

This study used three approaches to estimate the incidence of nonfamily abductions of children for 1988: a national survey of households with children, a national survey of police records, and an analysis of FBI homicide data. Estimates were derived for three differently defined types of events: stereotypical kidnappings, in which a stranger perpetrator took a child overnight, or a distance of 50 miles or more, or killed, ransomed, or evidenced an intent to keep the child permanently (200 to 300 children); legal-definition nonfamily abductions, in which a stranger or other nonfamily member took, detained, or lured a child, often in conjunction with another crime such as sexual assault (3,200 to 4,600 children); and attempted abduction, in which an unsuccessful attempt was made to take, detain, or lure a child (114,600 children).

The Abduction of Children by Strangers and Nonfamily Members

Estimating the Incidence Using Multiple Methods

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The number of children abducted by strangers has been the source of protracted controversy. In the wake of a string of child kidnappings and murders in the early 1980s, the nation experienced one of its periodic crime panics focused on stranger abduction, which culminated in congressional action (the Missing Children's Act of 1982 and the Missing Children's Assistance Act of 1984). In the publicity and lobbying surrounding that panic, the numbers of stranger-abducted children were widely quoted as high as 50,000 per year (Best, 1990).

These figures and the hysteria over stranger abduction were widely criticized by the press (Griego & Kilzer, 1985) as well as by scholars (Best,

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1988; Gentry, 1988). Although missing children's advocacy organizations eventually disavowed such figures, no reliable alternatives were subsequently developed.

To remedy this, Congress and the federal government undertook to foster studies that would fill the gap and provide estimates not just for stranger abduction but for other kinds of so-called missing children's episodes, such as family abductions and runaways. The result was the National Incidence Studies of Missing, Abducted, Runaway, and Thrownaway Children (NISMAART).

This article describes the methodology and findings of one portion of the NISMAART: the effort to estimate the number of children abducted by strangers and other nonfamily members.

DEFINING ABDUCTION

From the beginning, much of the controversy about nonfamily abduction has been about definitions, not numbers. Estimates of abductions using a legal definition have created confusion and disbelief when interpreted using the popular stereotype of a stranger kidnapping. The legal definition of abduction, although varying from state to state, can mean the coercive movement ("asportation" in legal terms) of a person even a small distance—in California, courts have set it at 22 feet—as well as the unlawful confinement of a victim for a period of time as short as a half hour (Diamond, 1985; Kanter, 1983). Thus many violent crimes can entail abduction as an element.

The popular stereotype of kidnapping, however, draws its imagery from nationally notorious and tragic cases of abduction (Alix, 1978) like those involving the Lindbergh baby, Bobby Franks, and more recently, Adam Walsh,¹ and to most people, entails the removal of a child from his or her home and parents for an extended period primarily for purposes of ransom, sadistic or sexual assault, or even murder.

When advocates for missing children claimed that there were "thousands of stranger abductions," many discriminating people found it implausible, based on their experience from the news and from their neighborhoods, because they were thinking of cases like Adam Walsh. But using a legal definition, such an incidence of abductions was not necessarily implausible. For example, the FBI (Federal Bureau of Investigation, 1985) in the mid-1980s reported close to 90,000 forcible rapes every year.² Children (most commonly, teenage girls) accounted for one third to one half of the cases (Katz & Mazur, 1979). Because many forcible rapes may involve enough coercive movement or detention to qualify legally as abductions, it was not out of the question to think that there were thousands of legally defined

abductions of children each year. Recognizing that confusion was created by these two competing conceptions of the crime of abduction, the researchers believed it necessary to count abductions using two definitions, one corresponding to the *legal* view, the legal-definition abduction, and one corresponding to the public *stereotype*, the stereotypical kidnapping.

The core element of abduction in both definitions involves the coerced, unauthorized movement of a child, the detention of a child, or the luring of a child for the purposes of committing another crime. However, the stereotypical kidnapping has more stringent requirements concerning time, distance, and the identity of the perpetrator.³

Legal-definition abductions include any "nonfamily" perpetrators: for example, acquaintances, neighbors, and baby-sitters, as well as strangers. This category was used because it includes all the potential perpetrators not counted in the study's Family Abduction category and is the one currently preferred by the federal government. It requires only a small amount of coerced movement. It includes cases where a child was simply taken forcibly into a vehicle or building or a distance of more than 20 feet. The legal-definition abduction has lenient requirements for the time during which the child must be detained. If the child was forcibly moved or lured, then any amount of time was sufficient. If the child was detained without movement, then only 1 hour of detainment was required.

