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Attempted Non-Family Abductions

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National estimates suggest that more than 100,000 children in the U.S. experience an attempted abduction by a non-family member each year. Most of those incidents befall young children—boys and girls ages four to 11—and, despite not being completed, cause both children and their parents significant alarm. The authors examined cases of attempted non-family abductions (ANFAs), identified in a national telephone survey of 10,367 households, to determine child and family characteristics that may serve as risk factors for such incidents. The prevalence and risk-marker findings from this study reinforce the need to continue teaching "stranger-danger" and suggest that children living in stressful or unstable family environments may be in particular need of such prevention efforts.

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Although the crime of child abduction by strangers appears to frighten and preoccupy a great many children and their parents [Price & Desmond 1987], it has not been the subject of much social scientific research. Official criminal justice statistics and victimization studies have almost entirely neglected the subject [Finkelhor & Dziuba-Leatherman 1994]. This knowledge vacuum was perhaps one factor contributing to the controversies that erupted in the 1980s, when contradictory estimates were publicized about the magnitude and seriousness of the problem [Best 1988]. Some prominent persons, such as U.S. Senator Paul Simon of Illinois, promoted the idea that over 50,000 children were abducted every year [Best 1990]. By contrast, two Denver-based journalists won a Pulitzer prize for a report claiming that only a few hundred cases could be documented [Griego & Kilzer 1985].

In part to try to resolve some of this controversy and also to better understand the problem, the U.S. Department of Justice commissioned the National Incidence Study of Missing, Abducted, Runaway and Thrownaway Children (NISMART) [Finkelhor et al. 1990]. This study used both a national survey of law enforcement records and a national survey of households to try to develop an estimate of the number of actual and attempted *non-family* abductions (as the problem became defined, to contrast it with family abductions).

The NISMART report pointed out that some of the controversy over estimates was related to definitions, not actual numbers. The public stereotype of stranger-abduction was a very serious crime involving the lengthy removal of a child from his or her home for purposes such as ransom, sadistic and sexual assault, or murder. Such cases did not appear to be that common. By contrast, abduction as it was legally defined was a much broader crime. It could include the coercive movement of a person over even a small distance or the unlawful confinement of a person for a short period of time. Many violent crimes, particularly rapes, involve abductions as legally defined. There might indeed be thousands of such episodes.

From the survey of law enforcement agencies, NISMART concluded that indeed the number of stereotypical kidnappings occurring each year numbered only between 200 and 300. By contrast, the cases falling within the legal definition of abduction numbered 3,200 to 4,600. Moreover, because many sexual assaults that involve elements of abduction may never be reported to police, NISMART speculated that the actual number of legal definition abductions might be substantially higher.

The household survey completed in NISMART was in theory a way of estimating such unreported episodes, but even with a sample of 10,000 households containing children, too few episodes were uncovered to develop a reliable estimate. It was possible, however, to develop a reliable estimate of abduction *attempts*. Based on the NISMART household sample, it was estimated that 114,600 children (95% confidence interval: 79,900 to 149,400) had experienced an attempted non-family abduction in 1988, mostly from strangers in passing cars [Finkelhor et al. 1990].

On this basis of its findings, the NISMART report cautioned that the true risk of a successful stranger abduction was probably quite a bit lower than many parents may have thought. But the report recommended, based on the number of attempted abduction episodes, that children should continue to receive prevention education about protecting themselves in such encounters. Given the welter of topics under consideration by NISMART, however, little additional analysis was made of the attempted abduction episodes. Information about the families and children could be further analyzed to get a sense of the seriousness of these attempted stranger abductions. In addition, one of the important neglected questions was whether any particular risk factors could be identified that were associated with vulnerability to abduction attempts. For example, a finding that such attempts occurred more often to children in certain regions or types of neighborhoods would allow prevention educators to target their messages to those children who most need it. A finding that

certain kinds of social and family situations, like inadequate supervision, seem to increase children's risk, would give prevention educators ideas about additional preventive measures that might need to be taken.

NISMART data on non-family abductions themselves, collected from police agencies, unfortunately did not contain much demographic and social information on the victimized children. But the data on non-family abduction *attempts*, because it came from the household survey, did have such information as well as a comparison group of nonvictimized children. It was possible, therefore, to analyze the risk-markers of children experiencing attempted non-family abductions. That analysis is described in this article.

