

David Hill: Speed is everything - and the police were too slow

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It seems a safe assumption that some planning might have gone into Madeleine's abduction. It wouldn't be rocket science for an abductor to look at her family and observe their movements. They might have even taken a chance to speak to her beforehand, which makes it easier when they walk into the apartment.

I'm convinced that we are talking about an abduction here, because there's no suggestion from her parents that she has done a similar thing before. There's also some disruption to the apartment. So it clearly isn't a case of her just walking off.

Who might have committed this crime? It might be somebody who has taken Madeleine for criminal purposes, a member of a paedophile ring or a couple who simply want a child.

Though we've got the benefit of hindsight, the initial Portuguese police response was apathetic. Speed is of the essence in the aftermath of an abduction. You don't have time to ponder your next move. In Britain, roads would be sealed off within the hour and the crime scene cordoned off. Officers would speak to everybody and anybody. This doesn't seem to have happened. I have experience of a case in which an abducted child was recovered within 24 hours and, with that one, the public were vital. A member of the public had seen her being taken into a car.

Getting to local people immediately, while the event is fresh in people's minds, is also vital and that doesn't seem to have happened here. Of course you have to be careful not to jeopardise the inquiry but there's a lot that can bring the public - who want to help - onside.

A search operation [on which the Portuguese police have now embarked] only becomes important if you've no positive leads, but the search does have to be meticulously organised. You must pick an area around the scene where she went missing: first 100 yards, then half a mile and a mile. There's no reason why you shouldn't use the public in the search [as the Portuguese have] but they must be focussed and thoroughly briefed.

I feel desperately for Madeleine's parents. British officers know that they have to be kept informed. They have nothing else to hold on to and they must be reassured. I want them to retain their hope and be positive. Madeleine can still be found.

David Hill is a former area commander of the National Crime Squad and was awarded the Queen's Police Medal for helping write the police response procedures for kidnap scenarios