



OJJDP
Working for Youth Justice and Safety
JUVENILE JUSTICE
B U L L E T I N

June 2016

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From the Administrator

Stereotypical kidnappings—defined as abductions in which a slight acquaintance or stranger moves a child at least 20 feet or holds the child at least 1 hour, and in which the child is detained overnight, transported at least 50 miles, held for ransom, abducted with the intent to keep permanently, or killed—are rare. However, learning more about such events, the victims, and the perpetrators is an important step in addressing the problem.

This bulletin summarizes findings about stereotypical kidnappings in 2011 based on data from the Law Enforcement Survey, a component of the Third National Incidence Studies of Missing, Abducted, Runaway, and Thrownaway Children (NISMAART-3), and sponsored by OJJDP. The authors compared 2011 findings on stereotypical kidnappings with 1997 results from NISMAART-2 based on data from law enforcement agencies nationwide. Although stereotypical kidnappings have not decreased since 1997, recovering the child is more likely and the proportion of kidnappings involving homicide has declined.

NISMAART is a crucial component of a larger, comprehensive effort to respond to the issue of America's missing children. As we continue to enhance and improve our endeavors, we come closer to realizing our goal of keeping our nation's children safe.

Robert L. Listenbee
Administrator

Child Victims of Stereotypical Kidnappings Known to Law Enforcement in 2011

Janis Wolak, David Finkelhor, and Andrea J. Sedlak

Highlights

This bulletin summarizes findings on the incidence and characteristics of stereotypical kidnappings of children in 2011 and compares them with 1997 findings. The key findings include the following:

- An estimated 105 children were victims of stereotypical kidnappings in 2011, virtually the same as the 1997 estimate. Most kidnappings involved the use of force or threats, and about three in five victims were sexually assaulted, abused, or exploited.
- Victims were, most commonly, ages 12 to 17, girls, white, and living in situations other than with two biological or adoptive parents. Half of all stereotypical kidnappings in 2011 were sexually motivated crimes against adolescent girls.
- Most perpetrators of 2011 stereotypical kidnappings were male, were ages 18 to 35, and were white or black in equal proportions. About 70 percent were unemployed, and roughly half had problems with drugs or alcohol.
- Fewer stereotypical kidnappings ended in homicide in 2011 than in 1997 (8 percent versus 40 percent). Most kidnapers were not violent at first contact with victims; instead, they lured almost 70 percent of victims through deception or nonthreatening pretexts. Kidnappings involving 92 percent of child victims in 2011 ended in recovering the child alive, compared with 57 percent of victims in 1997.
- 2011 estimates of child victims being detained overnight were three times the 1997 estimates (80 percent versus 26 percent).
- Technologies, such as cell phones and the Internet, helped law enforcement to solve crimes involving two-thirds of the victims.





Child Victims of Stereotypical Kidnappings Known to Law Enforcement in 2011

Janis Wolak, David Finkelhor, and Andrea J. Sedlak

The findings reported in this bulletin are from the law enforcement component of the Third National Incidence Studies of Missing, Abducted, Runaway, and Thrownaway Children (NISMAART-3), sponsored by the Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention. The NISMAART research program was undertaken in response to the mandate of the 1984 Missing Children's Assistance Act (Pub. L. 98-473), which requires OJJDP to periodically conduct national incidence studies to determine, for a given year, the actual number of children who are reported missing, abducted by strangers, or kidnapped by a parent as well as the number of children who are recovered. (The Act was amended in 2013 to

require such incidence studies to be conducted triennially [Pub. L. 113-38].)

Conceptualizing the Problem

The terms "child abduction" and "kidnapping" bring to mind notorious crimes that have been the focus of public attention, such as the kidnappings of Etan Patz, Adam Walsh, Polly Klass, Shawn Hornbeck, Elizabeth Smart, or of Michelle Wright, Amanda Berry, and Georgina "Gina" DeJesus, who escaped from captivity in 2013. All of these crimes involved a substantial duration or distance and life-threatening circumstances. Some of the children were killed; others suffered extreme forms of abuse. Strangers committed

DEFINING STEREOTYPICAL KIDNAPPING AND RELATED TERMS

To be counted as a stereotypical kidnapping, an incident first has to qualify under the NISMAART definition of a nonfamily abduction and then meet the criteria for a stereotypical kidnapping.

