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Risk Factors for Family Abduction: Demographic and Family Interaction Characteristics

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Previous research in the study of family abduction has been plagued by three problems in efforts to establish risk factors for the experience of these events: (1) failure to use appropriate comparison groups; (2) focus on only the most severe cases of abduction, without consideration of the full spectrum of these events; and (3) use of data drawn only from some "reported" source (i.e., police, court, or missing children agency reports). This paper addresses these three methodological difficulties, using data drawn from a national sample of families, and including both abducted and nonabducted children. We find that race, age of children, family size, and incidence of violence in the family all appear to bear on the risk of experiencing a family abduction event. Further, recency of divorce or separation appears to be associated with the risk for more serious or alarming cases of family abduction.

KEY WORDS: risk factors; family abduction; family interaction characteristics.

Recent research has indicated that abduction of children by their own parents is becoming an increasingly common by-product of divorce and separation in America. Results from a recent national study estimated that over 350,000 American children experience family abductions annually (Finkelhor *et al.*, 1990). The legal definition of such events ranges from relatively benign episodes in which one parent refuses to grant another legitimate contact with a child for a period of a few days, to much more disruptive situations in which one parent kidnaps a child, leaving the other

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parent permanently without contact. Even relatively minor episodes of family abduction can have harmful effects on children (Agopian, 1984; Plass *et al.*, 1996; see also, Greif and Hegar, 1991, for a discussion of effects on parents), and any such event can make the already difficult task of re-establishing family roles after divorce or separation even more traumatic for children and their families.

Establishing which children and which types of families are at high risk for the experience of a family abduction is clearly an important goal, and indeed, previous research has made progress in identifying a typical profile of such abductions and the children and adults involved in them. Research to date, however, has been plagued by three problems in attempting to establish *risk factors* for the experience of family abductions. First, the studies have not included a group of nonabducted control children for comparison purposes, making it difficult if not impossible to adequately assess which factors may or may not actually differentiate family abducted children from those in the general (non-family abducted) population. While identifying common characteristics of children who are abducted by family members is important in beginning to understand the etiology of such events, it is impossible to adequately assess *risk* for abduction without the use of an appropriate comparison sample of nonabducted children.

Second, other research has focused exclusively on abduction events at the most severe end of the continuum, drawing cases exclusively from sources such as court reports or missing children's organizations. (Agopian, 1981; Cole and Bradford, 1992; Greif and Hegar, 1993; Janvier, 1990). While episodes which come to the attention of such agencies are generally quite alarming ones (involving, for example, children who vanish for long if not indefinite periods of time), they are not necessarily "typical" family abductions. The full spectrum of such events, which affect literally thousands of children and their families each year, is much broader (see Finkelhor *et al.*, 1990). It is impossible to know if the risk factors identified for very serious, stereotypical family abductions are at all similar to those associated with less stereotypical events which, nonetheless, still meet the legal definitions of abduction.

Third, because virtually all previous research has drawn cases from some *official* source, it is impossible to ascertain the potential influence of reporting itself. The fact that much crime of all types goes unreported to the police (or any other official agency), and that there are important differences between crimes which are reported and those which are not is well established (see, for example, U.S. Department of Justice, 1994; see also Plass *et al.*, 1995, for a discussion of differences in family abductions reported to police and those which are not reported). Hence, basing conclusions about who is at risk for family abduction exclusively on these "tip

of the iceberg" cases reported to some official agency could be somewhat misleading.

This study was designed to fill these methodological and conceptual gaps in the family abduction literature by examining risk factors for family abductions using data gathered directly from parents (and not only from official agencies) in a nationally representative sample. Using data from the National Incidence Studies of Missing, Abducted, Runaway and Thrownaway Children (NISMA²), we offer a comparison of demographic and family interaction characteristics for a sample of abducted *and nonabducted* children drawn from the general population, with an aim of establishing risk factors for the experience of abduction.

