

Children Abducted by Family Members: A National Household Survey of Incidence and Episode Characteristics

This article reports on the results of a national survey of 10,544 households containing 20,505 children as part of the National Incidence Study of Missing, Abducted, Runaway, and Thrown-away Children. On the basis of the survey, and using a broad, legal definition of abduction that includes many short-term violations of custody arrangements; the authors estimate that, in 1988, approximately 354,100 children were abducted by a family member. Using a more restrictive definition that is closer to the popular stereotype—that is, a situation where there is concealment, transportation to another state, or an intent to keep the child or to permanently alter custodial privileges—they estimate that there were 163,200 family-abducted children.

Attention to the problem of abduction of children by family members is fairly recent, dating from the late 1970s and early 1980s (Agopian, 1981; Demeter, 1977; Moore, 1981). The increased interest

would appear to be associated with several major social changes.

First, there has been a dramatic rise in the number of divorces involving children. These have more than tripled between 1960 and the present (Saluter, 1989; U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 1986; Weitzman, 1985).

Second, the rise in divorce has been matched by an increase in the number of legal contests over custody or visitation. An estimated 15% of all divorces with children, 150,000 each year, entail such battles (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 1986).

Third, social attitudes and legal presumptions have been changing in regard to custody and how it should be allocated. The dramatic increase in the number of working women means that mothers are no longer always in an advantaged position to care for dependent children. And men's greater emotional involvement in childrearing—in part a consequence of the women's movement—means that fathers no longer so readily acquiesce to situations where they have less access to their children than they would prefer. By 1985, reflecting this change in the traditional presumption that mothers should get custody of children, 30 states had adopted some form of joint custody legislation (Weitzman, 1985).

All this is aggravated by continuing high levels

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of geographic mobility among Americans, which means that divorced parents do not necessarily remain in the same community with each other and their children. This increases their incentive to take or keep children in order to be able to see them regularly. It also enhances their ability to foil recovery by virtue of being in another state or country.

Family and parental abductions occur in many contexts, with many motives (Agopian, 1981). Parents flee with children prior to divorce decrees because of fears of losing custody. Parents unhappy with custody decisions abduct or refuse to return children after permitted visitation. Parents go to courts in other jurisdictions and obtain contradictory custody awards, then flee with children to those jurisdictions. Some parents snatch a child because they discover, or have reason to fear, that the other parent is physically or sexually abusing the child. In some cases, the predominant motive may not be a desire to have or protect the child, but simply to retaliate against a still-hated ex-partner. In many other cases, grandparents, aunts, uncles, siblings, and others get involved as allies or agents or because they have a claim on the custody of the child. This is one reason why in policy circles the term "family abduction" has supplanted the term "parental abduction."

A small body of social science research is beginning to focus on family abductions, primarily on the basis of cases coming to the attention of missing children's agencies and the legal system (Agopian, 1981; Hegar and Grief, in press; Janvier, McCormick, and Donaldson, 1990). Although there is a belief that the number of family abductions is on the rise, the size of the problem has been mostly a matter of speculation (Agopian, 1981; Gill, 1981; Lewis, 1978).

There has been one serious scientific effort to develop an incidence estimate from a national population survey (Gelles, 1984), but it had a number of major methodological problems. The estimate was based on a procedure whereby respondents were asked if they knew about an incident of "parental child snatching" during the past 12 months, in which they were "personally involved." Unfortunately, the study had no way to assess precisely the number of children in the respondents' reporting "network," which, depending on a person's definition of "personally involved," could have been large. Because an undeterminable number of potential respondents

(parents, relatives, acquaintances, or neighbors, theoretically could have reported the same episode, it was not possible to arrive at an "unduplicated" estimate of episodes, except by making crude and untested assumptions. The current study was designed to avoid these limitations.

METHODOLOGY

The goal of the present study was to estimate the national incidence of family abductions for a one-year period (1988), using the Household Survey portion of the National Incidence Studies of Missing, Abducted, Runaway, and Thrownaway Children (NISMA). In this national telephone survey, caretakers in 10,544 randomly selected households were asked about the experiences of 20,505 children aged 17 or younger.

The sampling frame consisted of 60,000 telephone numbers, which yielded 34,820 actual households after we eliminated businesses, non-working numbers, car phones, and numbers that never answered. Of such households, we were interested only in the 11,617 where children actually resided for at least two weeks during the preceding year. In 1,250 of these households we were never able to talk to a caretaker or the caretaker refused to participate or broke off the interview at some point. Our completed interviews represent a response rate of 89.2% of the households that were known to have children.