In contrast, the stereotypical kidnapping applies to the severe kinds of cases where *strangers* are perpetrators and (a) the child was gone overnight, or (b) the child was transported a distance of 50 miles or more from the point of abduction, or (c) the child was killed, or (d) the child was ransomed, or (e) the perpetrator evidenced an intent to keep the child permanently (see Figure 1).

In addition to completed nonfamily abductions, the NISMART also tried to define and count events called attempted nonfamily abductions. It was recognized that children can be frightened and harmed, and the police can be called, in situations where abductions were attempted but were unsuccessful. An attempt was defined as a situation in which a nonfamily member tried to take, detain, or lure a child. If the action had been successful, the situation would have probably met the criteria for a legal-definition abduction.

Admittedly, however, there is a high degree of subjectivity in the attempted abduction category. It is inherently difficult to judge what *would have happened* in a situation had it continued or what a potential perpetrator's intent *might have been*. Nonetheless, it was felt appropriate to include a category of attempted nonfamily abduction because it is an indicator of the potential danger to children and an important component of public perceptions about the problem. However, attempts are counted separately and are

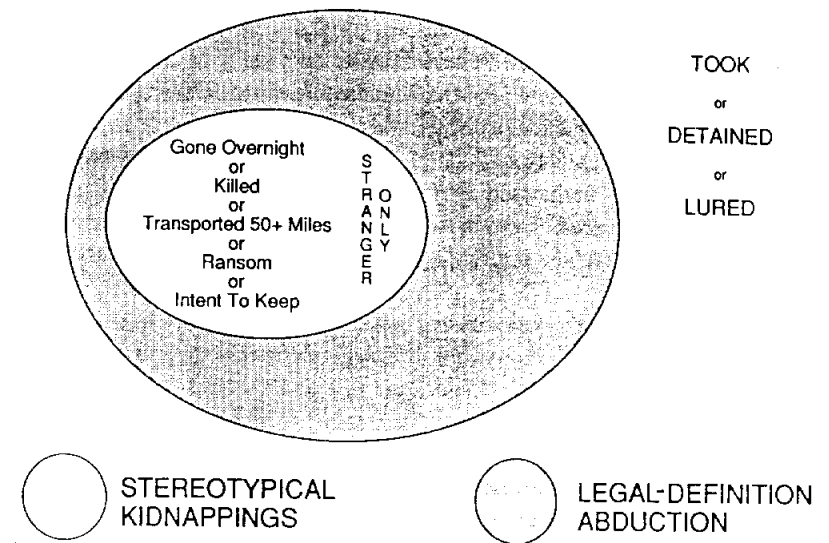


Figure 1: Nonfamily Abduction Definition

not included in the total legal-definition abduction or stereotypical kidnapping estimates.

METHODOLOGY

To estimate the national incidence⁴ of nonfamily abductions for a 1-year period (1988), three independent methodologies were used: a large-scale national household survey, a national study of police records, and a reanalysis of FBI homicide statistics. The reliance on three methodologies grew out of concerns that given the rarity of the problem and also the inadequacies of official record keeping, no single methodology could be counted on to yield a reliable result.

Household Survey

The national survey, conducted by Westat, Inc., consisted of telephone interviews with caretakers in 10,544 randomly selected households, who reported about the experiences of 20,505 children, aged 17 years or younger. The "caretaker" in each household was defined as that person who took care

of the children most of the time when they were staying in that household; 9 out of 10 were parents and the remainder mostly grandparents, aunts, and uncles.

The sampling frame consisted of 60,000 randomly dialed telephone numbers, which yielded 34,820 actual households after eliminating businesses, nonworking numbers, car phones, and numbers that never answered. Of such households, only 11,617 had children who had resided there for at least 2 weeks during the preceding year. In 1,250 of these households, the researchers were never able to talk to a caretaker or the caretaker refused to participate or broke off the interview at some point. Completed interviews represent a response rate of 89.2% of the households known to have children.