RISK FACTORS FOR FAMILY ABDUCTION: REVIEW OF GENERAL ISSUES

As stated above, previous research (using non-representative samples drawn from official sources, and lacking a control group for comparison purposes) has identified several common characteristics among those who experience family abductions. These characteristics can be divided into two categories: demographic attributes of the individuals and families involved, and social features of the relationships and life experiences of those who undergo these events.⁴

Demographic Characteristics

The demographic risk factors most commonly cited in the family abduction literature are race, class, and age of abducted children. More limited discussion of two further demographic features—marital status of the child's parents and family size (i.e., number of siblings)—also appears.

With regard to race, family abductions have largely been found more typical among White than among minority families (Agopian, 1981; Agopian, 1984; Greif and Hegar, 1991; Greif and Hegar, 1993). Greif and Hegar (1993) found that abductors were slightly more likely to be non-White than were left behind parents, but that overall a majority of those involved in family abduction events in their sample were Whites. While

⁴Let the reader note that the focus of this paper is on sociological variables found to be associated with family abduction events. There are many potentially important psychological attributes (such as personality characteristics of parents and other family members) which are not dealt with in this paper. This is not meant to imply, however, that psychological variables are unimportant predictors of abduction events; just that they are not the focus of this inquiry.

the findings regarding the relatively greater involvement of white families in abduction events are consistent in the literature, it is also possible that use of cases drawn exclusively from official sources may influence these patterns somewhat, as may the failure to use appropriate control groups for comparison purposes. With regard to reporting issues, some studies do find *limited* differences by race in the likelihood of, for example, reporting crimes to the police (e.g., U.S. Dept. of Justice, 1994). Perhaps even more significantly, however, other researchers have suggested that African Americans may be less likely to involve official agents (e.g., the police or the courts, or even community help sources) in dealing with crime. For example, in the area of domestic violence (a useful parallel, in that it is, like family abduction, a family crime) it has been proposed that African American women may be more reluctant to contact the police, *or* to make use of "self-help" community resources (such as battered women's shelters) (Asbury, 1987). Thus, a confirmation of the role of race as a risk factor using data drawn from a survey of the population—and *not* from any official reporting source—is necessary.

Likewise, use of an appropriate control group for comparison purposes is important—it is unclear, for example, from previous literature if white families are *over* represented in abduction cases, or if the majority of abductions involve whites simply because the majority of the American population is White.

With regard to class, family abductions are largely assumed to be most common among non-poor families (again, see Agopian, 1981). The general assumption is that abducting a child and going into hiding with him/her (as is often the case in the most serious abduction events which are likely to be the focus of research using cases drawn from official reporting sources) requires a certain amount of resources. As is the case with race, however, it is possible that social class may be associated with reporting behaviors. In addition, the very serious and often long term events which have commonly been the focus of previous research may be more likely to involve families with more significant resources. Perhaps less long term, stereotypical events (which might not come to the attention of courts or missing children's agencies) are more common among the poor. Again, a confirmation of the role of social class using a random sample, and a broad spectrum of abduction cases is necessary.

Family abductions typically involve young children (Agopian, 1984; Hegar and Greif, 1991; Finkelhor *et al.*, 1990). Most research has found that abducted children are generally younger than age 5 or 6. The assumption here is that younger children are less likely to be able to make their own decisions about which parent they want to live with, and are easier to take and conceal than are older children. Again, however, it is possible

that reporting behaviors could be related to age—parents might be more alarmed by the abduction of younger children, and hence more likely to call in some official agency for help.

The role of marital status of the child's parents generally has two areas of focus. First, abductions appear to be less common for children whose parents were never legally married (Finkelhor *et al.*, 1991). The assumption here is that in situations in which parents were never married, there may be fewer potential conflicts over (for example) the custody of children.

A second issue is related to the status of deteriorating relationships between parents when an abduction occurs. It appears that family abductions are more common in the period shortly after (or, in some cases, even just before) a divorce. It is likely that the period surrounding the breakup of a marriage is a time of negotiating new roles, and in which anxiety and anger over child custody or visitation issues may be paramount. Such an environment is likely fertile ground for parental abductions.

