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Police Response to Family Abduction Episodes

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Using data from a national survey, the role of police in responding to family abduction episodes is examined, with an aim of clarifying the causes and consequences of police intervention in these events. Specifically, the following questions are addressed: What is the frequency of police involvement in family abductions? How do abductions to which police respond differ from those to which they do not? What actions do police take, and how do aggrieved parents assess these actions? What is the effect of police intervention on episode outcomes?

The part played by law enforcement in family crimes and family problems is neither well understood nor routinely addressed. In fact, we lack representative data to answer even the most basic questions about police response to many family crises. With the exception of domestic violence and, to some extent, child abuse and neglect, there has not been a great deal of attention paid to the role of the police in family problems.

The abduction of children by family members in disputes over custody is no exception to this pattern. Even though knowledge about the prevalence and risk factors associated with family abduction has increased dramatically in recent years (e.g., see Finkelhor, Hotaling, and Sedlak 1990), the nature of police response to these kinds of episodes is not well understood. This article is designed to fill in some of this gap in our knowledge and to begin a more fruitful debate regarding the nature of law enforcement intervention in family abductions. Data are analyzed from a unique survey of a nationally representative sample of households—a sample that includes abduction cases

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reported to the police as well as a comparison group of such events that were not reported.

Specifically, we address four questions. First, what is the frequency of police intervention in incidents of family abduction? Second, how do family abduction episodes that involve police intervention differ from those that do not? Third, what actions do police take when they do intervene in abduction cases, and how do parents assess these actions? Fourth, does police intervention have an effect on episode outcomes, specifically on duration and the potential for harm to a child involved?

THE ROLE OF LAW ENFORCEMENT IN FAMILY CRIME: REVIEW OF GENERAL ISSUES AND STATEMENT OF HYPOTHESES

Examination of the literature regarding patterns of police involvement in the resolution of family crime in a general sense is helpful in structuring the inquiry related to the four questions specifically about family abductions identified above. First, with regard to the incidence of police intervention, research on other family crimes suggests that requests for police assistance are uniformly low. Estimates of reporting of spouse abuse are generally between 7% and 9% (see Kaufman-Kantor and Straus 1990; Schulman 1979). A national prevalence study of the recognition of child maltreatment found that police played a minor role in the recognition of such cases, accounting for about 8% of all recognized children (Sedlak 1991). Elder abuse is no exception to this pattern, with a very low proportion of such cases ever coming to the attention of the police (Wolf and Pillemer 1989).

On the other hand, noncriminal family crises, even those that may be indicative of family dysfunction, are much more likely to involve the police. For example, on the basis of data from a national study of households, it is estimated that 40% of adolescents who ran away from home in 1988 were reported to the police by parents or caretakers (Finkelhor et al. 1990). Family abductions are crimes, but they *may* also involve the element of a child's whereabouts being unknown. Hence we would predict that the police reporting rate for family abductions will be higher than that for other family crimes, and in fact more similar to family crises (such as runaway episodes) in which a child's location or recovery is at issue.

With regard to characteristics associated with reporting, research on other family crimes indicates that more serious episodes are more likely to result in calls for police assistance. Instances of severe domestic violence are more than four times as likely to be reported to the police (Kaufman-Kantor and Straus 1990). In cases of child abuse and neglect, the police are also more likely to recognize and be involved in more serious forms of child maltreatment, such as sexual and physical abuse, than they are in other forms of abuse and neglect (Sedlak 1991). We would assume that police intervention in family abductions would follow the pattern of other family crimes. We would predict that episode characteristics indicating that an abduction was more serious or alarming (for example, when the whereabouts of the child are unknown to the aggrieved parent) will be more likely to involve requests for police assistance.