The early portion of the interview consisted of a series of "screeners" questions, asking about a variety of situations of interest to the study that could have occurred in the previous 12 months to any child who resided in the household for 2 weeks or more. A nonfamily abduction episode could have been revealed in response to any one of three questions: "Was there any time when anyone tried to take [any of these children] away against your wishes?"; "Was there any time when anyone tried to sexually molest, rape, attack, or beat up [any of these children]?"; or "Has anyone ever kidnapped or tried to kidnap [any of these children]?"

If respondents answered yes to any of these screeners, some additional qualifiers were asked to make sure that the perpetrator was not a family member and that the event had occurred in the relevant time period.⁵ Then they were asked a lengthy series of questions about the episode. The details of the episode were carefully evaluated against the definition of a nonfamily abduction or attempt.

On the basis of the cases that met the definitional criteria, 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 households with more than one phone, and for nonparticipating households. They also took into account the probability of selection of children who had lived (2 weeks) in more than one household during the year. They were also adjusted for small differences between the sample demographics and those of the U.S. population. (Additional details are available in Sedlak, Mohadjer, and Hudock's [1990] technical report on the survey.)

Police Records Study

A survey of police records in a nationally representative sample of law enforcement agencies was conducted to estimate the number of nonfamily

abductions known to law enforcement. The researchers were concerned that nonfamily abductions, especially the more serious cases, might not occur frequently enough to be reliably counted through the household survey but that a systematic national survey of police records might provide enough cases to derive a reliable incidence estimate as well as profile information.

First, a nationally representative sample of 21 counties in 16 different states was selected using a method that guaranteed representation of all regions of the country and all levels of urbanization. These counties, which included Los Angeles, Cook County (Chicago), and the borough of Manhattan, contained 13% of the total and 10% of the child population of the United States. Then, within each county, the researchers recruited state police, county sheriff, and municipal police departments that had jurisdiction over and maintained files on criminal offenses. When there were more than five municipal police agencies in a county, five were sampled. Ultimately, 83 agencies in the 21 counties were found to have files on the types of cases of interest here. All of the selected agencies agreed to participate in the study. (Details concerning county and agency sampling methods are given in the report on police study methodology by Sedlak, Mohadjer, McFarland, and Hudock [1990].)

The major challenge for this study was to identify abduction cases in what were frequently voluminous police records. Unfortunately, police agencies do not generally keep a separate file in which they store all cases involving abductions. Many abductions occur in conjunction with other crimes, such as homicide and rape. Exploratory discussions with law enforcement officials, criminologists, and missing children's advocates and the findings of a previous police records study of child abduction (National Center for Missing and Exploited Children, 1986) indicated that four general types of crime classifications would contain most of the reported cases involving nonfamily abductions: abduction, missing persons, homicides, and sexual assaults.

In preliminary contacts with the participating police departments, it became clear that whereas a survey of homicide, abduction, and missing persons files would be relatively straightforward, sex offenses records would pose a significant problem for the time and budget constraints of the study. In many jurisdictions, sex offense cases were handled by more than one division, so multiple file systems would have to be searched. Moreover, the relevant files were typically very large and heterogeneous, including many types of records that were outside the scope of the study (e.g., voyeurism, indecent exposure, and offenses perpetrated by family members). For these reasons, the survey of sex offense records was limited to 4 of the 21 study counties: two large, one medium-sized, and one small. Combined, these four

counties contained almost 5% of the nation's child population (U.S. Bureau of the Census, 1989, Table B).⁶ In the end, 1,259 records from the abduction, missing persons, and homicide files and 1,566 records from the four county sexual assault files were reviewed, of which 216 and 180, respectively, met the study's criteria for a legal-definition case.

FBI Data Reanalysis

The purpose of reanalyzing FBI data was to estimate the number of children who were murdered in the course of a stranger abduction, a very important and understandably frightening part of the abduction problem. The challenge of this study was that national homicide figures are not kept in a form that makes it easy to determine whether an abduction occurred together with the killing.