Both of these issues related to marital status are not so likely to be affected by reporting practices. Nor is there necessarily reason to suspect that such patterns should be different for the very serious cases included in the samples of most previous research and cases of a more "mundane" nature. However, it is possible that the apparent effects of both of these variables might be spurious. Recency of divorce might be related to age of children—the age of children inevitably increases as the time elapsed since a divorce increases. Some of the findings with regard to race could be related to the smaller likelihood of abduction among "never married" parents. Rates of out of wedlock birth are considerably higher, for example, for African Americans than for Whites (National Center for Health Statistics, 1995). Thus, it is important to examine the effects of these measures in a multivariate model (as is presented below), in which the impact of potentially entwined variables are controlled.

Family size is the last demographic feature which is commonly found to be associated with family abductions. Most clinical samples of these events have found them most likely to involve one child (and consequently, smaller families) (Greif and Hegar, 1993). The assumption here is that caring for and/or concealing a single child is simpler than accomplishing these tasks for several children. As is the case with economic resources, however, it is possible that larger families are at an equal (or even higher) risk for less lengthy abduction events, the sort which are unlikely to end up in the files of courts of missing children's agencies. Again, examination of these patterns using data drawn from a random, national sample, is important.

Social Interaction Characteristics

Domestic violence is the most commonly cited social interaction characteristic in family abductions. Greif and Hegar (1993) in fact, identified the occurrence of violence in relationships as one element of the typology of abductions which they develop. Family violence is assumed to have a relationship to the likelihood of abduction in at least two ways. First, violent former partners may abduct children as an act of further abuse or in an attempt to maintain control over a partner who wants to end a violent relationship. Second, non-violent relatives may abduct children in an attempt to "rescue" them from abuse.

These findings regarding the role of violence in family abduction are quite important. It is crucial, however, that they be confirmed using a broad sample of reported and unreported cases, and using a control group. It is possible that reporting of cases is more likely in relationships which have involved violence (e.g., "left behind" parents might be more concerned about potential abuse or harm for their children). It is also possible that a violent relationship context is a more common feature of very alarming and stereotypical abduction events, but that the role of this factor in shorter, less celebrated cases may be quite different. Finally, in the absence of a control group it is difficult to ascertain if the incidence of violence in abducting families is actually greater than that in nonabducting families going through divorce.

One other social interaction characteristic identified in families which experience abduction also bears mention. Greif and Hegar (1993) found that many of the left behind parents in their sample had experienced some sort of childhood abuse themselves. For example, among parents in their sample,⁵ 1 in eight reported physical abuse in childhood and 1 in 20 reported having been sexually abused. The relationship between such childhood experiences and the later experience of a family abduction event is likely based on the ways in which childhood abuse affects adult relationships. For example, abused children may be more likely to form relationships which would have characteristics of high conflict or even abuse, and hence be fertile ground for a family abduction. As is the case with violence, however, it is impossible to assess the actual influence of such factors in the absence of a comparison group, especially given what is known about the widespread experience of abuse in childhood among the general population.

⁵Greif and Hegar use a sample of parents drawn from the files of a missing children's organization. They conducted surveys and some interviews with parents who agreed to participate in the study after pre-screening by the agency. More information regarding the methodology of this study can be found in Greif and Hegar, 1993.

The NISMART data offer an opportunity to address all of the issues raised above. Because these data were drawn from a nationally representative sample of parents (and include a comparison/control group of nonabducted children), because they include a broad range of abductions cases (varying in terms of measures of "seriousness"), and because they are currently the only data available which include both reported and unreported cases, they provide an opportunity to assess each of the "typical" characteristics identified above as *risk factors* for the experience of family abductions.