Nonfamily abduction: (1) An episode in which a nonfamily perpetrator uses physical force or threats of bodily harm to take a child or uses physical force or threats of bodily harm without lawful authority or parental permission to detain a child for a substantial period of time (at least 1 hour) in an isolated place, or (2) an episode in which a child who is younger than 15 or mentally incompetent and, without lawful authority or parental permission, is taken or detained or voluntarily accompanies a nonfamily perpetrator who conceals the child's whereabouts, demands a ransom, or expresses the intention to keep the child permanently.

Stereotypical kidnapping: A nonfamily abduction in which a slight acquaintance or stranger moves a child (age 0-17) at least 20 feet or holds the child at least 1 hour, and in which one or more of the following circumstances occurs: The child is detained overnight, transported at least 50 miles, held for ransom, abducted with intent to keep the child permanently, or killed.

Stranger: A perpetrator whom the child or family does not know or a perpetrator of unknown identity whom law enforcement investigators reasonably believe is a stranger.

Slight acquaintance: A nonfamily perpetrator whose name is unknown to the child or family prior to the abduction and whom the child or family did not know well enough to speak to or a recent acquaintance whom the child or family have known for less than 6 months, or someone the family or child have known for longer than 6 months but have seen less than once a month.

most of these infamous crimes, but some perpetrators were persons whom the children or their families knew slightly. For example, the perpetrator in the Elizabeth Smart case had worked briefly for her family, and Amanda Berry and Gina DeJesus knew their kidnapper slightly through interactions with his children.

In the criminal justice system, abduction means something much broader than the circumstances of these dramatic crimes. Abductions can occur when a child is moved even a short distance, detained for even a modest amount of time, or taken or held by someone who has no legal right to custody. These types of child abductions often occur in the context of family disputes over child custody or during the commission of other crimes. For example, a situation in which a parent deliberately keeps a child beyond the time allowed for visitation in violation of a custody order would meet the statutory definition of abduction in most states, as would crimes in which a child is detained on the street at gunpoint and robbed or lured into a neighbor's home and sexually assaulted. However, estimates that include these types of abductions would not satisfy the need to know how many children experience the very serious crimes that the public thinks of as kidnappings, which involve lengthy detentions, movement over long distances, homicides, or motives such as ransom or stealing a child to keep as one's own.

The NISMART research program was created in the 1980s to establish clear definitions and provide scientifically based estimates of abducted children and children missing for other reasons. NISMART-1 defined major types of missing child episodes and examined the numbers of children who experienced each type in 1988 (Asdigian, Finkelhor, and Hotaling, 1995).

In particular, NISMART-1 defined stereotypical kidnappings to identify the most serious child abductions as those perpetrated by a stranger or slight acquaintance in which a child was moved at least 20 feet or held for at least 1 hour, and one or more of the following occurred: The child was transported 50 or more miles, detained overnight, held for ransom or with intent to keep permanently, or killed. NISMART-1 used a Police Records Study to collect data about stereotypical kidnappings and other nonfamily child abductions (Finkelhor, Hotaling, and Sedlak, 1990). However, the Police Records Study entailed costly methodology with uncertain coverage of the population of interest, identified only a handful of stereotypical kidnapping cases, and yielded imprecise estimates—all of which prompted the researchers to redesign the methodology.

NISMART-2, conducted in the late 1990s, instituted the Law Enforcement Survey methodology to collect data about stereotypical kidnappings from a national

sample of law enforcement agencies. It used a two-stage methodology that ensured effective national coverage of these abductions, efficiently located the cases and their data sources, and efficiently obtained substantial details about the cases in interviews with the investigating officers. Further, NISMART-2 determined that stereotypical kidnappings were quite rare. An estimated 115 incidents occurred nationwide in 1997, although the confidence interval for this estimate was wide relative to the size of the estimate itself, which is common for estimates of rare phenomena (Finkelhor, Hammer, and Sedlak, 2002). The findings also demonstrated the efficiency of the new methodology, since the number of cases in the sample was about half of the estimated national total. The Third National Incidence Studies of Missing, Abducted, Runaway, and Thrownaway Children (NISMART-3) replicates the Law Enforcement Survey methodology used in NISMART-2.