The early portion of the interview consisted of a series of "screener" questions, asking about a variety of situations of interest to the study, which could have occurred to any child who resided in the household for two weeks or more. A family abduction episode could have been revealed in response to any one of five of these questions:

In the past 12 months, did *any* family member outside of your household, such as an ex-spouse, brother, sister, parent, or in-law or someone acting for them, do any of the following things:

1. Did any family member or someone acting for them *take or try to take* [any of your children] in violation of a custody order, agreement or other child living arrangement?
2. Did any family member outside of your household *keep or try to keep* [any of your children] from you when you were supposed to have [them] even if for just a day or weekend?
3. Did any family member *conceal* [any of your children] or *try to prevent* you from having contact with [them]?

4. Was there any time when anyone *tried to take* [any of your children] away against your wishes?

5. Has anyone ever *kidnapped* or *tried to kidnap* [any of your children] ?¹

If respondents answered yes to any of these screeners, details were obtained about the episode. Later, the definitional criteria of the study (see below) were applied to see if it met our strict definition of family abduction (or some other type episode).

There were several quite noteworthy strengths to this approach, in contrast to previous efforts. First, the household survey method allowed for the counting of many family abduction episodes that could not be accessed through agencies or courts. It has been suspected, and the survey confirmed, that many abductions do not come to the attention of police or agencies.

Second, the approach ensured that all episodes used in the final count met precise definitional criteria. Details on the episodes were systematically evaluated by coders to see if the episode fell within the study's definitions. The study did not rely on the respondents' definition of abduction or even their interpretation of a definition that could have been read to them.

Third, unlike the Gelles (1984) survey, caretakers were asked about abductions that had occurred only to the children who had lived in their own household for at least two weeks or more in the past year. Information was obtained on the number of other households in which the child had lived, as well. This procedure allowed us to make an unduplicated estimate of the number of children, because we knew exactly how many households might have reported a given child.

Finally, by using multiple screener questions, caretakers were given multiple cues and multiple opportunities to be reminded of episodes that might have occurred in the last year. Research shows that even serious criminal episodes may be forgotten over the course of a year (Martin, Groves, Matlin, and Miller, 1986). One particular problem to recalling family abductions is that respondents may not have stored this episode in their memories as a "kidnapping" or even the "taking" of a child. The specific mention of an ex-spouse or the term "concealment" may be the cue that reminds the respondent of the event.

DEFINING FAMILY ABDUCTION

Family abductions entail some serious definitional dilemmas. Perhaps most important, such situations revolve around complex competing claims. What one parent may call an abduction, the other parent may consider to be his or her right to have the child. Or the second parent may contend that it is not an abduction, because he is protecting the child from ongoing or potential abuse.

A formal custody decree should be the final arbiter in such situations, but such decrees are subject to different interpretations and legal wranglings that can take lawyers and judges years to sort out. As we mentioned, sometimes parents even obtain custody decrees from different states, with the decrees contradicting one another. Then again, many abductions occur prior to or in the absence of a formal custody decree. Here, it is even harder to determine who has custody rights.

If courts and attorneys can disagree about the custody rights, survey researchers are in an even worse position to make a determination. Moreover, since parents are hostile or estranged, it is not likely that two points of view are even available. Thus, to some extent, studies are forced to rely on the point of view of one party to a family abduction, with the realization that this may be a distorted claim. However, in this respect, researchers are not so different from police or missing children's agencies, which are also forced to rely at least initially on the claim of an aggrieved parent. But we want to be clear: in this study, facts about an episode came entirely from a single point of view.

A second definitional problem concerns abductions by custodial parents. The stereotypical family abduction occurs with noncustodial parents as abductors and custodial parents as the aggrieved parties. But noncustodial parents, when deprived of their lawful visitation rights, can also be aggrieved parties. A common example is a custodial parent who, in violation of the custody agreement, moves out of town with the children to take a job. Or, as in some recently publicized cases, the custodial parent, a native of some other country, may take the child and return to their country, thus depriving the noncustodial parent of rightful visitation. In this study we counted abductions that deprived parental access to either the noncustodial or the custodial parent, when it

was said to violate formal agreements or informal arrangements.²

There is a third important definitional issue: the legal definition of parental abduction is broader than the stereotype of the crime, which is based on cases that come to public and police attention. Parental abduction has been defined differently in the criminal law from state to state (Hoff, 1986). But in some states the crime includes almost all intentional acts that deprive another parent of lawful custody. For example, California's criminal statutes define it to cover "every person who in violation of the physical custody or visitation provisions of a custody order, judgment or decree, takes, detains, conceals, or retains the child with the intent to deprive another person of his or her rights to physical custody or visitation" (California Penal Code, 1976). Under this definition, to keep a child for an extra night in willful violation of a custody arrangement would be considered an abduction. (Note that the California statute applies equally to violations committed by custodial as well as non-custodial parents.) It is doubtful that many such short-term violations actually would be prosecuted. But for aggrieved parents such violations can be frightening, and for the affected children, the violations may be traumatic (Agopian, 1984; Schetky and Haller, 1983). This is undoubtedly why such laws are broadly drawn.