DEFINITIONS OF VARIABLES AND ANALYSIS STRATEGY

Defining Abducted and Non-Abducted Children

NISMART was designed as a random sample of the American population, with an aim of establishing incidence for a number of categories of "missing" children, including family abduction. In the study's national probability sample, telephone contact was made with 10,544 households, where primary caretakers were asked about the experiences of 20,505 children aged 17 or younger. Starting with a sampling frame of 60,000 telephone numbers, which yielded 11,617 actual households in which a child resided for at least 2 weeks during the previous year, interviews were completed with caretakers in all but 1250 households, for a response rate of 89.2%. (A more detailed description of the sampling design is available in Finkelhor *et al.*, 1990; and Sedlak *et al.*, 1990). Findings from the NISMART data are generalizable to American families with children.

Two definitions of family abduction were used by the study, differentiating cases on the basis of certain "seriousness" criteria. A "Broad Scope" family abduction was defined as: (1) Situations in which a family member *took* a child in violation of a custody agreement or decree, OR (2) 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 1 additional night in these cases. Using the broad scope definition, 104 cases of family abduction were uncovered in NISMART.

A second, "Policy Focal" definition of family abduction was also used. The "Policy Focal" definition included a subset of the Broad Scope episodes that met *any 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. The Policy Focal definition is also likely to be somewhat closer to what might be called a "stereotypical" family abduction scenario. [For general descriptive information regarding the characteristics of both broad scope and policy focal definitions of family abduction cases uncovered by NISMART, see Finkelhor *et al.* (1990), and Finkelhor *et al.* (1991)].

Because family abduction is so clearly an event associated with disrupted/divorced families,⁶ we defined our comparison sample as any family with a child who lived in a household with only *one* of his/her natural or adoptive parents (except in cases in which one parent was deceased), or, where *no* natural or adoptive parent was present. The necessary information as to household composition was gathered for all children whose caretakers gave an affirmative answer to any of the screener questions (for family abduction, or one of the other NISMART events), and for 1/8 of the children who had not experienced any of the NISMART events. It is from this 1/8 sample that the control children for this study were drawn (i.e., children in the 1/8 sample who were not living with both natural or adoptive parents who did not experience any NISMART event were defined as controls for the analysis which follows). Children who experienced a NISMART event other than family abduction were excluded from the analysis, as such youngsters were not "control" children in either a statistical or conceptual sense.

Unit of Analysis

In testing for risk factors associated with the likelihood of experiencing a family abduction, we were interested in assessing the influence of the demographic and social interaction factors identified in the literature as typical of family abduction events—i.e., race, class, age of children, family size, marital status, violence between adults, and childhood abuse of parents involved. With the exception of age (and in some cases, race) of individual abducted children, all of these measures are family or household level variables. Consequently, the analyses which follow use family (or household) level data. Let the reader note that many households included in the NISMART sample had more than one child—76% of the control families, and 67% of the family

⁶Because family abductions by definition involve the enforced separation of a child from legitimate contact with a family member, they inevitably arise out of situations in which there is rancor between parents, in the form of divorce or separation. Even when extended kin (i.e., those other than parents) are involved in abduction events, their involvement is likely to be rooted in the breakdown of a family through divorce or separation.

abduction families had multiple children living in the household. In a "child" level analysis, the influence of family or household level variables would be "counted" more than once in families which had multiple children. Thus, we elected to use a family/household level of analysis here. Relevant characteristics of individual children are incorporated into the family level of analysis, in the form of a measure of the average age of children in the families, and a dummy variable indicating if *any* children in the family were white (children of more than one race were found in a very small percentage of the NISMART families—1.9% of controls, and 1% of abduction families). The reader should note, however, that the adoption of a household level unit of analysis (and the subsequent translation of child level variables to a household level of analysis) resulted in no substantive changes in conclusions drawn about the effects of child level variables.