Methodology

NISMART used a household telephone survey to gather national data on the yearly incidence of various events befalling children, including those incidents described here as attempted non-family abductions (ANFAs). The survey consisted of telephone interviews with caregivers in 10,367 randomly selected households who reported on the experiences of 20,505 children age 17 years or younger. The interviews represented a response rate of 89.2% of the households known to have children.*

Identification of ANFAs

NISMART defined an ANFA as "any incident in which a non-family member tried to take, detain, or lure a child, and if the action had been successful, the situation would have probably met the criteria for a completed non-family abduction." The early portion of the telephone interview consisted of a series of 15 "screener" questions about a variety of situations that could have

*For more detail on the sample and methodology, see Finkelhor et al. [1990], and Sedlak et al. [1990].

happened in the previous 12 months to any child who lived in the household for two weeks or more. Incidents potentially meeting the definitional criteria for ANFAs could have been disclosed by any of the following screeners:

1. Was there any time when anyone (including a neighbor, babysitter, or another child) tried to take [referent child] away against your wishes?
2. Was there any time when anyone tried to sexually molest, rape, attack, or beat up [referent child]?
3. Has anyone ever kidnapped or tried to kidnap [referent child]?

Caregivers who reported such an episode were asked to respond to a lengthier series of questions about the incident. The episode information provided by caregivers was later evaluated by trained coders to determine whether each incident satisfied the definitional criteria for an ANFA.

Measures

Household demographics. All households reporting any type of missing child episode studied by NISMART and a one-eighth, random sample of all nonepisode households (N = 1,520) were selected to participate in an extended version of the survey that collected demographic data about all adults and children living in the household. Respondents provided information about the age, gender, race, and relationship of each household member. Information about the respondent's marital status, the household's 1987 gross income, and the region and type of community (e.g., large city, small town) in which the household was located was also obtained.

Family interaction patterns. In an extended portion of the telephone interview, all episode households as well as a random subsample (n = 491) of all nonepisode households responded to a series of measures assessing the nature of the respondent's relationship to an index child, recent stressors experienced by the

index child and by other household members, and the respondent's personal history in relation to the events studied in NISMART.*

Findings

Estimated Incidence of ANFAs in 1988

The household survey yielded an unweighted total of 35 attempted nonfamily abductions. After weighting those cases to reflect the 67 million children in the United States and adjusting for households without telephones, households with multiple phones, nonparticipating households, and the probability of selecting children who lived (at least two weeks) in more than one household during the year, NISMART [Finkelhor et al. 1990] estimated that 114,600 children (95% confidence interval: 79,900 to 149,400) were involved in attempted non-family abductions in 1988.

Review of Initial Descriptive Findings on ANFAs

As described in NISMART's final report of its findings, ANFA incidents differed in a number of ways from the completed non-family abduction incidents (NFAs) found in an analysis of police records.** In contrast to the latter incidents, which disproportionately involved teenage girls, nearly 70% of all ANFAs involved children between the ages of four and 11 and were

*A description of the measures administered during this portion of the interview can be obtained from the authors.

**As anticipated, the number of non-family abductions cases obtained in the household survey portion of NISMART was too small to develop a reliable profile of the events in that category. As such, we contrasted attempts with the picture of completed non-family abductions that emerged from an analysis of the 364 legal-definition abduction cases obtained in the Police Records Study component of NISMART. The descriptive information about ANFAs reported in NISMART's final report [Finkelhor et al. 1990] was based on weighted data. All analyses reported in the present article were, however, based on unweighted data.

TABLE 1
Age and Sex of Children Involved in ANFA Incidents

	ANFA *(Unweighted N = 35)* *(Weighted N = 114,600)*
Age	
0–1	3%[1]
2[2]–3	8%[1]
4[2]–5	19%[1]
6[2]–7	4%[1]
8[2]–9	26%[1]
10[2]–11	20%[1]
12[2]–13	9%[1]
14[2]–15	10%[1]
16[2]–17[3]	0%[1]
Sex	
Male	44%
Female	56%

[1]Based on fewer than 10 cases.
[2]Some children who were this age at the *time of the study* were a year younger at the *time of the episode.*
[3]In addition to children who were 17 at the *time of the study*, this category includes children who were 17 at any time during the period of eligibility.

almost evenly distributed between boys and girls (see table 1). In addition, all ANFAs were perpetrated by strangers (100%) and involved children being lured away by nonforceful rather than forceful means (see table 2). Although about a third of the victims of ANFAs reportedly suffered psychological harm (primarily fear), few (3%) were physically injured and none were sexually assaulted. Consistent with these descriptive data, the narrative accounts of the ANFA cases showed that they primarily involved situations where strangers unsuccessfully tried to lure children into their cars and where children were, for the most part, physically unscathed but nevertheless quite frightened.