On the other hand, by using a broad definition of family abduction, one risks arriving at a misleadingly large incidence estimate. Minor willful violations of custody terms (such as an extra night) could well be exceedingly common. An incidence estimate that includes such minor episodes might misrepresent the true extent of the serious problem of interest to police and policy makers.

Thus, we defined two types of family abduction to deal with the difference between what can be legally classified as a family abduction and what is of greatest concern to policymakers. Under our *broad-scope* definition, a family abduction occurs (a) when a family member takes a child in violation of a custody agreement or decree; or (b) when a family member in violation of a custody agreement or decree fails to return or give over a child at the end of a legal or agreed-upon visit, and the child is away at least overnight.

We defined a second, *policy-focal* type of

family abduction that included only a subset of broad-scope episodes that met one of three other conditions: (a) an attempt was made to conceal the taking or the whereabouts of the child and to prevent contact with the child; or (b) the child was transported out of state; or (c) there was evidence that the abductor had intended to keep the child indefinitely or permanently affect custodial privileges. These conditions each signal an abduction episode that is very serious and in which authorities, such as police, attorneys, or prosecutors, are likely to be called into play.³

To reiterate, family abduction (broad-scope) conforms more to the legal conception and includes many short-term violations of custody arrangements or decrees. Family abduction (policy-focal) is closer to popular conceptions of "child snatching" and is limited to cases of concealment, transportation out of state, and intent to keep the child or alter custodial privileges.

FINDINGS: THE ESTIMATES

A total of 142 children from 104 households were identified who had episodes that met the study criteria for a broad-scope family abduction. On the basis of these cases, national estimates were derived through a process of weighting up from the sample to the 67 million children in the United States. Weights were adjusted to compensate for households without telephones, for those with more than one phone, and for nonparticipating households. They also took into account the probability of selection of children who had lived (two weeks) in more than a single household during the year.⁴ They were also adjusted for small differences between the sample demographics and those of the U.S. population.

As shown in Table 1, this process produced an estimate that in 1988 approximately 354,100 children experienced a broad-scope family abduction. Of these, an estimated 163,200 qualified for what we called a policy-focal episode. In addition, there were an estimated 44,900 attempted family abductions. Table 1 also shows the 95% confidence intervals around these estimates.

These are large numbers of family abductions, larger than many previous estimates, which placed the occurrence at 25,000 to 100,000 (Agopian, 1981; McGoy, 1978; Moore, 1981). But they are certainly plausible figures, when put into context. There are currently 9 million children who live

TABLE 1. ESTIMATED NATIONAL INCIDENCE OF FAMILY ABDUCTIONS, 1988

Type of Abduction	Number of Children	Rate per 1,000 Children 0-17	SD	95% Confidence Interval	CV (%) ^a
Actual					
Broad-scope ^b	354,100	5.62	36,817	281,900-426,200	10.4
Policy-focal	163,200	2.59	28,767	106,800-219,600	17.6
Attempted ^c	44,900	.71	13,977	17,500- 72,300	31.2

^aThe coefficient of variation (CV) is the standard deviation expressed as a percentage of the midpoint estimate.

^bIncludes policy-focal abductions.

^cNot included in broad-scope or policy-focal abductions.

with a mother or father who is separated or divorced (Rawlings, 1989; U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 1986). Close to half of all children can expect to experience the breakup of their parents' marriage sometime in their childhood, and one in ten can expect three such family transitions (Furstenberg, Nord, Peterson, and Zill, 1983). As we will note shortly, the period of vulnerability for a family abduction extends up to 4 or 5 years after a separation or divorce. With more than a million children experiencing parental divorce every year, there are anywhere from 5 to 9 million children of divorce in the risk pool for family abduction, not to mention children living in stepfamilies or children whose parents never married.

It should also be no surprise that a large number of divorces provoke heated disputes about child custody. It is estimated that from 10% to 15% of all custody arrangements are contested by one party or the other (Theonnes, 1989). And even among uncontested custody situations, dissatisfaction runs high (Theonnes, 1985).

In this context, 354,100 broad-scope and 163,200 policy-focal family abductions are very plausible. In crude percentages, if we use only children from recent divorces in the denominator (there are certainly other children in the risk pool), it means that between 3% and 7% of these children were subject to a broad-scope episode, and from 1% to 3% were subject to a policy-focal one. But, as we indicated earlier, not all family abductions are divorce-related. Still, the order of magnitude is quite reasonable.