INDEPENDENT VARIABLES AND BI-VARIATE RELATIONSHIPS

NISMART identified 104 families who experienced family abductions (according to the Broad Scope definition specified above). The analyses below compare these 104 families who experienced abductions with 472 "control" families—those identified as containing children living with only one or neither of their natural or adoptive parents (and who did not have a child who experienced *any* of the NISMART focus events). Data are available for the whole sample for basic demographic and family structure characteristics. Information on family interaction traits (e.g., the incidence of domestic violence, etc.) was also gathered for a smaller subset of the total sample (95 families of family abducted children, and 292 control families). Data were lost here because only a subset of the 1/8 sample of control cases received the questions in the Family dynamics section of the interview. Families who experienced an abduction had missing data for some of these items due to refusals, "don't know" responses, and the like. [Note that general comparison of the families who had missing data for these items with those who were not missing revealed no significant differences in terms of demographic measures such as class (education and income), racial composition, age of children, etc. In addition, family abduction cases which were missing on these variables showed no significant differences in terms of indicators of seriousness of the episode (duration, police contact, policy focal status) from those abduction families who were not "missing."]

Measures of all eight demographic and social characteristics identified above are included in the analyses below. Race and age of children involved were measured as discussed above. Families that experienced an abduction

were significantly more likely to have White children—86% of the abduction families as compared with 74% of the control families were White ($p \leq .01$). Likewise, abduction families were significantly more likely to have children of an average age less than 5—56% of the abduction families had children with average age of 5 or less, compared with 37% of the control families with such young children ($p \leq .00$).

Education level of head of household was used as a measure of social class. (Other measures of social class, such as income, were plagued by missing data problems. Hence, we chose education as an indicator of this concept.) This was a categorical variable with values ranging from 1 to 4 (a value of 1 indicating less than high school education, two high school graduates, three some college, and four college graduate or more). Control families had an average score of 2.6 on this measure, while family abduction families averaged slightly higher, at 2.78 ($p \leq .17$).

A dummy variable indicating family size was constructed, with a value of one for families with three or more children, and a value of 0 for families with two or fewer children. Forty percent of the control families had three or more children, compared to 27% of the family abduction families (a significant difference, $p \leq .01$).

Similarly, a dummy variable indicating whether or not a child's parent had ever been married was also constructed. This variable had a value of one for parents who reported that they had never been married, and a value of zero for parents with any other marital status. Parents of children who experienced family abductions were less likely to report that they had never been married—10% of the control parents were never married, compared with only 4% of the family abduction parents ($p \leq .07$).

Recency of divorce or dissolution of the marriage was difficult to measure. Some of the NISMART abductions were perpetrated by extended kin (and not ex-spouses), and hence no data on the time frame of divorce or separation was available for these cases. Furthermore, the control parents were not asked about how long it had been since the end of their relationship. The interview did include a question, however, which asked parents if they had experienced a divorce or separation in the previous year. This variable was used as a measure of recency of divorce. It is a dummy variable, coded one for parents who experienced divorce or separation in the previous year, and zero for those who did not. Thirteen percent of control parents reported a divorce or separation in the previous year, compared with 23% of the family abduction parents ($p \leq .02$).

Measurement of domestic violence in families was difficult. Because the NISMART interview was so long, and because the occurrence of family violence was not the primary interest of the study, only a rough measure of this concept was provided in the survey. Specifically, parents who participated in

the NISMART interview were asked if there was any violence between adults in the household only in the previous year. The survey question which gleaned this information did not ask *which* adults were involved in the violence. Thus, while this violence may have involved the aggrieved parent and his/her estranged partner, such an interpretation certainly cannot be assured for all cases. Nevertheless, even though it is not an ideal measure of the relevant concept, it can be considered as an indicator of the occurrence of violence in the child's household (if not of the complete context of this violence). This variable was coded with a value of one for families who reported any adult violence, and a value of zero for those who did not. Five percent of the control parents reported any violence in the previous year, compared with 18% of the family abduction parents ($p \leq .00$).