At the same time, national figures on homicide are better than those for any other crime. For homicides, the FBI obtains details from local police that are not currently available for other crimes, such as the relationship of the victim and the offender and the age of the victim. This information is made available to researchers in the form of a supplementary homicide report (SHR). Unfortunately, the SHR does not specifically note whether the homicide was associated with an abduction. What the SHR does note is a variety of "circumstances" that describe the context or the precipitating event in which the homicide took place (e.g., robbery, burglary, arson, or a lovers' triangle; see Maxfield, 1989).

Although the circumstance codes could not be used to specify the exact number of stranger abduction homicides, they could be used to draw an *upper limit* on the possible number of such crimes. Cases could be eliminated where their circumstance codes suggested that they were very unlikely to involve an abduction, leaving only homicides where an abduction was possible. Cases involving, for example, arson, larceny, alcoholic brawls, or lovers' triangles were excluded. This left homicides that occurred in conjunction with rape, other sex offenses, other felonies, and other suspected felonies or where circumstances were not determinable. (Additional information is available on the FBI data reanalysis in Hotelling and Finkelhor [1990].)

FINDINGS

From police records, it was estimated that between 3,200 and 4,600 legal-definition nonfamily abductions were known to law enforcement in

TABLE 1: Estimated National Incidence of Nonfamily Abductions, 1988

	Number of Children	Rate per 1,000 Children 0-17 Years Old
Police records study		
Legal-definition abductions ^a	3,200-4,600 ^b	.05-.07
Stereotypical kidnappings	200-300 ^b	.003-.005
Attempts (not in official count)	370-430 ^b	
FBI data		
Stranger abduction homicides ^c	43-147 ^d	.001-.002
Household survey		
Legal-definition abductions	Unable to estimate	
Attempts	114,600	1.80

a. Includes stereotypical kidnappings.

b. Figures are based on a national estimate from abduction, homicide, and missing person files multiplied by a "correction factor" to reflect cases that might be found in sexual assault files (based on a purposive-sample four-county study). Range reflects correction factor for highest and lowest county.

c. Average for 1976-1987.

d. Range represents with and without "undetermined" category (see text).

1988. Of these, between 200 and 300 met the criteria for stereotypical kidnappings. In addition, there were between 370 and 430 *attempted* legal-definition abductions known to police but not included in the full count (see Table 1).

These figures are based on two components: a core estimate with a known statistical precision from a 21-county sample and a "multiplier" inferred from the sexual offense files in the four counties where these were examined. The national survey of 21 counties yielded the core estimate of 1,400 legal-definition abductions (95% confidence interval: 500 to 2,500) and 200 stereotypical kidnappings (95% confidence interval: 0 to 400) located in homicide, abduction, and missing person files. To this core estimate was applied a "multiplier," representing the number of additional cases that might have been found in sexual assault files had these files been examined in all 21 counties. This multiplier, based on what was found in the four-county substudy,⁷ was the ratio of the number of cases in the sexual assault files to the number of cases in the homicide, abduction, and missing person files. The multiplier was between 2.3 and 3.3 for legal-definition abductions, representing an additional 1,800 to 3,200 cases. The multiplier was smaller for the stereotypical kidnappings, adding from 0 to 100 more cases, and was almost negligible for attempted abductions.

TABLE 2: National Incidence of Stranger Abduction Homicides (1976-1987): FBI Data Reanalysis

<i>Criminal Circumstance</i>	<i>Total Cases From FBI Data Base</i>	<i>Rate Per 1,000,000 Children^a</i>
Rape	14	0.2
Other sexual offense	3	0.0
Other felony types	7	0.1
Other suspected felonies	19	0.3
Undetermined	104	1.6
Total (excluding undetermined circumstances)	43	0.7
Total (including undetermined circumstances)	147	2.3

a. Average estimated child population for years 1976-1987 is used as the denominator in the calculation of rates.

The estimate of stranger abduction homicides is between 43 and 147 children, based on the reanalysis of FBI data.⁸ This estimate is an *average* for the 12-year period,⁹ computed this way to eliminate the year-to-year fluctuations. The range reflects the researchers' uncertainty about how to classify a group of homicides in FBI statistics whose characteristics were "undetermined" (Table 2). The low estimate (43) excludes and the high estimate (147) includes these undetermined cases, although it is very doubtful that they could all have involved abductions.