These new figures are also plausible in light of the previous study by Gelles (1984), which estimated from 229,600 to 751,500 family abductions on the basis of a household survey conducted in 1982. As indicated earlier, a major flaw in the Gelles study was its inability to specify exactly how many respondents could potentially

have reported the same child to the researchers. (The wide range of the estimate resulted from a range of assumptions on this issue.) Because it was not a fully unduplicated estimate, the Gelles figure has generally been regarded as too high. We anticipated lower estimates based on our more exact methodology and definitions, and in fact, that is what we found.

THE DEMOGRAPHICS OF FAMILY ABDUCTION

There is a range (from 2 to 13 years) in the ages of victims of family abduction (Table 2),¹ with a peak, particularly marked in the policy-focal group, for ages 2 and 3. Older teenagers accounted for few of the victims, perhaps because at that age it is more often the teenagers' desires than those of their parents or caretakers that determine where they go. Young infants were also less subject to abduction than 2- or 3-year-olds, probably because these children require such intensive care.

The decline of percentages with age may mask an even greater disparity in actual risk. The older the children, the more likely they are to have experienced a parental divorce or separation (Furstenberg et al., 1983). Thus, there are more older than younger children in the risk pool for family abduction. If an equal percentage of 4- to 5-year-olds were abducted as 14- to 15-year-olds, it might in fact be evidence of a higher *risk* for the 4- to 5-year-olds because the risk pool is smaller for this group. This question deserves more detailed statistical analysis, however, than will be attempted here. Suffice it to say that relatively equal proportions of family-abducted children at different ages would not necessarily mean equal risk for those children, given different-sized risk pools.

Boys and girls are both subject to family abductions in roughly equal proportions. Neither the slight excess of boys in the broad-scope

TABLE 2. AGE AND SEX OF CHILDREN INVOLVED IN BROAD-SCOPE FAMILY ABDUCTIONS

Characteristic	Broad-scope (<i>n</i> = 142) ^a	Policy-focal (<i>n</i> = 59) ^b	Non-episode Children (<i>n</i> = 21,029)
Age			
0-1	6%	7%	10%
2 ^c -3	18	30	11
4 ^c -5	15	9	11
6 ^c -7	13	18	11
8 ^c -9	15	11	10
10 ^c -11	14	11	10
12 ^c -13	10	10	10
14 ^c -15	7	4	10
16 ^c -17 ^d	1	—	16
	$\chi^2(8) = 36.99^e$ <i>p</i> < .0001	$\chi^2(8) = 32.74^e$ <i>p</i> < .0001	
Sex			
Boys	58%	45%	51%
Girls	42	55	49
	$\chi^2(1) = 2.48^e$ <i>p</i> = .11; ns	$\chi^2(1) = .16^e$ <i>p</i> = .68; ns	

^aWeighted *n* = 354,100.

^bWeighted *n* = 163,200.

^cSome children who were this age at the *time of the interview* were a year younger at the *time of the episode*.

^dIn addition to children who were 17 at *time of interview*, this category included children who were 17 at any time during period of eligibility.

^eComparison of this category with distribution of non-episode children.

category nor the slight excess of girls in the policy-focal category represented a significant departure from the distribution of non-episode children.

It should be no surprise that family abductions were much more likely to occur in families where children were not living with both parents (Table 3).⁶ These circumstances establish the motives for family abduction. Even when the perpetrator is not a parent, the occurrence of a divorce or separation often creates family conflict or concern that motivates an abduction by another family member. Half the broad-scope abducted children were living with a single parent, and one-quarter were living with a parent who was remarried or had a live-in partner.

In the distribution of family abduction by race/ethnicity, there were slightly fewer Hispanics than would have been expected (Table 4). However, no significant disparities emerged between abducted and non-episode children according to family income.

Family abduction appears to be disproportionately a southern phenomenon. Fully half of all abductions occurred in the South, which is many more than one would expect on the basis of the distribution of non-episode children. In contrast, fewer of the family abductions occurred in the Midwest. We can only speculate on this interesting finding. It may be that the more traditional

legal system in southern states leaves divorcing and separating fathers more pessimistic about the possibility of getting a favorable custody arrangement, and so they take matters into their own hands. The reason for the finding about the Midwest is unclear.