Third, it is widely believed that the police do not treat family crimes as seriously as they do similar offenses involving nonfamily persons. For example, accumulated evidence over the past 25 years has been critical of the police response to domestic violence cases (Buzawa and Buzawa 1990). Studies of police attitudes and behavior both point to a reluctance to view domestic assaults as "real" crime and little motivation to intervene in domestic violence cases (Stanko 1989). Existing studies of police intervention in family abductions paint a very similar picture. Police tend to view family abductions as essentially civil cases that do not require their intervention (Forst, Vivona, Garcia, and Jang 1988). This view is reinforced by the belief on the part of police that because the child is with a parent or other relative, he/she is not at risk for harm. Police officers also seem to lack extensive training in the dynamics of family abductions (Girdner and Hoff 1992), and they may believe that parents exaggerate the seriousness of family abductions to promote their custody claims. Given these findings, we would predict that police will not be especially aggressive in responding to family abduction complaints and that aggrieved parents will be generally dissatisfied with the police response to their requests for help.

Fourth, with regard to the effect of police intervention, there is a lack of clear-cut evidence that intervention results in any measurable, positive outcomes for victims of family crimes. In spite of the recent move toward mandatory arrest policies for incidents of domestic violence, for example, conclusive scientific evidence supporting the use of arrest to deter future incidents has not been forthcoming (Schmidt and Sherman 1993). Some research, in fact, has suggested that in some situations police intervention in domestic violence disputes may actually make things worse in the long run (Sherman 1992). Similarly, in the area of child abuse and neglect, there has been resistance to criminalization because of concerns that it will only serve to further harm victims of maltreatment (Garbarino 1989).

Some research on family abduction suggests that police intervention does facilitate the return of the abducted child. Agopian (1981) contends that the chance of recovery of the child is enhanced when custodial parents notify law

enforcement early. In addition, research has found that the risk of physical or mental harm to the child is related to the duration of the episode (Agopian 1984; Plass, Finkelhor, and Hotaling unpublished), so that an early return of the child would seemingly minimize such harm as well. We will examine the influence of police intervention on two episode outcomes, namely, its duration and whether a child was harmed. We predict that police intervention will result in episodes of shorter duration and less harm to involved children.

Each of the issues outlined above will be examined in our analyses of data from a recent national survey on family abductions. The National Incidence Study of Missing, Abducted, Runaway, and Thrownaway Children (NISMART) was among the first to illuminate the full spectrum of the family abduction problem in the United States. NISMART relied on a national household survey and garnered information on a wide variety of family abduction events, varying in terms of duration, seriousness, and outcome. Most important for our purposes here, NISMART uncovered both episodes that were reported to the police and those that were not reported to law enforcement agencies. NISMART is virtually the only such source of data on family abductions drawn from a representative sample of the general population, rather than from official reports of one kind or another (e.g., police reports themselves, court reports, reports to missing children's agencies, and the like). This feature makes the data a unique source for examining the role of police intervention in such events.

METHODOLOGY

Before discussing the role of police in responding to the NISMART abductions, it is important to briefly review a few key features of the study methodology. NISMART used a household telephone survey to gather data on the yearly incidence of various missing-child events, including those described here as family abductions. The survey, which was conducted in 1988, consisted of telephone interviews with caretakers in 10,367 randomly selected households (representing a response rate of 89.2% of households known to have children) who reported on the experiences of 20,505 children age 17 or younger. (For more detail on the sample and methodology, see Sedlak, Mohadjer, McFarland, and Hudock 1990).

Two definitions or characterizations of family abduction were used in the study. A *broad scope* family abduction was defined as: (a) situations in which a family member took a child in violation of a custody agreement or decree, or (b) situations in which a family member (in violation of a custody agreement or decree) failed to return a child at the end of a legal or agreed-upon visitation period, with the child being away at least one additional night in these cases.

A second, *policy focal* definition of family abduction was also constructed, intended to separate out the most serious and alarming abduction events. Specifically, a policy focal event is defined as any broad scope episode that also met one or more of the following conditions: (a) an attempt was made to conceal the taking or whereabouts of the child and to prevent contact with the child, (b) the child was transported out of state, (c) there was evidence that the abductor had intended to keep the child indefinitely or to permanently affect custodial privileges. These conditions are all objective indicators of an abduction episode that is very serious and likely to be quite alarming to parents. The abductions in the analyses that follow met the broad scope study definition. However, the policy focal designation is sometimes also used as an objective indicator of more serious episodes.