The NISMART interview also included a series of questions for parents about their own experiences with various negative events in their own childhoods.⁷ Two of these were used as measures of "childhood disruption" among caretakers. Namely, respondents who reported that they had been either physically or sexually abused in their own childhoods were identified. The variable was coded as one for parents who experienced any such abuse, and zero for those who did not. Twenty two percent of the control parents reported such abuses, compared to 32% of the family abduction parents ($p \leq .03$).

RISK FACTORS FOR FAMILY ABDUCTION: MULTIVARIATE ANALYSIS

Risk for Broad Scope Definition Abductions

Acknowledging the fact that the basic definition of a family abduction case used in NISMART was intentionally broad and inclusive, we provide the results of two analyses below, one using the broad scope abduction episode definition as the dependent variable, and the second using the more narrow policy focal definition.

Because the dependent variable here is dichotomous, logistic regression is used to evaluate the effect of independent variables on the probability that a family would experience an abduction event. Table I shows the results of the first model, predicting the likelihood that a family would experience a broad scope definition abduction. The reduced number of cases in the model—388—is due to the inclusion of the family interaction characteristic

⁷It should be noted that some parents may not have acknowledged information about their own childhoods, due to blocking, embarrassment, or the like.

Table I. Logistic Regression Predicting the Likelihood of Broad Scope Family Abduction

Variable	B	S.E.	(Exp)B
Large family size (3+ children)	-.65	.28	.52*
Mean age of children in HH < 5 years	.8	.26	2.38**
White family	1.01	.36	2.75**
Parent was never married	-.51	.60	.60
Education level of head of household	.14	.13	1.15
Violence between adults in household	1.46	.43	4.28**
Separation/Divorce in last year	.20	.35	1.22
Parent abused as child	-.10	.27	.91
Constant	-2.59	.56	
-2 Log Likelihood	386.62		
Model Chi-Square	44.18**		

Note. $N = 386$ (95 family abduction families, 291 control families).

* $p < .05$.

** $p < .01$.

variables (violence between adults in the household and recent separation or divorce). As noted above, a part of the sample did not receive this part of the interview, or had missing data for these variables. The reader should be aware, however, that the behaviors of the *demographic variables* in the model (which are available for the full sample) were not markedly different when entered in an equation (not shown here in the interests of brevity) without the family interaction measures (and thus including the full sample). Thus, the loss of cases resulting from use of the family dynamics variables did not influence the behavior of the demographic variables (available for the whole sample) in the reduced model here.

The odds ratios reported in the table indicate the effect of an individual variable (while controlling for other measures) on the likelihood that a family would experience an abduction. Odds ratios greater than one indicate that the presence of the specified variable is associated with an *increase* in the risk for abduction, while those less than one indicate that the risk of family abduction is *decreased* in the presence of this measure.

Having children of White racial background, experiencing violence between adults in the household, and having younger aged children (mean age of children in the household less than 5 years old) were all factors significantly associated with an increased risk of experiencing family abductions. Family size was (significantly) associated with a decreased risk, with families with three or more children being less likely to experience a family abduction. Having a parent who was never married was associated with a decreased risk of abduction (although not a significant one), and risk of abduction was seen to rise with the education level of the head of household (although, again, the education relationship was not a significant one).

Table II. Logistic Regression Predicting the Likelihood of Policy Focal Family Abductions

Variable	<i>B</i>	<i>S.E.</i>	<i>(Exp)B</i>
Large family size (3+ children)	-.64	.41	.53
Mean age of children in HH < 5 years	1.21	.39	3.35**
White family	.99	.52	2.68
Parent was never married	-.31	.82	.73
Education level of head of household	.15	.19	.86
Violence between adults in household	1.38	.54	3.97**
Separation/Divorce in last year	1.01	.44	2.75*
Caretaker sexually abused in childhood	.35	.39	1.41
Constant	-3.32	.80	
-2 Log Likelihood	204.04		
Model Chi-Square	37.77**		

Note. *N* = 330 (39 family abduction families, 291 control families).

**p* .05.

***p* .01.

There were no significant effects for either recency of divorce (which was associated with an increased risk) or the experience of childhood abuse by the responding parent (associated with a decreased risk of abduction).