CHARACTERISTICS OF FAMILY ABDUCTION EPISODES

All caretakers who reported a family abduction episode were administered an extended questionnaire inquiring about the characteristics of the episode. The following section describes some of these characteristics.⁷

The perpetrators of family abduction tended to be in their 30s, with about three out of four under the age of 40 (Table 5). Three-quarters were also men. Current and former husbands or boyfriends were by far the most common abductors. Interestingly, current husbands and boyfriends were significantly more common, and former husbands and boyfriends significantly less common, in the policy-focal episodes.⁸

The risk of a family abduction appeared to extend over a considerable time period during the separation and divorce process (Table 5). In nearly half the broad-scope episodes, the abduction took place 2 or more years after the divorce and

TABLE 3. PARENT IN HOUSEHOLD FOR CHILDREN INVOLVED IN BROAD-SCOPE FAMILY ABDUCTIONS

Category	Broad-scope (n = 142)	Non-episode Children (n = 21,029)
Both parents ^a	4%	67%
Single parent, no partner ^a	53	16
Single parent, with partner ^a	24	7
Neither parent ^a	5	3
DK/NA ^b	14	8

$\chi^2(4) = 281.24$
 $p < .0001$

^aCategories in this table are as follows:

Both parents = two natural or adoptive parents

Single parent, no partner = unmarried or divorced, natural or adoptive parent with no spouse or unmarried partner in household

Single parent, with partner = natural or adoptive parent with a stepparent or nonmarital partner in household

Neither parent = living with other relatives, foster home, or with unrelated individuals.

^bIncludes families for whom no determination could be made because of missing or ambiguous information.

10% occurred after four years. Apparently, the conflicts that promote family abductions can persist over a substantial period of time.

However, the more serious, policy-focal cases were heavily concentrated (54%) in the period of separation prior to an actual divorce. This suggests that the most serious extralegal actions occur in the period when feelings of anger and rejection may be most acute and when fears are most

prevalent about the as-yet-unresolved court process. This may also be the period when family members perceive that actual possession of a child will be most influential on the ultimate outcome.

There did seem to be certain seasonal peaks in family abductions. They tended to occur during or at the end of school vacation periods: summer vacations in July and August, and at the end of Christmas vacation in January. This probably

TABLE 4. RACE, HOUSEHOLD INCOME, AND REGION OF CHILDREN INVOLVED IN BROAD-SCOPE FAMILY ABDUCTIONS

Characteristic	Broad-scope (n = 142)	Non-episode Children (n = 21,029)
Race/ethnicity		
White	80%	71%
Black	17	15
Hispanic	3	11
Other	0	3
		$\chi^2(3) = 13.44$ $p = .004$
Income		
< \$10,000	19%	14%
\$10,000-20,000	19	20
\$20,000-30,000	27	25
\$30,000-40,000	16	19
\$40,000+	19	22
		$\chi^2(4) = 3.08$ $p = .54; ns$
Region ^a		
Northeast	17%	19%
Midwest	11	25
South	50	35
West	22	21
		$\chi^2(3) = 20.38$ $p < .0001$

^aNortheast: ME, NH, VT, MA, RI, CT, NY, NJ, PA

Midwest: OH, IN, IL, MI, WI, MN, IA, MO, ND, SD, NE, KS

South: DE, MD, DC, VA, WV, NC, SC, GA, FL, KY, TN, AL, MS, AR, LA, OK, TX

West: MT, ID, WY, CO, NM, AZ, UT, NV, WA, OR, CA, AK, HI

TABLE 5. AGE AND RELATIONSHIP OF PERPETRATOR TO RESPONDENT AND TIME SINCE RELATIONSHIP ENDED IN FAMILY ABDUCTIONS

Characteristic	Broad-scope (<i>n</i> = 142) ^a	Policy-focal (<i>n</i> = 59) ^b	Non-policy-focal (<i>n</i> = 83) ^c
Age			
Under 30	30%	33%	29%
31-40	46	37	54
41 or older	14	14	13
DK/NA	10	16	4
		$\chi^2(3) = 8.60$ $p = .035; ns^d$	
Relationship			
Former husband/boyfriend	42%	24%	57%
Current husband/boyfriend	21	36	9
Former wife/girlfriend	8	4	12
Current wife/girlfriend	3	4	1
Husband/boyfriend of ex-wife	1	—	2
Wife/girlfriend of ex-husband	6	8	4
Male in-law	8	14	3
Female in-law	6	7	5
Other male	1	—	3
Other female	3	2	4
		$\chi^2(2) = 20.97^f$ $p < .0001$	
Time since relationship ended^e			
Never lived together	3%	—	5%
Not separated prior to abduction	9	14%	5
Separated, but not yet divorced	28	54	10
Divorced < 1 year	7	5	9
1 + -2 years	12	13	11
2 + -3 years	11	5	15
3 + -4 years	20	3	32
4 or more years	10	6	13
		$\chi^2(2) = 31.80^f$ $p < .0001$	

^aWeighted *n* = 354,100.