TABLE 2
Methods Used in ANFA Incidents to Detain Children

	ANFA (*Unweighted* N = 35) (*Weighted* N = 114,600)	
Attempt to Detain	12%[1]	
By force		5%[1]
No force		7%[1]
Attempt to Take	39%	
By force		13%[1]
No force		26%[1]
Attempt to Lure (No Force)	65%	
Police Contacted	42%	

[1]Based on fewer than 10 cases.

Risk-Marker Analyses

In the present analysis, we sought to extend our understanding of ANFA incidents by exploring the demographic and family characteristics that put children at risk for these events. We compared the children who experienced ANFA incidents with the 1,520 other children for whom we had data on household and demographic characteristics and with the subset (n = 491) of children for whom we also had data on family interaction patterns and parent-child relations.

Demographic characteristics. Almost no notable demographic characteristics distinguished ANFA children from others (table 3). Unlike child victims of many other crimes, they were not disproportionately urban, low-income, or from minority families. If anything, they tended to be slightly more from upper income, Caucasian families, but none of these differences were significant. The only significant difference was that a greater number of ANFA children came from *intact* families. In the absence of any theory that suggests plausibly why this should be so, however, we are inclined to see this as a random statistical difference.

TABLE 3
Demographic Characteristics of Nonepisode Control and ANFA Groups

Characteristic	*Control* (N = 1,520) (%)	*ANFA* (N = 35) (%)
Child's Sex		
Male	52	46
Female	49	54
Child's Race		
Caucasian	80	94
African American	12	3
Latino	6	3
Other	3	—
Child's Age (years)		
0–2	15	6
3–5	16	17
6–8	17	23
9–11	17	29
12–14	16	20
15–18	19	6
Type of Area Living In		
Large city	16	26
City suburb	24	29
Large town	17	9
Small town	24	11
Rural area	20	26
Census Region		
Northeast	19	14
Midwest	28	37
South	29	31
West	24	17
Family Income		
<$10,000	11	3
$10–$20,000	18	19
$20–$30,000	25	22
$30–$40,000	19	19
$40,000 +	27	38
Educational Level of Household Head		
No high school diploma	13	6
High school diploma	31	37
Some college	28	31
College degree	28	26

continued

TABLE 3 *(continued)*

Characteristic	*Control (N = 1,520) (%)*	*ANFA (N = 35) (%)*
Parental Structure		
Both biological	57	83*
No biological	6	—
Single without partner	18	11
Single with partner	11	6
Unable to determine	7	—

*p < .05

Family interaction patterns and parent-child relations. In a second set of analyses, we examined whether episode and nonepisode households differed on any of the family dynamics dimensions measured by NISMART. Analysis of covariance (ANCOVA) was used to test mean differences between the nonepisode and ANFA groups on the seven measures of family interaction patterns and parent-child relations administered to caregivers. The age of the index child was used as a covariate in each analysis. Results are presented in table 4.

Significant group differences emerged on the measures of household stress and caregiver history of childhood trauma. Caregivers in the ANFA group reported higher levels of household stress. They also reported more personal experience with missing and/or abusive events in their childhoods. Although not statistically significant, ANFA victims also suffered somewhat higher levels of physical abuse relative to nonepisode children.

We conducted several supplemental analyses to evaluate possible explanations of the family interaction and caregiver trauma findings. First, recalling that ANFA's were slightly more prevalent in large cities, we statistically controlled for type of community in the analysis of household stress. With urban residence controlled, levels of household stress remained significantly larger in the ANFA group ($p < .01$).

TABLE 4
Adjusted Means and Results of Univariate ANCOVAs on Family Interaction Measures

Family Dynamics Measure		*Nonepisode Control*	*ANFA*
Parent-Child Disagreements	*Adj. M*	5.03	5.56
	n	333	21
Parent-to-Child Support	*Adj. M*	18.50	18.14
	n	325	21
Child-to-Parent Support	*Adj. M*	17.09	16.54
	n	322	21
Household Stress	*Adj. M*	1.29	1.94*
	n	480	35
Child Stress	*Adj. M*	0.95	1.48
	n	87	4
Physical Abuse of Child	*Adj. M*	0.12	0.25
	n	483	28
Caregiver's History of Childhood Trauma	*Adj. M*	0.48	1.15**
	n	478	35

*p < .01
**p < .001

An alternative explanation of the findings on family dynamics is that increased levels of household stress impair parental supervision, thereby rendering children more vulnerable to victimization attempts. This possibility was examined by comparing levels of child supervision reported by caregivers of ANFA victims and nonepisode children. Supervision levels did not reliably differ between the groups; ANFA victims actually received more hours of adult supervision throughout the day (*Adj. M* = 12.52 hours) than did nonepisode children (*Adj. M* = 12.18 hours) ($p = .67$).