FREQUENCY OF POLICE CONTACT

NISMART identified 104 broad scope family abduction episodes involving 142 individual children. Police were contacted in almost 40% of these cases (involving a total of 55 children from 37 families). This reporting rate is clearly high when compared with police-reporting estimates for other family crimes, such as domestic violence. As we predicted, the reporting rate for family abductions is much more similar to that for noncriminal family crises like adolescents running away from home.

FACTORS INFLUENCING THE LIKELIHOOD OF POLICE CONTACT

As stated above, reporting of other family crimes seems to be related to characteristics of the episodes, with more serious events being more likely to result in police contact. We expected that episode characteristics would be most important in determining whether parents decided to contact police agencies about a family abduction. However, we were also interested in examining the social/demographic characteristics of abducted children and their families, which might play a role in predicting the likelihood of intervention by law enforcement agencies.

Table 1 provides odds ratios,[1] predicting the likelihood that an episode was reported to police. An odds ratio of less than 1 indicates that the presence

of the specified variable was associated with a decreased likelihood that police would be contacted, whereas a value greater than 1 indicates that the presence of the variable in question resulted in an increased likelihood that police would be called in. The influence of various episode characteristics is examined in Panel A; Panel B provides information on the effects of social/demographic characteristics of participants in the episode.

As expected, characteristics of episodes (found in Panel A) were much more likely to be significantly related to the likelihood that police were contacted in a case than were characteristics of children and their families (found in Panel B, none of which had a significant influence on the likelihood of police intervention). Thus it would seem that the decision to contact police in a family abduction event is based primarily on logical assessment of the characteristics of the episode itself and not on extrinsic characteristics of the participants.

POLICE ACTIONS AND PARENT SATISFACTION

Although parents may call the police for rational reasons, this does not mean that police do what parents expect or that parents end up feeling satisfied with how the police handled their cases. Indeed, one of the key issues surrounding police intervention in family crime in general is the failure of law enforcement officers to treat these offenses like similar crimes involving nonfamily members (e.g., Forst et al. 1988). In the case of family abduction, as stated above, it has also been suggested that police officers believe that parents exaggerate the seriousness of these events in order to promote their custody cases in court and that these cases are not taken seriously by district attorneys or by state and local government in general (Forst et al. 1988; Collins, Powers, McCalla, Lucas, and Forst unpublished).

Parents in NISMART who reported that they had contacted the police also responded to a series of questions regarding what the police did and how they (the parents) felt about the actions police took on their behalf. Let the reader be aware that these data are indicative not necessarily of exactly what the police did in a case (no police officers were interviewed), but rather of what parents *knew* about the actions taken by officers.

The first panel of Table 2 provides a breakdown of the respondents' reports of what sorts of actions police officers took when they were contacted. The actions taken by police were quite varied, and only in a small number of cases (16%) did the respondents report that the police did nothing (or that they did not *know* if the police had taken any actions).

TABLE 1: The Likelihood of Police Contact: By Episode Characteristics and by Characteristics of Participants in the Episode

Panel A: Episode Characteristics *Variable*	*Odds Ratio Indicating Likelihood of Police Contact*
Episode was a taking	3.67*
Episode was a keeping	.29*
Event was in violation of a custody order	.97
Threats to prevent contact with child ever	6.09*
Attempt to conceal removal/location of child	4.74*
Attempt to prevent letter/phone contact	4.11*
Caretaker knew child's whereabouts less than half the time	5.87*
Perpetrator took child out of state	1.01
Parent contacted attorney	1.76
Parent considered event to be a kidnapping	9.53*
Episode receive policy focal designation	4.12*
Panel B: Characteristics of Participants in Episode	
Perpetrator's relationship to aggrieved parent	
Ex-spouse	.62
Current spouse	1.28
Nonpartner (other family member)	2.94
Perpetrator gender	
Male	1.76
Female	.57
Aggrieved parent's family income	
Less than $10,000	1.65
$10,000-$30,000	1.67
More than $30,000	.49
Demographic characteristics of abducted child	
Age 0-4	2.08
Age 5-9	1.02
Age 10-13	.59
Age 14-17	.75
Male child	.72
Female child	1.39
White child	.67
African American child	2.23
Hispanic child	.60

*$p < .01$.