^bWeighted *n* = 163,200.

^cWeighted *n* = 190,900.

^dNot significant when Bonferroni's correction for multiple tests is used.

^eExcludes those in a relationship, like relative, that could not be "ended."

^f χ^2 is for regrouped categories shown by brackets.

reflects seasonal variations in opportunity. These are times when children are visiting noncustodial parents, or when parents are not working and have the time and inclination to go and take children in violation of custody. Episodes started more often in the afternoon.

As will be recalled, the definition of family abduction used in this study included *children who were kept or not returned* in violation of custody agreements or mutual understandings, as well as children who were taken. Episodes were divided fairly evenly between those that involved a taking and those that involved a failure to return (not shown in the tables). Three-fifths of the situations involved violations of written custody orders; the rest violated mutual understandings. Of course, this is one subject on which we were especially handicapped by not having the point of view of

both parties. In some cases, what were perceived by our respondents as "violations" may have been honest disagreements (or misunderstandings) about the terms of a custody order or understanding.

In the cases where children were actually taken (as opposed to being kept too long where they already were), the children were taken most frequently from their own home (35% of broad-scope) and less frequently from another home (8% of broad-scope), such as that of a relative they were visiting. The stereotypical case of parents grabbing children from schools and day care occurred in only a small proportion of cases (2% of broad-scope).

Several individual descriptors give a sense of the spectrum from less serious to more serious episodes: how long the child was gone, whether

TABLE 6. LENGTH OF CHILD'S ABSENCE

Absence	Broad-scope (n = 142)	Policy-focal (n = 59)	Non-policy-focal (n = 83)
Under 1 hour	4%	8%	—
2-6 hours	9	0	16%
8-24 hours	20	24	16
2-6 days	27	23	30
1 week	17	22	13
More than 1 week, but less than 1 month	10	5	15
1 month or more	9	12	5
Not yet returned	1	3	—
DK	3	2	4

$\chi^2(3) = 0.23^a$
 $p = .97$; ns

^a χ^2 test for regrouped categories shown by brackets.

the child was concealed or taken out of state, whether the police were contacted, and whether the child suffered harm during the episode. Some of these descriptors are shown in Tables 6 to 8.

Only a very small percentage of the family abductions were still unresolved at the time we talked to respondents (Table 6). In 99% of all broad-scope and 97% of policy-focal cases, the children were returned or recovered. This means that it was quite rare for a family member to successfully remove and hide a child or flee to a remote location, permanently altering the custodial arrangements or preventing the parent from having contact. However, some of the episodes were of relatively long duration: one in five lasted more than a week. Nonetheless, close to one-half of the episodes (both types) lasted between two days and a week.

Another index of seriousness was removal from the state, because this takes a child out of the legal jurisdiction of the custody order and also makes recovery more difficult. This occurred in only 9% of broad-scope and 12% of policy-focal episodes (Table 7). Fourteen percent of broad-scope and 18% of policy-focal abductors used

force. However, perpetrators did other things to interfere with parental rights besides simply taking or keeping the child. In one-third of the broad-scope and over half of the policy-focal cases, the abductor attempted to *conceal* the child, and in 41% of the broad-scope and 70% of the policy-focal cases, the abductor tried to prevent telephone or written contact with the caretaker.

Still another indicator of seriousness was whether the aggrieved parent contacted the police or an attorney in order to assist in recovery. Forty-four percent of the children in broad-scope and 65% of those in policy-focal cases were involved in episodes in which the caretakers actually contacted the police. Contacting an attorney was also common (50%) in broad-scope cases, and even more common (66%) in policy-focal cases.

Our measure of how much harm the children suffered in the episode was crude. We simply asked the respondent to assess the harm. No independent evaluation of the child was made. Some of these children may have been harmed—for example, sexually abused without the knowledge of their caretaker. Other

TABLE 7. COERCIVE ELEMENTS

Element	Broad-scope ^a (n = 142)	Policy-focal (n = 59)	Signifi- cance ^b
Child taken out of state	9%	12%	ns
Force used	14	18	ns
Threats or demands	17	22	ns
Concealment of child	33	56	****
Attempt to prevent child from contacting caretaker	41	70	****
Attempt to permanently affect custodial privileges	40	59	****

^aColumn does not sum to 100 because episodes could have more than one of these elements.

^bComparison of Policy-focal and Non-policy-focal.

**** $p < .0001$.

caretakers, angry about the episode, may have exaggerated its effects. So the assessments of harm must be interpreted with caution.

