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Reconsidering the Leading Myths of Stranger Child Abduction

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This paper addresses the two foremost myths of child abduction: (1) that it is generally committed by strangers; and (2) that the phenomenon is a growing problem. These commonly held views are considered in light of the extant empirical knowledge base, including the recently released NISMART-2 study. Research indicates that stranger abduction occurs less frequently than family abduction or acquaintance abduction; stereotypical stranger abductions are rarer still, and stereotypical stranger abductions resulting in homicide are extraordinarily rare. There is no evidence of a stranger-abduction epidemic, and there is no clear evidence for a child abduction epidemic overall. There is, however, strong evidence that parental abduction is widespread. Assessment of the extant knowledge base suggests the need for: (1) national longitudinal studies with consistent typologies and methodologies which could determine the scope and trend of child abduction; (2) increased efforts to verify interview data to avoid overestimation; (3) theoretical construction to predict/explain abduction behaviors; and (4) migration of new elaborated typologies into NIBRS and especially UCR data collection.

Keywords: kidnapping; parental; parent; NISMART

Introduction

The sex murders of children are most effective in producing hysteria. (Edwin Sutherland, 1950)

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Child abduction is one of America's most feared crimes. The threat of child abduction has, to an extent, been a socially constructed problem, resulting from mass media sensationalism and fabrication (Forst & Blomquist, 1991; Kappeler, Blumberg, & Potter, 1996). For more than a century intense media coverage has personalized the kidnappings of the child next door (Fass, 1997; Zierold, 1967), making figures such as Polly Klaas, Danielle van Dam, Adam Walsh, Elizabeth Smart and most recently Carlie Brucia household names. Through media accounts, the public has developed a stereotype of child abductors as strangers who take children; keep them for extended periods; and move them long distances (Asdigian, Finkelhor, & Hotaling, 1995). In the 1980s, perhaps beginning with Adam Walsh's murder, a more sinister image of child abductors became prevalent (Fass, 1997), namely the child abductor morphed to a furtive stranger and sexual predator who snatches and murders innocent children. Public fear has manifested itself in websites and faces on milk cartons, as well as in emerging markets for DNA samples, sentry transmitters and human microchip implantation. The publishing industry provided yet another index of public anxiety: An Amazon search for 'child abduction' retrieved 42 items, with such titles as *Child Lures: What Every Parent and Child Should Know About Preventing Sexual Abuse and Abduction* (Wooden, 1995), *Child Abduction: How to Protect Your Children* (Woodson, 2002) and *Don't Take My Child: A Parent's Guide to Keeping Our Kids Safe* (Richard et al., 2001).

Societal fear affected public policy as criminal justice responses to stereotypical stranger abductions factored into election platforms. In advocating AMBER Alert legislation, for example, Pennsylvania Congresswoman Melissa Hart labeled child abduction a 'national epidemic' which had increased '468% over the past 20 years' (Benner, 2003). To this perceived problem, legislators responded with numerous efforts, including *inter alia*, the Missing Children Act (1982), the National Child Search Assistance Act (1990), the Missing Children's Assistance Act (1995) and the Missing, Exploited, and Runaway Children Protection Act (1999).

Despite the public's preoccupation, recently released national studies have shown the lightning-strike rarity of stereotypical stranger kidnappings (see, Finkelhor & Ormrod, 2000). At the same time, increasingly sophisticated analyses have rendered a more complex image of child abduction (Finkelhor, Hammer, & Sedlak, 2002; Hammer, Finkelhor, & Sedlak, 2002). This paper critically examines commonly held child abduction myths that largely define the extant literature base to identify implications for research and policy. Child abduction seems particularly timely in light of the 2002 release of the second National Incidence Studies of Missing, Abducted, Runaway, and Thrownaway Children (hereinafter 'NISMA-2') and the 2003 Elizabeth Smart and Carlie Brucia cases.

Myth 1: Child Abductions are Generally Committed by Strangers

In the 1980s, some criminal justice researchers discerned a national epidemic, citing child abduction estimates ranging from 25,000 to 500,000 (Hyde & Hyde, 1985) to 300,000 to 600,000 (Arenberg, Bartimole, & Bartimole, 1984). Such law enforcement appraisals of child abduction may have been predicated on conflated typologies. By

combining 'exploited' and 'missing' children counts, agencies and researchers derived exaggerated child abduction estimates (Kappeler et al., 1996). As Fass (1997, p. 261) writes, 'By the 1980s, when the numbers of family kidnappings made them a democratic indulgence, they were strongly connected by child advocates and child-find organizations with stranger abductions, then subtly associated in the public mind with the sexual exploitation of one's own children'. High abduction estimates and public concern justified new legislation and agencies and greater criminal justice resources. Later research indicated that only a small fraction of caretaker-missing children were abducted (Finkelhor et al., 2002).