The second panel of Table 2 provides information on the number of actions that parents reported police officers took (recall again that this was the number of actions—taken from responses to the items listed in the first panel of the table—about which parents *knew*). Although it is certainly not

TABLE 2: What Police Did in Responding to Respondents' Complaints in Family Abductions

Police Actions	*Percentage*[a]	N
Took report over phone	27	9
Officer sent to scene	54	19
Officer interviewed respondent	58	21
Took written report at interview	61	19
Respondent got copy of report	23	8
Got photograph of child(ren)	24	8
Referred case to another agency	36	13
Did something else	31	11
Reported to Federal Parent Locator	3	1
Reported to FBI	6	2
Reported to other federal agency	6	2
Police did none of these things[b]	16	6
Mean Number of Actions Taken by Police:		
Total	3.05	
For parents who did not consider case a kidnapping	2.75	
For parents who did consider case a kidnapping	3.14	
For policy focal cases	3.59	
For nonpolicy focal cases	2.27	
For cases involving a current spouse	4.00	
For cases involving a noncurrent spouse	2.87	
For cases involving a court order	3.00	
For cases not involving a court order	3.42	
For cases involving attorney contact	3.00	
For cases involving no attorney contact	3.13	
For cases involving satisfied parents	3.50	
For cases involving dissatisfied parents	2.78	

a. Percentages in this column are for valid responses; that is, "don't know" responses were excluded from the denominator.
b. This category includes both parents who said that police took none of these actions and parents who could not remember/did not know if police had done any of these things.

true that doing a great number of things is necessarily the same as treating an event seriously or aggressively pursuing a solution, the sheer number of things that police did can be seen as some crude indication of the amount of attention a case received. Parents indicated that to their knowledge, the police took an average of just over three separate types of action in dealing with each of the 37 cases reported in NISMART. There is also some indication here that police were spending more time on serious cases (the average number of actions taken was greater, although not significantly so, in events that parents

defined as a kidnapping and in events that received the study's more serious policy focal designation—subjective and objective indicators of seriousness of events). There is also no evidence that police gave substantially less attention to incidents involving current spouses, those that lacked a court order, or those that did not also involve the contact of attorneys. Overall, then, it would appear that the police response to family abductions in NISMART was appropriate.

Unfortunately, the majority of study respondents did not seem to agree, with 62% of the parents reporting that they were "somewhat" or "very" dissatisfied with what the police did in handling their cases. It is impossible to be certain of the source of dissatisfaction among the NISMART parents, as the interview did not offer parents an opportunity to directly explain the origin of these feelings. Examination of differences between events in which parents were satisfied and those in which they were not shed little light on the issue. Police appeared to take more actions in cases in which parents were satisfied than in those in which they were not, but this difference was not significant.

Thus the NISMART data would seem to suggest that although police generally appear to respond with appropriate measures to family abductions, most parents are not satisfied with their response. Important as are parents' impressions of police response in family abduction cases, the most crucial issue regarding the nature of police intervention is its effect on outcomes of abductions.

EFFECTS OF POLICE INTERVENTION ON ABDUCTION OUTCOMES

Some authorities suggest that police intervention hastens the recovery of children and minimizes the impact on families, whereas others contend that the police complicate efforts to reunite children and parents (by, for example, creating fear of serious legal repercussions in abductors who would otherwise give up). Because NISMART included interviews both with parents who contacted the police and those who did not, the data can shed a unique light on the effect of police intervention on abduction outcomes. Two outcome measures will be examined here, namely, the duration of episodes and whether any of the children involved in an episode were harmed.