Most of the children, it would appear, did not suffer serious harm as a result of the episode (Table 8). A small percentage of the children were sexually abused, at least to the extent known by their caretakers, although in absolute numbers this could still mean several thousand children. Physical abuse and physical harm occurred to small percentages as well, proportions that nonetheless represented thousands of children. Serious mental harm—a vague term that could cover a wide variety of difficulties—was suffered by 16% of broad-scope and 17% of policy-focal children.^a More policy-focal than broad-scope children had some mild or minor mental harm. In reconciling the low level of harm with other research that shows more damage to children in family abductions (Agopian, 1984; Terr, 1983), one must bear in mind that prior research has been largely based on samples of the more serious cases that come to police attention.

Given that the problem has been publicized by missing-children's advocacy organizations, one of the most interesting issues probed by the study is how many of the family-abducted children were actually missing. In fact, many of the respondents in the Household Survey did know where their children were most of the time during the course of the family abduction episodes. Forty-eight percent in broad-scope cases and 34% in the policy-focal cases said they knew the whereabouts "most of the time." The number who did not know where their children were at all was only 17% for broad-scope and 22% for policy-focal cases. This illustrates that family abduction is not primarily a problem of "missing children" but is rather a problem of children who are not where they are supposed to be. Elsewhere we have proposed that the missing-children problem may have been misnamed and is more accurately a problem of missing and "displaced" children. Such a reformulation might clear up at least one of the confusions that plague discussions about the missing-children problem.

TABLE 8. ABUSE OR HARM TO CHILD

Type of Harm	Broad-scope (<i>n</i> = 142)	Policy-focal (<i>n</i> = 59)	Non-policy-focal (<i>n</i> = 83)
Sexually abused			
Yes	< 1%	—	< 1%
Attempt	< 1	—	< 1
No	94	94	93
DK	4	6	4
		$\chi^2(2) = 2.18$ $p = .53; ns$	
Physically abused			
Yes	4%	5%	3%
No	89	87	90
DK/NA	7	8	7
	$\chi^2(2) = 2.86$ $p = .41; ns$		
Injured/harmed			
Yes	4%	8%	2%
No	93	89	96
DK/NA	3	3	2
	$\chi^2(2) = 8.47$ $p = .03; ns^a$		
Mentally harmed ^b			
Serious	16%	17%	15%
Mild/minor	24	35	16
No	54	41	69
DK whether or degree	5	7	1
	$\chi^2(5) = 19.86$ $p = .001$		

^aNot significant when Bonferoni's correction is used.

^bAs judged by the caretaker.

DISCUSSION

This household survey study has provided one of the first portraits of the problem of family abduction that is not based solely on the cases coming to the attention of the legal system and missing-children's agencies. It shows a fairly large problem, more than half of which does not get reported to the police. Like many family problems, including spousal violence, which sometimes come to official attention, family abduction exists on a continuum, much of which is not publicly visible. At one end are very short-term episodes that are quickly resolved. A majority of the cases fall into this category. At the other end are longer episodes, and episodes that involve removal from the state, concealment, and attempts to permanently affect custodial privileges. The extremely serious cases—for example, where the child is held longer than a week, taken out of state, or physically injured—constitute about one-tenth of all cases. While family abduction in the broad sense is a serious problem for divorcing families and may be the source of much conflict and consternation, we need to guard against stereotyping a "typical" family abduction with the dramatic characteristics of those cases that have received so much publicity.

A number of the findings of the study have important policy implications. First, the study demonstrated that in a large percentage of family abductions (half of broad-scope and a third of policy-focal cases), the whereabouts of the child was known for most of the episode. This suggests that the task for law enforcement and public policy for these cases needs to involve not only locating the child, which has represented the preponderance of past efforts, but also facilitating their return. The locating of abductors and children through law enforcement computers and parental locator systems needs to be supplemented with a greater emphasis on creating the conditions for the safe return of children whose locations have been established.

A second important finding concerns the continuing vulnerability of children to family abduction even several years after the parents have terminated their relationship. Forty percent of broad-scope abductions occurred more than 2 years after the divorce, and 10% occurred more than 4 years afterward.¹⁰ This suggests that time does not necessarily reduce the motives to abduct,

but may, as a result of changing life circumstances, actually exacerbate them.

However, the concentration of the policy-focal cases in the period of separation prior to divorce has policy implications as well. It suggests the importance of providing some protections against the most serious kinds of family abductions as soon as possible after a couple separate.