The household stress and caregiver trauma differences that emerged between ANFA victims and nonepisode children could not be explained by corresponding group differences in either parental supervision levels or community residence. Several plausible hypotheses for these findings remain, although the data are not currently available to evaluate them. For example, one possibility is that parents who themselves had a missing child or abusive experience as children are particularly sensitive to apparently similar events befalling their own children. This sensitivity, which may be especially acute under conditions of increased family stress, might prime parents to interpret events occurring to their children as abduction or abduction-related incidents. Alternatively, or in addition, such "sensitized" parents may be more likely to remember, and therefore to report, perceived abduction incidents involving their children.

It might also be that children living in highly stressed family environments are, for a variety of reasons, more prone to victimization attempts. Due to the instability that high levels of stress breed, such children may spend more time away from home and either engage in more risky behaviors or come into contact with more dangerous situations, activities, or persons. It is also possible that the changes associated with high levels of family stress place greater adjustment demands on children and therefore leave them more vulnerable to being victimized. For example, children may find themselves in unfamiliar environments or in the company of unfamiliar people as a result of moving or the entry or exit of household members. Although reasonable, these speculations require empirical evaluation before serving as a basis for prevention recommendations.

Conclusions and Implications

NISMART's analysis of ANFAs provides important information about the prevalence, nature, and risk factors associated with these incidents. In American communities, NISMART estimated that 114,600 children had encounters in 1988 in which their parents saw a risk that the children could have been abducted. The majority of these attempts were attempted *lures*, where strangers tried to get children to enter cars. By definition, all were unsuccessful. The events seemed most common in families experiencing levels of family stress and in which parents themselves had experienced childhood trauma and abuse.

In understanding the implications of these findings, several things are important. First, the definition of an ANFA included a component of subjectivity. NISMART evaluators inferred, on the basis of caregiver reports, what *could* have happened in the situation. But it is really impossible to judge what the intent of potential perpetrators was or how real was the risk inherent in many of these situations. The description of the episodes suggests that most of these were *not* cases where children *simply* misconstrued the intent of a completely benign stranger who was asking for directions. There appears to have been some threatening component to most of the situations, such as a stranger inviting a child into a car. Because the event did not proceed further, however, we do not know whether some of these perpetrators may have been primarily trying to harass or taunt a child without real criminal intent. The events were clearly perceived, however, as real threats by most of the affected children and their caregivers. Note that police were contacted in about 42% of the episodes. In the cases where they were not called, some caregivers appeared to dismiss the episode on the grounds that "nothing happened." Others said they did not contact the police because they had learned that someone else had already alerted the authorities. Still others seem to have doubted that the police could do anything, because the child was unable to provide very much information about the person, the car, and so forth.

In the end, there appear to be contradictory implications within this study that probably need to be resolved by further research. On the one hand, a large number of American parents report threatening incidents involving the possible stranger-abduction of their children, which appear to result in a substan-

tial number of alarmed calls to the police and the perception that these events caused more than transient psychological trauma. Such facts would appear to justify continuing to teach children how to identify and avoid potential "stranger-danger" situations, particularly strangers in cars, even while we also focus children's attention on child abuse and other possible threats from persons that they know.

On the other hand, it is also possible that some of the parental concern about stranger abduction may be exaggerated. As other data from the NISMART study have shown, the actual number of successful stranger-abductions involving the removal of the child for a substantial period of time or over a long distance is rather small. It is also interesting that, within the current analysis, the predictors of stranger-abduction attempts were not the usual correlates of crime victimization like low-income, urban residence, and minority group status. Rather, the single most powerful predictor was a parent who had a history of having been abducted, or sexually or physically abused, or of having run away or having been missing from the home long enough for the police to be called. Some parents may be sensitized from their own childhoods in a way that primes them to overinterpret events as attempted abductions. This is a hypothesis that should be advanced with some caution: if the police are sometimes too inclined to dismiss one parent's concerns about an attempted stranger-abduction, it can result in a tragedy for another child. By the same token, however, if the police intuit from parents' reports that the parents are primarily acting out personal issues, rather than reporting on serious events, the result can be the same kind of police laxity as a crying-wolf phenomenon. If some elements of exaggeration are possibly involved, perhaps parents as well as children should be better educated about how to identify a truly serious attempt.

Unfortunately, the current findings only hint at such a possibility. Additional study is obviously needed about the true seriousness of attempted stranger-abduction episodes, including information obtained directly from children about what was

said, how the threat was perceived or conveyed, and what kinds of risk elements were present. It is only in this way that we can tailor a response that protects children both from the true risks of crime and the risks of unnecessary alarm. ♦

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