Duration

The reader should be reminded that *duration* does not refer to the amount of time a child was missing or even necessarily gone from his/her regular

place of residence. Duration measures the period of time during which the aggrieved parent was deprived of the mandated or agreed-upon custody. Many of these cases involved children who were removed from their usual place of residence and hidden from the searching parent. In addition, however, abductions (both in the NISMART definition and, in many states, under the law) could have involved custodial parents who denied their ex-spouses legitimate visitation with their children or noncustodial parents who refused to return children when their periods of visitation had ended (see Plass et al. unpublished, for a further discussion of issues related to duration of episodes in NISMART).

The first panel of Table 3 provides descriptive statistics for the duration of episodes in NISMART. The majority of episodes were resolved in 3 days or less, but a substantial number endured for more than 7 days. Parents' reports of duration ranged from less than an hour to 6 months. The average duration of episodes that involved police contact was slightly greater than that of episodes in which police were not contacted (note that this difference is not statistically significant), although the median duration of episodes was the same for both categories. (Because the duration variable is highly skewed, the median is likely to be a better measure of central tendency than is the mean.) It would appear, then, that police intervention had no significant effect on the duration of abduction episodes.

Parents' Evaluations of Harm to Children

The second outcome variable in which we had an interest was parents' perceptions of whether abduction episodes had been harmful to their children. It is important to point out that, as children were not interviewed in the course of NISMART's investigation of family abductions, this measure is based on parents' evaluations of the effects of the events on their child(ren). We considered an episode to have resulted in harm for a child if a parent reported that the child (or, in events involving more than one child, any one of the children) had been sexually abused, physically injured as a result of being hit or beaten, or had suffered "serious mental harm." The second panel of Table 3 provides descriptive statistics for this measure. A child experienced some such harm in about 24% of the episodes. Most of this harm was described as psychological (a finding consistent with other literature in the field of family abductions) (e.g., Greif and Hegar 1993).[2]

Panel B of Table 3 also provides the odds ratio predicting the likelihood of harm to a child when police were involved. This statistic implies that police intervention greatly increased the likelihood that an episode would result in harm to a child. It is possible, however, that both police contact and harm are

TABLE 3: Descriptive Statistics for Duration of Episodes and Harm to Children

Panel A: Duration *Duration of Episode*	*% of Cases*	N
Less than 1 day	19.6	20
1 to 3 days	36.3	37
4 to 7 days	14.4	15
More than 1 week	29.4	30
Mean number of days: 11.67	Median number of days: 3	
Minimum: Less than 1 hour	Maximum: 180 days (6 months)	
Skewness: 4.94	Kurtosis: 28.62	

	Mean	*Median*
Duration when police were involved	13.11 days	3 days
Duration when police were not involved	10.86 days	3 days

Panel B: Harm		*Percentage of*	
Type of Harm[a]	N	*All Episodes*	*Episodes With Harm*
Episodes with harm	24	23.5	100.0
Only mental harm	17	16.7	70.8
Only physical harm	4	3.9	16.7
Physical and mental harm	2	2.0	8.3
Sexual, physical, and mental harm	1	1.0	4.2
Episodes with no harm	80	78.4	—
Total	102	100.0	—
Missing	2		
Likelihood of harm to child when police are involved		5.41*	

a. Note that there is overlap in the harm categories; that is, some caretakers reported more than one type of harm for the same child.
*$p < .01$.

the result of the dangers associated with more serious episodes. The measure of harm used here—that is, the parent's perception of the effect of the episode on his/her child—may be especially sensitive to this problem. Parents who were alarmed enough by an abduction to bring in police may also be more likely to perceive that a child had been harmed in the episode. Because more serious episodes are more likely to involve both harm to children and police contact, separating out the independent influence of police intervention—the major goal here—is difficult.