In planning such interventions, it is important to consider that family abductions may also be one of the most readily preventable of the "missing children" problems, for one important reason: the perpetrators of family abduction—who are parental figures in 8 out of 10 cases—have frequently participated in and are potentially accessible through the system that regulates custody issues. Sixty percent of the abducted children (both types) had been under a formal custody order, which presumably had been negotiated at some point between the parties. The occurrence of family abduction does often reflect a failure both of these orders and of the child custody system as a whole to protect children and to promote negotiation, communication, and compromise as solutions to custody problems. Children, unlike material possessions and property, cannot be easily "divided" by a set of legal principles or simple compromises. But the legal processes, because they tend to be slow, inflexible, and intimidating, can contribute additional frustrations and risks to the highly charged emotions that lead to abductions.

But these aspects of the custody process can be ameliorated. Courts can be made more responsive and sensitive. Custody orders can be written with more explicit provisions and guarantees to discourage or prevent abductions. More emphasis can be placed on negotiation, and staff can be trained to manage the emotional as well as legal dynamics in custody disputes (Bentch, 1986; Hegar, 1990). Experiments are currently under way to set up custody crisis hotlines and emergency services to help parties negotiate solutions to urgent custody conflicts, thus forestalling or resolving extralegal solutions (Child Find Mediation Program, n.d.). Millions of children are involved in custody situations, and unfortunately, there are not enough professionals currently trained and available to assist in the many foreseeable crises that divided families encounter.

A prevention approach to family abduction can also make use of improved deterrence, useful

even (or especially) in situations where negotiation is not a possibility. Part of this can come from publicizing penalties and laws and the increasing effectiveness of recovery systems. A recent study of police behavior shows that police are more aggressive and recovery more expeditious in jurisdictions where parental abduction is considered a felony (Collins, McCalla, Powers, and Stutts, 1989). But perhaps just as important, judges, attorneys, and children's guardians, by becoming educated and aware, may be able to short-circuit potential family abductions by addressing this possibility more directly, highlighting the consequences, and discouraging this solution both formally and informally. For example, a history of wife or child abuse or other coercive behavior by a husband may need to be taken as a signal for added caution in monitoring child custody. Judges and even attorneys for these noncustodial parents might do well preemptively to caution clients against attempted abductions. And the possibility of abduction needs to be considered in the issuing and enforcement of protection orders.

CONCLUSION

Family abduction is a family problem that has been the subject of relatively little research and policy development. But the scope of the problem, as indicated in this study, along with the possibility that it may be increasing, should motivate us to do more of both. If family abduction *prevention* has a potential for success, then a high priority for research should be the search for indicators that allow us to recognize and target custody situations where an abduction is most likely to occur. Thus, it should be a research priority to find out more about how to diagnose high-risk situations.

In addition, there is much more to be learned about the effects of family abduction on children. This may also be useful in discouraging perpetrators, but in any event it will certainly be helpful in treating children who have been affected.

Family abductions are a new frontier for public policy and research. Although this problem occurs with discouraging frequency, there are potentially big payoffs in the near future for successful prevention initiatives in this area and thereby for improving the security and well-being of large numbers of children.

NOTES

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1. An additional question asking respondents whether they had ever abducted a child themselves was abandoned after the early stages of data collection because it produced so few affirmative replies.
2. However, only noncustodial parents who had the child in residence for two weeks during the last year would have been included.
3. The policy-focal family abduction also makes a distinction among episodes according to age in order to exclude instances in custody disputes where an older child wants to go and live with a noncustodial parent and so conspires or cooperates to violate a decree or custodial arrangement. For children aged 15 or older, policy-focal cases require that there be some evidence of force or threat used to take or detain the child.
4. If all children in a household are included in a study, and correction is made for children who lived in multiple households, then a survey based on households is also an unbiased survey of children living in households.
5. Tests of significance in this study have been corrected for actual sample size but have not been corrected for any design effects such as the clustering of telephone numbers in certain exchanges.
6. The Household Survey information about the U.S. population distribution differs from Bureau of Census information, and this is especially true here, for family structure. It is nevertheless valid to compare the percentages for children with episodes to the survey-based estimated percentages for the non-episode children, because they were derived by the exact same methodology.
For Tables 3, 4, and 5, distributions for policy-focal cases were not significantly different from broad-scope cases, so they have been omitted, and only the comparison between broad-scope and non-episode percentages is shown.
7. The characteristics are not, strictly speaking, characteristics of all episodes. For each child, we collected information on a single episode—the most serious episode for children who experienced more than one. Thus the less serious episodes of children with multiple episodes were excluded from the tally.
8. The comparison is made between policy-focal and the remainder of the broad-scope episodes, which were not policy-focal.

9. Caretakers, again, were allowed to interpret the term themselves.
10. Unfortunately, we do not know from the results of this single-year study whether abductions had also occurred in prior years.

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