There was concern that the household survey would not yield enough cases to permit calculating a national estimate, and in fact, it did not. There were 15 actual cases from the survey that met the criteria for legal-definition abductions, but it was not possible from these to formulate a national estimate because it would have been associated with an unacceptably low degree of precision. For example, the confidence interval for the estimate would have included zero, with an unacceptable coefficient of variation well above 50%.

However, a sufficient number of cases were encountered that qualified as attempted abductions to formulate an estimate from the household survey. It was calculated that an estimated 114,600 children nationwide were involved in nonfamily abduction *attempts* in 1988. (The 95% confidence interval ranged from 79,900 to 149,400 children.) These attempts represented situations that would probably have qualified as legal-definition abductions had they succeeded. The large size of this figure stands in stark contrast to the figures for completed abductions, and the difference, discussed further in the next section, stems from matters of both definition and methodology.

DISCUSSION

Prior estimates of nonfamily abductions have ranged from a few dozen to 50,000 and have been the subject of much heated controversy. Because the present findings involve several potentially confusing new estimates, it is important to review all these carefully and to consider them in the context of anything else known about nonfamily abductions that would recommend confidence or caution in the interpretation of these estimates.

In the case of the estimates for abduction homicide, the comparison of two different sources within the NISMART does lend some confirmation. Murders of children are notorious crimes, widely publicized, and also generally well-documented by the police. Thus police data are a reliable source for numbers on these crimes. Reanalysis of the FBI data from the police yielded an "upper bound" estimate of 43 to 147. At the same time, another NISMART data source roughly confirms this order of magnitude. A search of police records in the current sample of police agencies revealed that about 5% of the estimated 1,400 countable legal-definition nonfamily abductions involved a homicide. Although no exact estimate of abduction homicides can be made from the small numbers in the police records, the order of magnitude is nonetheless clear and quite consistent with the finding from the FBI data reanalysis. In absolute terms, these numbers (43 to 147) appear small, but because the crimes they represent get extended publicity, even beyond the regions where they occur, they are influential in molding public opinion about the risk and frequency of stranger abduction homicides.

In evaluating the estimate for stereotypical kidnappings, there are also some official statistics against which to make a comparison. Here again, this is a highly salient type of crime — children who are abducted overnight, taken a large distance, held for ransom, or killed by strangers. The National Center for Missing and Exploited Children (NCMEC), the clearinghouse for information on these kinds of crimes, has kept figures over the past 5-year period. Their cases are more generally of the stereotypical kidnapping type, and they report receiving an average of 100 reports per year (Rabun, 1989). This is the same order of magnitude of the NISMART estimate of 200-300 stereotypical kidnappings per year, especially if one considers that the NCMEC is certainly not alerted about every case but is aware of a substantial portion.

The estimate for legal-definition abductions presented here is the hardest to validate against any other source. Many of these abductions are not thought of as abductions, even by police, and they are not necessarily reported as such in newspaper accounts, so experts' and laypeople's sense of what this number should be is understandably vague.

There are good reasons to believe that the national estimate for legal-definition abductions based on the police records could be low. First, some legal-definition abductions that were reported to police were probably not counted in this survey. For example, in some physical or sexual assaults, the police may have failed to provide in the record any indication of the coerced movement of the victim, even though coerced movement occurred. The study would not have noted these cases as abductions. Also, there could have been cases that the police for some reason filed in an unusual crime category not searched by the study, for example, under auto theft. In the Jacksonville-Houston study (Rabun, 1989), although the vast majority of crimes that were counted as abductions had been filed in the sexual assault, homicide, abduction, or missing person files, 20% of these crimes were from "miscellaneous" files. The Police Records Study would have missed these latter cases.