Policy Focal

Having established risk factors for the full sample of Broad Scope family abductions, we now turn to examining the more serious Policy Focal abductions. As stated earlier, Policy Focal cases are a subset of the total Broad Scope abductions identified. The Policy Focal definition was designed to identify the most serious abductions, and those which most closely resemble a stereotypical notion of what a family abduction is. We were interested in establishing if the risk factors for abduction which we identified above would appear different in any way if we used this more narrow definition (identifying as it did the most serious and alarming events in the sample). Since these cases are a subset of the Broad Scope events, it is likely that many of the same factors already identified differentiate between children who experienced a Policy Focal abduction and children in the control group.

Table II provides the results of a logistic regression, which compares the more serious Policy Focal subset of the abduction episodes with the children in the control group. As predicted, many features of this Policy Focal equation are quite similar to those of the Broad Scope equation (found in Table I). There are, however, some differences. First, children living in families which experienced divorce or separation in the previous year were at (significantly) higher risk for a Policy Focal abduction (this

variable did not have a significant effect in the broad scope abduction equation above)—families who had experienced divorce or separation in the previous year were 2.75 times more likely to experience a family abduction than were families who had not. The measure of racial background no longer exerts a statistically significant effect (although this variable is extremely close to statistical significance, with $p \leq .0556$). Likewise, family size does not have a significant effect in the policy focal regression equation. In addition, the variable measuring disruption in the childhood of the caretaker (i.e., the respondent), while still not significant, is associated with an *increased* risk of abduction in the policy focal equation, and the class measure (education of head of household), while also continuing not to exert a significant effect, shows a *negative* relationship to the likelihood that a family would experience an abduction. Other variables (violence between adults in the household, marital status, and average age of children in the family) behave in much the same way as we saw in the equation predicting the likelihood of Broad Scope abduction.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

In the analyses presented above, we identified risk factors for the experience of family abduction using two different definitions—a more general “Broad Scope” definition (designed to correspond to a more “legalistic” conception of family abductions), and a more stringent “Policy Focal” definition (designed to more closely resemble stereotypical abduction events). These analyses are important in a number of ways. First, they provide a picture of what kinds of children and families are at risk for abduction, and offer some direction for subsequent research. We found that families with young White children (without siblings), and which have experienced some sort of violence between the adults in the household seem to be at higher risk than are divorced families without these characteristics. The risk for the most serious abductions (using the Policy Focal definition) seems additionally to be greater during the period immediately following or surrounding a divorce/separation.

The single most powerful measure in the regression analyses (for both Broad Scope and Policy Focal definition abductions) was, notably, the presence of violent interaction between adults in the households in which the abducted children lived. Apparently, abductions are likely to grow out of or be closely related to the incidence of physical violence in families. One implication here is that family abductions should perhaps be looked at as a by-product of violent relationships, one that has not previously been a focus in general research on family violence. In this context, violence pre-

vention efforts may be seen as having an ameliorating effect on the incidence of family abduction as well.

Second, these results are significant in what they tell us about the findings of other research. Our results correspond fairly well with the implications of other less random studies which focused solely on quite serious cases of abduction (i.e., those reported to missing children's or law enforcement agencies) and which used no control groups. The similarity in risk factors identified here for the two different definitions of family abduction (the more general Broad Scope definition and the more stringent Policy Focal definition which identified more serious episodes) appears to offer further support for the notion that some of the risk factors for abduction may be uniform across the spectrum of "seriousness," and independent of the potential effects of reporting. Many factors that put families at risk for experiencing quite grave and long lasting abductions and those related to relatively less alarming incidents may be basically the same. This provides the first clear evidence that there may be some consistency in the etiology of all kinds of family abductions, and that measures aimed at preventing or controlling very alarming events (such as those which come to the attention of official agencies of some type) may also be effective in helping families who experience less dangerous, but still alarming, abductions.

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