

Shocking and strange: Experts compare Nancy Guthrie's case to other missing persons

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Nancy Guthrie's case has drawn wide attention, in part because of the unique circumstances of her disappearance. She's seen here alongside other people who are listed on the FBI's Kidnappings and Missing Persons page as of Thursday morning.

FBI/Screenshot by NPR

The abduction of Nancy Guthrie is putting a spotlight on the excruciating uncertainty endured by thousands of families whose loved ones go missing each year. Experts see parallels with those cases, even as many details in Guthrie's case are unique, from the victim's age to her celebrity daughter, *Today* show co-host Savannah Guthrie.

The circumstances of Guthrie's disappearance are "quite shocking," says Jesse Goliath, a forensic anthropologist at [Mississippi State University](#).

"Usually you hear about smaller children, juveniles that go missing" and attracting national press, Goliath says. "But having an older woman who's gone missing and having [a daughter] that you've seen on TV every day" is extraordinary, he adds.

More than 500,000 people were reported missing in the U.S. last year, according to the [Justice Department](#). But Tara Kennedy, media representative for the [Doe Network](#), a volunteer group working to identify missing and unidentified persons, says high-profile kidnappings are rare.

"I can't remember the last time I heard about a ransom case besides Guthrie," says Kennedy, who has worked with the Doe Network since 2014. "I always associate them with different periods in American history, like the Lindbergh kidnapping, not someone's mother from the *Today* show."

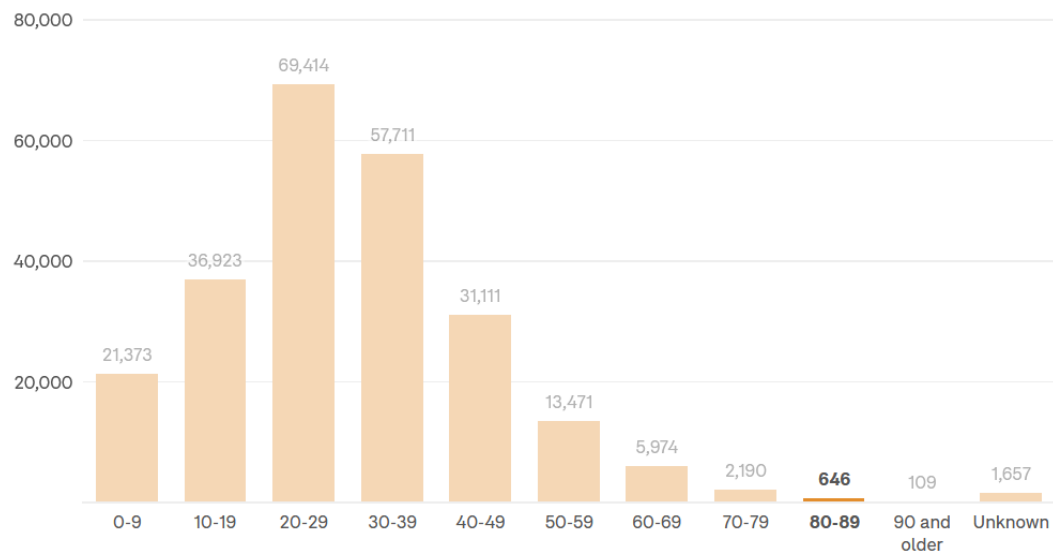
Both Kennedy and Goliath describe the Guthrie case as "strange." Here's a rundown of things it has in common with other missing-persons cases, and why it's unusual:

Key details that are "unheard of"

From June 2020 to June 2025, women comprised more than 75% of the victims in the some 240,000 cases of kidnappings or abductions that were reported in the U.S., according to [FBI crime data](#). But of those, only 646 women were in their 80s like Nancy Guthrie, who is 84, or less than .2% of all victims. Compare that to the age group that accounted for the largest number of victims that year: people 20-29, who made up just shy of 30% of victims.