However, the biggest potential unknown for the estimate of legal-definition abductions concerns crimes *not reported to the police*. The methodology based its estimates on the review of police records and so bypassed legal-definition abductions that did not get reported to the police. One can imagine, for example, a teenage girl who was abducted, taken somewhere, and raped but who failed to report this crime because she was ashamed or blamed herself. Or one can imagine a neighborhood teenager who lured a younger child into his house, molested, and forcibly detained the child for over an hour, but the parents never reported the crime to spare the neighbor family from the public disclosure. Potentially countable cases like these would not have been included in this study's estimates of nonfamily abduction because they relied on episodes known to the police.

It is unlikely, however, that the number of unreported abduction-related crimes—at least those known to caretakers—would be on the order of 50,000 or more. If they were, they should have shown up in the household survey in numbers sufficient to allow a reliable estimate of their incidence using that methodology. It is, then, reasonable to say that the number of legal-definition abductions *known to caretakers* is probably higher than the police records' estimate but below 50,000.

There is yet another source of possible underestimate for legal-definition abductions that is completely outside the bounds of either the police records or household survey methodology: abductions not known to caretakers. It is possible to imagine children who were assaulted and abducted, such as in a gang rape, but who did not reveal these assaults even to their parents because of shame or fear of retaliation. Unfortunately, there is no basis in the NISMART for an idea of the full magnitude of the nonfamily abduction problem that includes this component, one that goes beyond the cases known to police *and* beyond those known to caretakers.

Although the household survey failed to produce an estimate of actual abductions, it was possible to derive an estimate of *attempted* legal-definition nonfamily abductions that were known to caretakers. These involved an estimated 114,600 children in the course of a year. In comparison to the estimates from the police records, this estimate for attempted abduction appeared very large. To understand why caretakers disclosed so many more attempts than were evidenced in police records, several points must be kept in mind.

First, as mentioned earlier, the concept of attempted abduction is much more vague than actual abduction. It relies on assessments of *what might have happened* and therefore conjectures made by both the respondents (the caretakers) and the coders. Efforts were made to establish conservative criteria for the coders, but conjecture was still required.

Most of the attempts (65%) involved lures, not force. In the type of episode most frequently reported by caretakers, one or two strangers driving by in a car would slow or stop and try to entice or cajole a child, or sometimes several children, to get into the car. The children often refused outright and generally ran away. It is plausible that these kinds of attempts to lure children into cars are relatively widespread and mostly unsuccessful.

These kinds of episodes also were not reflected in police statistics because many caretakers who heard about them did not report them to police. In only 42% of the attempted abduction cases did the caretakers in the household survey actually contact the police. For the most part, this reflects the fact that the children did not have good descriptive information to help identify the person who made the attempt, and in all cases, the children escaped from the situation and were not actually hurt. In some cases, caretakers also believed that school officials or some other parent had already notified the police, so they did not make a report.

Even when caretakers did contact the police, police may have made no record of it. In many of the episodes, there may have been no actual crime to record. Generally, the stranger made some statement to the child (e.g., "Get in the car!") but did not use force and left when the child ran for help. Because there usually were no witnesses and little identifying information was typically available, this type of event may not have been entered into the files that were searched or perhaps into any crime files.

CONCLUSIONS

The conclusions from this research pertain to three issues: the definition of abduction, the methodology of research, and public policy regarding prevention and response.

Definition

This research has substantially advanced policy and research about nonfamily abduction by recognizing that two different types of abduction exist in public discourse, one of which is kidnapping by strangers that fits the public stereotype, involving ransom, homicide, and the child being gone a substantial time or taken a substantial distance. It is estimated that these very serious crimes involve between 200 and 300 children a year. Then there are abductions in the legal sense, where children are moved, detained, or lured over shorter distances or time periods, usually in the course of other crimes like sexual assault. These crimes number in the thousands. The study's estimate of 3,200 to 4,600 known to the police probably underestimates the extent of the problem to the degree that these crimes are not reported to the police.

A permanent distinction in terminology needs to be established between the two types of nonfamily abductions defined here. The distinction should be formalized in public discussion and perhaps even in crime statutes and record-keeping systems. Policymakers and advocates should be encouraged to clarify what type of abduction they mean whenever they use the term.

In addition, there should be uniform state definitions and criminal statutes on nonfamily abduction. One of the current obstacles to accurate records and meaningful nationwide statistics about abduction is the variability across states in what constitutes an abduction or kidnapping. There is more variability on this crime than on many others. National figures cannot be collected nor can local studies be extrapolated to other jurisdictions without more uniformity and comparability.