It is important to clarify that a child who is stereotypically kidnapped is not necessarily a missing child, although many of these episodes do involve children missing for lengthy periods of time. For example, a child can be abducted on the way home from school, dragged into a remote area, sexually assaulted, and killed without being missed by a caretaker or reported as missing to any law enforcement agency. The discovery of the child's body may be the first evidence of the episode. Thus, the researchers make a distinction between the child victims of stereotypical kidnappings who were missing and those who were not.

Estimated Number of Child Victims of 2011 Stereotypical Kidnappings

Based on the Law Enforcement Survey conducted as part of NISMART-3, an estimated 105 children were kidnapped by strangers or slight acquaintances in the year between October 1, 2010, and September 30, 2011, in cases investigated by law enforcement that met the criteria of "stereotypical kidnapping" (table 1, page 4). This estimate includes episodes in which a child was moved at least 20 feet or held for at least 1 hour and, additionally, taken or detained overnight, transported a distance of 50 or more miles, held for ransom or with the intent to keep the child permanently, or killed. (Both this estimate and the estimate for 1997 are rounded to the nearest multiple of 5 to avoid conveying a false sense of precision.)

Trend since 1997

The estimate of child victims of stereotypical kidnapping in 2011 may appear to be slightly lower than the estimate of 115 in 1997, but the estimates are too similar to suggest an actual decrease in victims in 2011. Both estimates have a "95-percent confidence interval" (95% CI), which is the



other study's estimate, the 1997 and 2011 estimates are statistically equivalent. The most one can say is that the two estimates are about the same.

Although the estimated number of victims was very similar in 1997 and 2011, case outcomes for victims appear to have improved. Eight percent of stereotypically kidnapped children in 2011 were killed, compared to 40 percent in 1997. Cases involving 92 percent of the victims in 2011 ended with the child recovered alive, compared

range of numbers within which the estimate is likely to fall in 95 out of 100 attempts to estimate it using identical methodology. The 2011 estimate of victims was 105 (95% CI = 40–165) and the 1997 estimate was 115 (95% CI = 55–170). Because the confidence intervals from 2011 and 1997 overlap substantially, and both ranges include the

Table 1. Estimates of Children Stereotypically Kidnapped: 2011 and 1997

| Characteristics of Episode | 2011 Kidnapped Children, Estimated (N = 105) ^a Percent | 2011 95% CI (40–165) | 1997 Kidnapped Children, Estimated (N = 115) ^a Percent | 1997 95% CI (55–170) |
|--------------------------------------|---|----------------------|---|----------------------|
| Outcome^{***} | | | | |
| Homicide | 8 | (4–16) | 40 | (22–60) |
| Still missing | 0 | — | — [†] | — [†] |
| Recovered | 92 | (84–96) | 57 | (37–75) |
| Abduction involved | | | | |
| Use of force or threats ^b | 74 | (55–86) | 83 | (67–93) |
| Sexual assault or exploitation | 63 | (43–80) | 50 | (30–70) |
| Ransom/extortion | 12 | (6–22) | — [†] | — [†] |
| Intent to keep as own child | 8 | (4–14) | 18 | (8–34) |
| Victim was | | | | |
| Detained overnight ^{***c} | 80 | (59–91) | 26 | (14–42) |
| Moved 50 or more miles | 22 | (11–38) | 14 | (6–29) |

Notes: 2011 ($n = 46$) for victims of stereotypical kidnappings in study year, October 1, 2010, through September 30, 2011; 1997 ($n = 52$) for victims of stereotypical kidnappings in study year 1997. The estimated number of children stereotypically kidnapped and related confidence interval bounds, shown in the table headings, are rounded to the nearest multiple of 5 to avoid conveying a false sense of precision. The 95-percent confidence interval (95% CI) indicates that if the study were repeated 100 times, 95 of the replications would produce estimates within the ranges noted. Missing data of greater than 5 percent are footnoted; the table does not show percentage estimates that are based on fewer than five cases.