Table 4 provides information regarding the relationships between harm to children, police contact, and two measures of episode seriousness, namely, whether a parent defined the event as having been a kidnapping and whether

TABLE 4: The Relationships Between Harm to Children, Police Contact, and Two Measures of Episode Seriousness

Panel A: Likelihood that an episode would result in harm to one of the children involved when:	
Police were contacted	5.41*
Parent defined event as a kidnapping	11.37*
Episode received policy focal designation	5.01*
Panel B: Likelihood that an episode would involve police contact when:	
Parent defined event as a kidnapping	8.40*
Episode received policy focal designation	4.12*
Panel C: Likelihood that an episode would result in harm to one of the children involved when:	
Police were contacted, among episodes *not* defined by parent as a kidnapping	5.25
Police were contacted, among episodes *not* receiving the policy focal designation	4.08

NOTE: Numbers denote odds ratio.
*$p < .01$.

an event received the policy focal designation. Panel A of Table 4 shows the relationships of police contact and of the two measures of episode seriousness to the likelihood that an event would bring harm to one of the children involved. Not surprisingly, all three independent measures were associated with an increased likelihood that a child would be harmed.

The data in Panel B of Table 4 illustrate the problematic entanglement of police intervention with the two measures of seriousness. Episodes in which police were contacted were also significantly more likely to be either policy focal cases or to be ones that parents themselves defined as kidnappings. Panel C of Table 4 examines the relationships between police contact and perceived harm to children (a) for those episodes that parents did not define as kidnappings ($N = 66$), and (b) for those episodes that did not receive the policy focal designation ($N = 64$). Although the direction of the relationship between police contact and harm is still positive (and the coefficients quite large), it is not significant at the $p < .05$ level.

Attempts to fully understand the relationship between police contact and the likelihood of harm to a child involved in an episode are hampered by the small number of cases available here for analyses, by the definition of harm available (based solely on parents' perceptions), and by the entanglement of measures of seriousness, harm, and police contact. In fact, far from resolving the issue, the NISMART data are perhaps best considered as support for further inquiry in this area. It does not seem clear whether police contact is

(independently) associated with greater risk of harm or whether it is unrelated to the likelihood of harm. These data suggest that it would definitely be fruitful for future research to more closely examine the effect of present forms of police intervention in family abductions on the children involved. More attention should perhaps be given to the actual interaction between police and children who are victims of family abductions (it is impossible to ascertain from the NISMART data, for example, whether children involved in abduction events were even aware that police were contacted). Equally useful information in understanding the relationship between police intervention and trauma to children is the possible effect of police contact on the relationship between the aggrieved parent and perpetrator after the event. Only when such information is produced will it be possible to adequately assess the impact of police intervention on child victims independent of other potentially traumatic elements of the event.

The analyses presented above have perhaps raised as many questions as they have answered regarding the role that police play in family abduction events. The NISMART data, in spite of their limitations, are currently the only data available from a national sample, and hence the only source of information about both reported and unreported abductions. It is hoped that, the results of these analyses regarding the role of police in these events will both inform and promote future research in the area.

NOTES

1. Elements of the sampling design in NISMART require that certain basic demographic measures be controlled for in the examination of any relationships. In analyses done on the *episode* or *household level*, the education level of the head of the household in which the child lived should be controlled. The odds ratios in Table 1 (as well as those in Tables 3 and 4) were produced from logistic regression equations, and should be interpreted as the independent influence of the specified variable on the likelihood that police would be contacted, whereas the education of the head of household was held constant. The reported odds ratios are the antilog values of the coefficients for the indicated variable produced by the regression equations.

In Panel B of Table 1, the influence of three characteristics of individual children who were involved in an abduction event are examined for possible influence. Again, the sampling design of NISMART requires that the age, race, and gender of children be controlled for in analyses involving *child level* data. Thus the odds ratios indicating the influence of a given child's age, race, and gender in this table should be interpreted as the independent influence of the specified variable while holding constant the other two demographic characteristics of children. The unit of analysis in examining the influence of these three variables was an individual child. (Unless otherwise specified, the unit of analysis in all other analyses in the article is the abduction episode, not the individual child.)

2. Even though the evaluation of an aggrieved parent is admittedly a potentially biased source of information for characterizing the degree of mental harm suffered by a child, there was

some limited evidence from the NISMART data that parents' assessments were accurate. Behaviors that parents described as associated with "seriously mentally harmed" children (found in the uncoded responses of parents to open-ended questions) included such things as bed wetting, nail biting, crying, nightmares, and verbal expressions of fearfulness and general anxiety.

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