Methodology

Police records currently have severe limitations that impede the derivation of accurate estimates of nonfamily abduction. This is less true for an estimate of the incidence of stereotypical kidnappings: Because they are such serious crimes they are generally *reported to* and *recorded by* the police, so police records can give a fairly accurate estimate of this problem.

However, estimates of the number of legal-definition abductions derived from police records are less accurate. Many children and caretakers do not report assaults to the police, particularly sexual assaults, where abduction may have occurred. Even when they receive a report about a sexual assault, police do not reliably record the elements of movement and detention in their investigative reports about such crimes. Moreover, these reports are filed in a wide array of police files, organized very differently in different jurisdic-

tions. All this makes it difficult to rely on police records for an estimate of the incidence of legal-definition abductions. A major advance for incidence estimations will be achieved when law enforcement agencies implement the new uniform crime reporting system, the National Incident-Based Reporting System (NIBRS), which will identify abduction as a component in other crimes (Bureau of Justice Statistics, 1988; U.S. Department of Justice, 1988).

In addition, the problem of estimating legal-definition nonfamily abduction can still be approached through a household survey design to capture episodes not known to police. In the current study, the household survey did not yield enough cases to make a defensible estimate. However, based on the current yield, a survey of twice the size (i.e., approximately 40,000 children) would be able to arrive at a reliable estimate for legal-definition abductions known to caretakers. Studies should also experiment with the possibility of directly interviewing children themselves, especially older children, to overcome the problem of incidents unknown to caretakers.

Public Policy

The fact that there are not tens of thousands of stereotypical kidnappings (the estimate in this study is 200 to 300) is somewhat reassuring news for anxious parents and frightened children. In the context of the NISMART study as a whole, the problem of family abduction (estimated at 354,100 broad scope and 163,200 policy focal cases; see Finkelhor, Hotaling, & Sedlak, 1991) appeared to be of quite substantially larger magnitude than stranger abduction. Unfortunately, it has been very tempting to use parents' fears about stranger abductions to galvanize politicians to protect children from other crimes and other threats, but it is a mistake to focus public policy concerning child victimization on the crime of stranger abduction. It is not just that the number of such crimes is relatively small but that abduction is not a particularly good category for organizing or counting the criminal victimization of children. The nature and seriousness of abductions are mostly determined by the nature and severity of the other crimes that are committed in their course, such as rape, assault, and murder. And in fact, these crime categories are better focal points for action on child victimization.

For those concerned about raising awareness about crimes against children, the analysis here demonstrates that discussions of abduction inevitably lead to controversy and statistics that for the foreseeable future will understate the problem of children's victimization. As was pointed out, an estimate of 3,200 to 4,600 legal-definition abductions derived from police records probably undercounts the true magnitude of nonfamily abduction for a

variety of methodological reasons mentioned earlier. But many children are the objects of criminal attacks by nonfamily perpetrators, and it will be a while, if ever, before it is known what proportion of these involve some abduction component.

On the other side, however, those who have been perturbed by exaggerated figures in the past should be cautious about being dismissive of the problem of stereotypical kidnappings now that the numbers have been shown to be small. When terrible stranger abduction crimes make the headlines, as they inevitably do, it may not be enough to simply reassure parents and children that such crimes are rare. Because of their horrifying nature, these crimes have traumatizing effects on communities beyond the scope of their numbers. Moreover, they may cluster in ways that place certain communities or population sectors at higher risk. Recognizing that they affect thousands of families and children indirectly, proper policy may be to consider communitywide mental health type interventions in areas affected by these crimes.

Moreover, the prevalence of attempted abduction does give a sense that there is a certain type of threat to children that may be minimized by statistics on actual abductions. It was estimated from the household survey that 114,600 children had encounters in 1988 where there was an apparent *attempt* to abduct the children. The majority of these events involved attempted *lures*, where strangers tried to get children to enter cars. All, by definition, were unsuccessful.