[†]Estimate is based on fewer than five cases and not reliable.

^{***}Values are significantly different for 2011 compared to 1997 at $p < .001$.

^a Standard error (SE) = 32.24 for 2011 estimate; SE = 28.89 for 1997 estimate.

^b Perpetrator used force or threats to take or detain the victim or killed the victim.

^c Missing data in 16 percent of 1997 cases, mostly homicides in which law enforcement could not ascertain how long the child was detained.

Half of all stereotypical kidnappings in 2011 were sexually motivated crimes against adolescent girls.

to 57 percent in 1997. In both years, about the same proportion of victims suffered the use of force or threats by perpetrators, sexual assaults, ransom demands, or intentions by perpetrators to keep a child as their own, or they were taken 50 miles or more. However, more children were detained overnight in 2011 than in 1997 (80 percent compared to 26 percent). NISMART defines “overnight” as detentions of an hour or more between 12 midnight and 5:00 a.m.

Characteristics of Victims in 2011 Stereotypical Kidnappings

Child victims of stereotypical kidnappings in 2011 spanned the full range of childhood, from infants to late teens, but more than half were adolescents, ages 12 to 17 (table 2, page 6). About 81 percent were girls, and about 51 percent were adolescent girls, ages 12 to 17.

About one-quarter of the children were Hispanic or Latina/Latino. About 61 percent were white and about 31 percent were black. Only about 16 percent of children lived with both of their biological or adoptive parents, an unusually small percentage compared to the 62 percent of children in the general population living in such circumstances (Kreider and Ellis, 2011). Eighteen percent of child victims had past or current involvement with the criminal justice system, and 16 percent had parents with such involvement. Twenty-seven percent had parents who were involved with drugs.

Perpetrators’ relationships to victims

Strangers took almost two-thirds of the child victims of stereotypical kidnappings in 2011 (62 percent), and slight acquaintances to the child or family took more than one-third of the child victims (38 percent). As defined in NISMART, a slight acquaintance is a nonfamily perpetrator who could be a person the child or family did not know well enough to speak to, a recent acquaintance

whom the child or family knew for less than 6 months, or someone the child or family knew even longer but saw less than once a month. Examples of slight acquaintance perpetrators in 2011 include a man whom the child victim had seen in his neighborhood but had never spoken to, a friend of a friend who once babysat for the victim, a man whom a teen victim had communicated with online for less than 1 month but never met in person, and a woman who worked briefly for the family as a housekeeper.

Victims in 2011 compared to victims in 1997

Compared to victims in 1997, a higher percentage of 2011 victims were Hispanic or Latina/Latino (24 percent versus 8 percent). A lower percentage of victims in 2011 lived with two biological or adoptive parents compared to 1997 (16 percent versus 47 percent).

Characteristics of Perpetrators in 2011 Stereotypical Kidnappings

An estimated 100 perpetrators committed stereotypical kidnappings in 2011. Law enforcement had identified 95 percent of these perpetrators at the time NISMART researchers collected data (table 3, page 7). The 2011 perpetrators with identities known to law enforcement were largely male (75 percent), ages 18 to 35 (73 percent), and single (69 percent). Forty-four percent of the perpetrators were white and 45 percent were black. Eighteen percent were Hispanic or Latina/Latino. According to the law enforcement investigators the researchers interviewed, only 16 percent of the perpetrators had full- or part-time employment; 9 percent had diagnosed mental illnesses; and 54 percent had problems with drugs or alcohol. About 64 percent were described as having average or higher intelligence and about 38 percent had average rates of social interaction, although law enforcement respondents often could not assess these characteristics. About one in three perpetrators had active or ongoing involvement with the criminal justice system.