The criminal justice literature has similarly suffered from unfortunate typologies. The literature on child abduction that emerged in the 1980s grew and broadened during the 1990s (Finkelhor, Hotaling, & Sedlak, 1990; Johnston & Girdner, 2001). Many studies were descriptive rather than explanative (see, e.g. National Center for Missing and Exploited Children, 1986), perhaps in response to the need for accurate abduction estimates. Early research tended to oversimplify the complex range of child abductions into two classes, family abduction and non-family abduction (Juvenile Justice Bulletin, 2000). This false dichotomy obscured the significant distinctions between stranger and acquaintance abductions.

Making estimates even more difficult (and in a situation similar to that found in hate crimes), parental abduction was not criminalized until the mid-1970s (Agopian, 1981), which meant that law enforcement agencies had no reason to keep records of parental kidnapping prior to that time. In the absence of a court order specifically prohibiting the parent from being with the child, the child had never actually been missing at all. Consequently, parental abduction was under-recorded by law enforcement agencies, whereas the prevalence of stranger abduction was obscured by misleading classification.

The emerging picture of child abduction involves a complex range of unique, unduplicated phenomena. Child abduction has at least five typologies: (1) parental abductions; (2) hostage abductions; (3) rape or sexual abductions; (4) non-sexual assault or murder abductions; and (5) ransom abductions (Alix, 1978). Each child abduction typology has distinctive situational characteristics and temporal patterns (for parental abduction, see, e.g. Agopian, 1981; Finkelhor, Hoatling, & Sedlak, 1991; Johnston & Girdner, 1998, 2001). Within particular typologies, victim-offender sub-typologies are emerging based on offender motivations and victim-offender-offense characteristics (Butler, Leitenberg, & Fuselier, 1995; Carmody & Plass, 2000; Forst & Blomquist, 1991; Greif & Hegar, 1993; see also Boudreaux, Lord, & Etter, 2000). For example, parental abductors were 55 percent male and tended to victimize preschool children in order to gain custody (Forehand, Long, & Zogg, 1989; Hegar & Greif, 1991); by contrast, stranger abductors were overwhelmingly male and tended to target teenage girls due to sexual motivations (Boudreaux, Lord, & Dutra, 1999). However, stranger abduction is not motivationally monocausal: Stranger abductors exhibit numerous other motivations, including retributive acts, robbery, intimidation, ransom and dating violence (Asdigian et al., 1995). In light of these diverse motivations, researchers have motivationally sub-classified stranger abductors into pedophiles, profiteers, serial killers and childless psychotics (Tedisco & Paludi, 1996; see also Erikson & Friendship, 2002),

while identifying concomitant psychological characteristics (Burgess & Lanning, 1995; Lanning & Burgess, 1995; Prentky et al., 1991).

As rigorous studies of stranger abduction emerged, stranger–child abduction estimates precipitously declined. In one of the first attempts at comprehensiveness, Hotaling and Finkelhor (1990) estimated that between 52 and 158 stranger-abduction murders occurred each year. Unfortunately, the study used selected state samples to generalize to a national level and did not use concrete law enforcement data to establish indisputable numbers. Interstate and national studies, with broader scopes and more elaborate typologies, revised estimates downward once again (Finkelhor et al., 1990; Finkelhor et al., 2002; Finkelhor & Ormrod, 2000; Hammer et al., 2002). Problematically, however, these studies utilized different methodologies and classifications, making many direct comparisons difficult, if not impossible. For example, the 1997 National Incident-Based Reporting System (hereinafter ‘NIBRS’) study was collected from a 12-state region and based on police reports; in contrast, NISMART-1 and NISMART-2 had a nationwide sample and used a blended methodology of law enforcement data and telephone surveys. Even comparing the two NISMART studies was difficult: In an effort at methodological improvement, NISMART-2 utilized eight different kidnapping categories to NISMART-1’s five.

Despite methodological differences, the consensus finding was that stranger abduction comprised the rarest abduction type. For NIBRS (Finkelhor & Ormrod, 2000), stranger abductions occurred in just 24 percent of cases, compared to parental abduction (49%) and acquaintance abduction (27%). For NISMART-2 (Finkelhor et al., 2002), parental abduction comprised 78 percent of all abductions, compared to acquaintance abduction (12%) and stranger abduction (10%).

For stereotypical stranger abductions, kidnapping rates fell dramatically. Stranger abductions were stereotypical, according to the NISMART studies (Finkelhor et al., 1990) when they involved a stranger or slight acquaintance and the child taken is: (1) gone overnight; (2) killed; (3) transported 50 miles or more; (4) ransomed; or (5) kept with the intention of permanence. The study concluded that, out of 114,600 non-family abductions attempted in 1988, there were only 200 to 300 stereotypical stranger abductions. Much more common, by contrast, were legal-definition stranger abductions, in which the stranger neither: (1) takes the child overnight; (2) kills the child; (3) transports the child 50 miles or more; (4) ransoms the child; nor (5) keeps the child with the intention of permanence: There were an estimated 3,200 to 4,600 occurrences of legal-definition stranger abduction in 1988 (Asdigian et al., 1995). Such abductions tended to involve teenage girls, who were typically targeted for sexual assaults, and were short term in duration (Asdigian et al., 1995).