Abductions of victims in their 80s are rare

Reported kidnappings and abductions by victim's age, June 2020–June 2025



Source: [FBI Crime Data Explorer](#)

Credit: Alyson Hurt and Maureen Pao/NPR

Other highly unusual revelations have emerged as her disappearance has persisted: from purported ransom notes sent to media outlets demanding millions of dollars to unsettling images of a masked gunman approaching Guthrie's front door on the night she disappeared.

Taken together, it's like something out of a true crime novel, Goliath says: "That's something unheard of."

In missing-person cases, a quick response is crucial

TV shows have helped perpetuate a myth that families have to [wait 24 hours](#) before reporting a loved one as missing. But some shows and movies do get one thing right: [The first 24 to 48 hours are critical](#) to locating someone who has disappeared. "Usually a lot of them are going to be [found] within 24 hours, especially the juvenile and young adult cases," Goliath says.

In that early timeframe, eyewitness reports might be more useful; sniffer dogs will have a fresher scent to follow; and surveillance video and other electronic data is more likely to be intact and helpful.

"The longer the person is missing, the more difficult it becomes" to find them, Kennedy says, citing decades-old unresolved cases.

Then there's the victim's health. Whether the subject of a search operation wandered off and got lost, or was abducted or trafficked, Goliath notes that after 48 hours, their well-being could be compromised — by the elements, or by health issues such as Nancy Guthrie's pacemaker and her need for daily medication. "Sadly, if that person is not found within that first two days, their chances of survival drop exponentially," Goliath says.

Who are the people who go missing in the U.S.?

At any given moment, about 100,000 people are considered missing in the U.S., according to Goliath and Kennedy. At the end of 2024, for instance, the [National Crime Information Center](#) — listed more than 93,000 active missing-persons cases in the U.S., while a total of 533,936 cases were entered into the federal tracking system that year.

Of those cases, more than 60% — or roughly 330,000 — involved juveniles, according to the NCIC database, which law enforcement agencies use to share criminal warrants, missing-person alerts, and other records.

Among people who are reported missing, Goliath says there is an "overrepresentation of Black and Indigenous populations who go missing, especially females, across the United States."

In Mississippi, he adds, "Our highest demographic of missing [persons] is young Black females."

Black Americans are also overrepresented in abductions. While members of the group make up less than 15% of the U.S. population, they account for more than 25% of the victims in reported abductions or kidnappings, according to the [FBI's data](#).

But a large number of missing-persons cases also go unreported, because some communities, such as people of color or those who don't have documented status in the U.S., are less likely to engage with authorities. And Goliath notes that Indigenous people living on reservations might have limited access to law enforcement.

Another dynamic that skews public perception, Kennedy says, is "missing white woman syndrome," when national media become [fixated on a white woman](#) who has disappeared.

"As someone who researches cold cases in terms of looking for information, the disparity of information out there, of cases for people of color is ridiculous," she says.

Calling for action, easier ways to share data

Goliath says every missing-person case, not just Guthrie's, needs to be widely broadcast and shared, to increase the chance of bringing someone home.

"We call this a silent crisis," he says, "that there are people missing in the United States, throughout the country that really don't have that same social media representation or a nationwide media representation for their cases."

It's also difficult to find standardized data for missing persons, due to a patchwork of rules and resources. It's only mandatory for law enforcement agencies across the country to report missing persons cases to the federal government if they involve minors, for instance.

In addition to NCIC, missing persons data is collected by [NamUs](#) (the National Missing and Unidentified Persons System), which offers public access. But as of now, only 16 states require mandatory reporting to the NamUs clearinghouse for missing persons cases.

Goliath says he'd like to see a nationwide push for more states to adopt NamUs requirements. As [NPR reported](#) last year, a large portion of U.S. police agencies weren't listed in the system.

"That'd be a help, because it's already a system that exists," Goliath says. "Law enforcement already is doing it. So, let's just have all the states be able to use NamUs."