One policy implication of the statistics on attempted abduction may be that it is still worthwhile teaching children about "stranger danger." The fact that so many children have escaped from possibly dangerous situations says that children can and do effectively thwart attempts and that the need for such skills seems to arise with measurable frequency. The findings here do not speak to the effectiveness of the specific types of "stranger danger" warnings that are currently used, but the dangers that they are intended to counteract do exist. These findings also suggest that there is a need to emphasize the skill of observation, so that children who are accosted can provide better information about these strangers.

Moreover, the finding that attempted nonfamily abductions are this prevalent helps to make sense of the continuing concern that American parents have about stranger abduction. When children have "close calls," such as those documented here, the news must spread to other parents in the community. Such experiences must combine with the stories that families hear from newspapers and television to give a sense that the risk of serious stranger abduction is quite real. In spite of severe conceptual and methodological

difficulties, the crime of stranger abduction and the concerns it spawns are not likely to disappear soon from the public policy arena.

NOTES

1. Adam Walsh was a 6-year-old child who disappeared from a Miami area shopping mall. His severed head was later recovered, but the case has never been solved. The case became the subject of a 1983 NBC television docudrama, and Adam's father, John Walsh, went on to become one of the most influential figures in the missing children's movement. The Lindbergh case involved the kidnapping and murder in 1932 of the 20-month-old son of aviator and national hero, Charles Lindbergh. It was this case that sparked federal legislation making kidnapping a capital offense. Bobby Franks, the 14-year-old son of a Chicago millionaire, was kidnapped, ransomed, and murdered in 1924 by Richard Leob and Nathan Leopold, also the sons of wealthy Chicagoans. The case, in which the defendants were represented and spared from the death penalty by Clarence Darrow, became the subject for a famous book and movie.

2. The amount of *unreported* rape is far greater than what is reported to the police (Russell, 1984), but reported figures are cited here, because previous estimates of abduction have been based on analyses of police statistics.

3. The following were the detailed definitions:

Legal definition: Child was taken by the use of force or threat or detained by the use of force or threat for a substantial period in a place of isolation by a nonfamily member without either lawful authority or the permission of a parent/guardian; or child who is 14 or younger or who is under 18 and mentally incompetent was taken by or voluntarily went with or was detained by a nonfamily member without either lawful authority or the permission of a parent/guardian and the perpetrator (a) concealed the child's whereabouts, or (b) requested ransom, goods, or services in exchange for the child's return, or (c) expressed an intention to keep the child permanently; or child was taken by or voluntarily went with a nonfamily member who, at the time he or she took or went away with the child, had the apparent purpose of physically or sexually assaulting the child.

Stereotypical kidnapping: An episode meeting criteria for abduction under legal definition that has these additional components: Perpetrator of the abduction is a stranger (someone child had not met or known before day of the abduction), and child is detained overnight, is killed, or is transported 50 miles from the scene of abduction; or the perpetrator requests ransom, goods, or services in exchange for the child's return; or the perpetrator expressed an intention to keep the child permanently.

For more discussion of the rationale behind the definition, see Finkelhor, Hotaling, and Sedlak (1990).

4. All references to "incidence" or "abductions" in this article refer to the *number of children*, not the number of incidents.

5. Several strategies were used to deal with the problem of temporally bounding people's recollections of episodes, including ascertaining their time of occurrence on two separate occasions and asking respondents to refer to seasonal cues.

6. This was a large enough data base to provide some empirical grounds for suggesting the extent to which abductions that get classified solely as sexual offenses might augment the overall

estimates. Because the records came from only four counties, however, the researchers could not develop an unbiased national estimate with known reliability of the number of nonfamily abductions that get classified only as sexual offenses. This meant that, strictly speaking, the only police records estimates of known reliability were those based strictly on the files of abductions, homicides, and missing persons.

7. These four counties were chosen on the basis of size and are not necessarily representative, so the multiplier is of unknown precision.

8. Conceptually, these stranger abduction homicides are a portion of stereotypical kidnappings as well as legal-definition abductions, although they come from a completely different source. They are not to be added to the other incidence figures.

9. The estimates given here differ by a small amount from estimates made previously (see Hotelling & Finkelhor, 1990) because FBI data from the three most recent years (1985-1987) were added to the present analysis.

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