings, was convicted Friday on a charge related to his disappearance and sentenced to 10 years in prison. The 23-year-old woman has been jailed since December, and police arrested her after she told them false, misleading stories about the boy's whereabouts. Jennings has maintained that she left the boy somewhere safe, but prosecution witnesses said the young mother claimed she was stressed and pondered selling or giving away the boy.

Jennings' mother says she last saw her wide-eyed, giggly grandson early on the morning of Nov. 28, 2011. He went to a bank with his mother the next day but has not been seen since. A store owner has testified she saw the boy and his mother a month later, but prosecutors challenged that assertion, and there was no surveillance video to back up the claim.

In the months since he disappeared, Amir's grandmother has celebrated his second birthday. His mother has given birth to a second child. And the national spotlight that initially shone on the case has waned.

One of the reasons could be as simple as Amir being a boy. While federal officials say the numbers of the missing are roughly split when it comes to gender, Caison said pedophiles tend to seek out girls, while missing boys often are taken by a parent or other relative.

And in her searches for adult males, Caison said, she has an even harder time getting anyone to pay attention.

"People want to think that missing males are OK and safe," she said. "I still sit back every day and scratch my head and say,

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Amir's story has gotten nowhere near the attention of cases like that of Caylee Anthony, a 2-year-old white Orlando girl whose body was found a month after she was reported missing in 2008. Anthony's mother was arrested and charged with murder after telling a string of lies to the police.

The case captivated the nation for months and culminated with the trial of the girl's mother, Casey Anthony. Radio shows enlisted attorneys to provide analysis during the morning commute, while cable television networks covered every moment in the courtroom.

People camped outside the courthouse to make sure they could sit in the gallery the next morning. Protests erupted when Casey Anthony was acquitted of a murder charge; her attorneys devised an elaborate plan to shake the media when she was whisked away from jail.

In the Ramsey case, water-cooler speculation swirled for years about who killed the child beauty pageant queen in 1996 and who wrote the ransom note found at the murder scene. Her parents, John and Patsy Ramsey, were demonized by the public for years until prosecutors apologized and said DNA evidence excluded them as suspects. No one was ever charged in her death.

So why are some cases elevated in the public sphere, while others are not?

Jacqueline Fish, a former law officer and current criminal justice professor at Charleston Southern University, said law enforcement ideally takes each case seriously, and each case has had police and prosecutors who have spoken publicly about the need for justice. But inherently, Fish said, every case is still somewhat subjective. Columbia Police Chief Randy Scott is black, and surmised he might have seen something of one of his own children in Amir — and pushed initially to publicize the case.

After Jennings' arrest, Scott reached out to the media to ask for help finding the missing boy. Yellow flyers began popping up around Columbia. Groups organized vigils to pray for Amir's safe return.

"I want someone to call us and say, 'We just saw this on the news, we have Amir, we're sorry, we didn't realize this was going on,'" Scott said at a January news conference announcing that a tip line had been set up. "Her stories are so across the board."

In his investigation's early days, Scott also appeared on several national cable news shows, saying that Jennings continued to change her story when pressed for information about her son. Jennings' mother also made appeals for help, asking at a news conference for any information about the boy she called "Mir Mir" and "AJ." She sat down several times with The Associated Press, describing her conflicting emotions of concern for her grandson and support for her daughter.

But as the weeks dragged on, and no credible tips moved the case forward, the national news outlets stopped calling. Scott said his officers continued their investigation, but no bombshells came.

According to the U.S. Department of Justice, about 800,000 children are reported missing in the United States a year, and nearly all reported missing to the police — almost 99 percent — are returned home alive. More than half of those are white, while about 150,000 are black, and 164,000 are Hispanic.

Amir's body has not been found, although police have said from the beginning that they feared foul play had been involved in his disappearance. But it's the uncertainty of his fate, Fish said, that could play a role in the lack of widespread attention.

"Someone needs to be brought to justice," Fish said. "In Amir's case, they can't be out for justice because we don't know what happened to him."

Officials with the Black and Missing Foundation, Inc., an organization that focuses on finding missing minorities, said they struggle to get and maintain news coverage of minority missing persons cases.

"We are making some headway, but there are still challenges," said co-founder Natalie Wilson, who said she sometimes gets pushback when pitching a story to media outlets.

Noting she has had some recent successes pitching missing minority cases to media outlets, Wilson said she's often told that editors and producers can't promise coverage and don't have the time to run a big piece. In one instance, a plea for help to find a young missing black girl was bumped to report the news that Paris Hilton had been released from jail.

"How does that supersede someone's life?" Wilson asked. "Can you imagine how her parents would feel?"

Attention on a missing child case should be the same — intense — regardless of gender or race," Caison said.

"It's not an excuse," Caison said. "A child missing should be aired because of the fact that they're a child, that they're away from safe haven, and that there's foul play or other concerns involved."