Table 2. Characteristics of Children Stereotypically Kidnapped: 2011 and 1997

| Characteristics of Child | 2011 Victims (N = 105) Percent | 2011 Victims 95% CI | 1997 Victims (N = 115) Percent | 1997 Victims 95% CI |
|--|-----------------------------------|------------------------|-----------------------------------|------------------------|
| Age (years) | | | | |
| 0–2 | 13 | (8–19) | 5 | (2–11) |
| 3–5 | 11 | (4–26) | 13 | (6–28) |
| 6–11 | 18 | (9–34) | 24 | (10–45) |
| 12–17 | 58 | (33–79) | 58 | (35–77) |
| Gender | | | | |
| Male | 19 | (9–37) | 31 | (16–52) |
| Female | 81 | (63–91) | 69 | (48–84) |
| Gender/age | | | | |
| Girl, age 12–17 | 51 | (26–75) | 50 | (29–72) |
| Boy, age 12–17 | —† | —† | 8 | (5–12) |
| Girl, age 11 or younger | 30 | (16–48) | 19 | (7–42) |
| Boy, age 11 or younger | 12 | (5–28) | 23 | (10–46) |
| Race | | | | |
| White | 61 | (28–86) | 74 | (59–85) |
| Black | 31†† | (8–70) | 19 | (11–31) |
| Asian | —† | —† | —† | —† |
| Biracial | —† | —† | —† | —† |
| Race unknown | 7 | (5–11) | 7 | (4–11) |
| Ethnicity | | | | |
| Hispanic or Latina/Latino*** | 24 | (15–36) | 8 | (4–13) |
| Lived with | | | | |
| Both biological or adoptive parents** | 16 | (7–31) | 47 | (26–69) |
| Single parent | 32 | (18–50) | 43 | (24–65) |
| Parent and stepparent/partner | 24 | (8–53) | —† | —† |
| Another relative or someone else | 28†† | (6–70) | 8 | (4–16) |
| Type of housing | | | | |
| Single family* | 45 | (22–70) | 74 | (59–85) |
| Multifamily | 24 | (13–38) | 19 | (10–33) |
| Other | 27†† | (5–70) | 6 | (3–13) |
| Child criminal justice involvement (past or current) | | | | |
| | 18 | (7–40) | —† | —† |
| Child involved with drugs | | | | |
| | —† | —† | 5 | (3–9) |
| Parent criminal justice involvement (past or current) | | | | |
| | 16 | (11–23) | 0 | — |
| Parents involved with drugs | | | | |
| | 27 | (11–53) | 14†† | (4–40) |
| Relationship of perpetrator to victim | | | | |
| Stranger | 62 | (40–79) | 71 | (55–83) |
| Slight acquaintance | 38 | (21–60) | 29 | (17–45) |

Notes: Numbers are rounded to the nearest percent. Some categories may not add to 100 percent because of rounding. The 95-percent confidence interval (95% CI) indicates that if the study were repeated 100 times, 95 of the replications would produce percentage estimates within the ranges noted. Missing data of greater than 5 percent are shown in the table; the table does not show percentage estimates that are based on fewer than five cases.

†Estimate is based on fewer than five cases and not reliable. ††The coefficient of variation is greater than 50 percent.

*Values are significantly different for 2011 compared to 1997 at $p < .05$; **Values are significantly different at $p = .01$; ***Values are significantly different at $p < .001$.

Table 3. Characteristics of Stereotypical Kidnappers Known to Law Enforcement: 2011 and 1997