NISMART-2 used a similar methodology but collected data from 1997 to 1999. The study concluded that, out of 58,200 non-family abductions, only 115 of these abductions involved stereotypical stranger abductions. Of these abductions, 40 resulted in death, with four unknown results. Although 58 percent of stereotypical stranger abduction victims were 12 years of age or older, this form of abduction had a higher percentage of preteen victims than any other non-family abduction form. Nearly half of all stereotypical stranger abductions resulted in sexual assault.

Myth 2: Child Abductions Are an Epidemic

The literature has yielded mixed and sometimes uncertain estimates of child abduction rates. While there does not appear to be a stranger-abduction epidemic, there is considerable evidence that parental abduction is common. There is no clear indication, however, that parental abduction is increasing nor can it be determined for certain whether this level of occurrence constitutes the label of epidemic.

According to NIBRS data, child abduction comprises 0.1 percent of crimes against individuals and 1.5 percent of all violent crimes against juveniles (Finkelhor & Ormrod, 2000). Comparing NISMART-1 to NISMART-2, stereotypical stranger abductions appear to have decreased during the period 1988–1999, while overall non-family abduction attempts decreased from 114,600 to 58,200. While there is no question that juveniles abducted by strangers are in grave peril (see, National Center for Missing and Exploited Children, 1986), child abduction murders remain extremely rare events. In the NIBRS study, only one death resulted from child abduction. NISMART-2 reported only 40 deaths out of 58,200 non-family abductions. Placing this number in perspective, 5,834 children aged 1–14 years died from accidental injury in 1999 (National SAFEKids Campaign USA, 2000); of all causes, approximately 25,745 children and adolescents aged 1–19 years died in 2000 (Hoyert et al., 2001). Restated, a child is about 600 times more likely to die of causes other than stranger abduction.

While stranger abduction did not appear epidemic, there was evidence that parental abduction was widespread. NISMART-1 reported 354,100 parental abductions, whereas NISMART-2 reported 203,900. However, both studies produced questionable findings.

NISMART-1 used a broad-scope definition of parental abduction, resulting in an inflated estimate of parental abduction: The abduction tally did not discriminate between minor custodial interference and long-term parental abduction. Another difficulty with NISMART findings was reliance on self-reported survey data, which is always suspect and in this instance was never verified by any other sources. Finally, NISMART-1 used a complex research design that blended law enforcement data, telephone surveys, juvenile residential facility surveys, returned runaways and agencies who potentially could have been in contact with runaways. Consequent to all these factors, NISMART-1 findings appeared magnified when compared to other sources: Parental abduction estimates, for example, exceeded numbers from eight statewide missing-children information clearinghouses (Best & Thibodeau, 1997).

NISMART-2 estimated that 203,900 family abductions took place in 1999, though only 21 percent of these abductees were missing for more than a month (Hammer et al., 2002). Unfortunately, NISMART-2 inherited many of its predecessor's flaws. Although the parental abduction parameters were curtailed, NISMART-2 used an analogous research design that depended heavily on non-verifiable interviews. The NISMART studies' methodological flaws suggested that other NISMART estimates, such as non-family abduction estimates, would likewise be biased unless they were derived solely from law enforcement data (as were the stereotypical stranger kidnapping data).

Unfortunately, the existing literature provides little basis for comparing child abduction rates over time. NISMART-1 and NISMART-2 employed different child abduction categories, making direct comparison impracticable. No nationally focused longitudinal studies of parental abduction currently exist.

Conclusion

Available child abduction data indicate that stranger abduction occurs less frequently than family abduction or acquaintance abduction; stereotypical stranger abductions are rarer still, and stereotypical stranger abductions resulting in homicide are extraordinarily rare. There is no evidence of a stranger-abduction epidemic, and there is no clear evidence for a child abduction epidemic overall. There is, however, strong evidence that parental abduction is widespread.

The emphasis on stranger abductions, especially stereotypical stranger abductions, may hinder child abduction prevention efforts. Child abduction rates are related to the decline of family life and community structures, including family dissolution, poverty, child abuse and high divorce rates (Forst & Blomquist, 1991), thus law enforcement efforts, however vigorous, are reacting to the effects of an underlying problem. Children living in socially disorganized environments may need heightened interventions (Finkelhor, Hotaling, & Asdigian, 1995). Additionally, uncritical focus on stranger abduction as a category may obscure situationally specific factors such as offender-victim relationship, offense motivation (Erikson & Friendship, 2002), locale and time. While a number of studies have related child abduction to specific contexts, there has been little work relating child-abduction contexts to larger theoretical frameworks, such as routine activities theory (see, e.g. Boudreaux, Lord, & Jarvis, 2001, for an application of this theory to child abduction and homicide). Indeed, new theories are needed to account for the diverse nature of child abduction. Thus, there is a demonstrated need for: (1) national longitudinal studies with consistent typologies and methodologies that could determine the scope and trend of child abduction; (2) increased efforts to verify interview data to avoid overestimation; (3) theoretical construction to predict/explain abduction behaviors; and (4) migration of new elaborated typologies into NIBRS and especially UCR data collection.

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