| Characteristics of Kidnapper | 2011 Perpetrators (N = 100) Percent | 2011 Perpetrators 95% CI | 1997 Perpetrators (N = 160) Percent | 1997 Perpetrators 95% CI |
|---|--|-----------------------------|--|-----------------------------|
| Gender | | | | |
| Male | 75 | (62–84) | 94 | (84–98) |
| Female | 25 | (16–38) | —† | —† |
| Age | | | | |
| 15–17 | —† | —† | 8 | (4–14) |
| 18–25 | 40 | (20–63) | 56 | (40–72) |
| 26–35 | 33 | (15–57) | 19 | (9–34) |
| 36–45 | 17 | (11–27) | 15 | (7–29) |
| 46 or older | —† | —† | —† | —† |
| Marital Status | | | | |
| Single | 69 | (52–82) | 69 | (53–82) |
| Married or living with partner | 15 | (8–29) | 17 | (7–34) |
| Divorced or separated | —† | —† | 7 | (3–17) |
| Unknown | 8 | (5–14) | 7†† | (2–24) |
| Race | | | | |
| White | 44 | (25–66) | 72 | (53–86) |
| Black** | 45 | (25–67) | 15 | (8–26) |
| Asian | —† | —† | —† | —† |
| American Indian/Alaska Native | —† | —† | —† | —† |
| Unknown | —† | —† | 12†† | (4–33) |
| Ethnicity | | | | |
| Hispanic or Latina/Latino | 18 | (12–25) | 13†† | (4–33) |
| Employed full- or part-time | | | | |
| Yes | 16 | (8–29) | 30 | (18–46) |
| Unknown | 15 | (9–23) | 13 | (6–27) |
| Problems with drugs or alcohol | | | | |
| Yes | 54 | (32–74) | 70 | (51–84) |
| Diagnosed mental illness | | | | |
| Yes | 9 | (3–20) | —† | —† |
| Unknown | 25 | (15–40) | 16 | (7–33) |
| Intelligence | | | | |
| Below average | 17 | (9–32) | 23 | (11–41) |
| Average | 46 | (28–65) | 63 | (42–80) |
| Above average | 18†† | (5–47) | 8 | (4–14) |
| Unknown | 19 | (11–29) | 6 | (2–17) |
| Social interaction | | | | |
| Below average | 23 | (8–51) | 12 | (6–23) |
| Average | 38 | (22–57) | 58 | (37–76) |
| Above average | —† | —† | 11 | (4–25) |
| Unknown | 36 | (22–53) | 19 | (9–37) |
| Active involvement with criminal justice system or treatment program | | | | |
| Yes | 30 | (13–56) | 36 | (23–51) |
| Unknown | 15 | (9–25) | 8 | (4–18) |
| Prior arrests for crimes against children | | | | |
| Yes | —† | —† | 22 | (12–37) |
| Unknown | 15 | (10–21) | 12 | (5–26) |

Notes: Numbers are rounded to the nearest percent. Some categories may not add to 100 percent because of rounding. The 95-percent confidence interval (95% CI) indicates that if the study were repeated 100 times, 95 of the replications would produce percentage estimates within the ranges noted. Missing data greater than 5 percent are shown in the table; the table does not show percentage estimates that are based on fewer than five cases.

†Estimate is based on fewer than five cases and not reliable. ††The coefficient of variation is greater than 50 percent.

**Values are significantly different for 2011 compared to 1997 at $p < .01$.



Perpetrators in 2011 compared to perpetrators in 1997

The estimated number of perpetrators in 2011 was 100 (95% CI = 50–150), which was statistically similar to the 1997 estimate of 160 (95% CI = 85–240). Law enforcement had identified a larger proportion of the perpetrators in 2011 than in 1997 (95 percent versus 81 percent, $p < .05$, not shown in table 3). This appears to be partly attributable to a higher proportion of victims of unsolved homicides in 1997. In 2011, a higher proportion of perpetrators with identities known to law enforcement were black than in 1997 (45 percent versus 15 percent).

Table 4. Characteristics of Stereotypical Kidnappings: 2011 and 1997

| Kidnapping Characteristics | 2011 Victims (N = 105) Percent | 2011 Victims 95% CI | 1997 Victims (N = 115) Percent | 1997 Victims 95% CI |
|---|-----------------------------------|------------------------|-----------------------------------|------------------------|
| Child's location when taking or detention began | | | | |
| Indoor or outdoor area with public access** | 36 | (20–56) | 71 | (50–85) |
| Child's home or place child was staying at night | 32 | (12–62) | 17 | (9–30) |
| Perpetrator's home (includes detention when not taken) | 32 ^{††} | (8–73) | — [†] | — [†] |
| Other | 0 | — | — [†] | — [†] |
| Unknown | 0 | — | — [†] | — [†] |
| Child was taken from a group of two or more children | 18 ^{††} | (4–49) | 14 | (6–31) |
| Multiple child victims in case | 19 ^{††} | (6–46) | — [†] | — [†] |
| Multiple perpetrators in case** | 17 | (9–28) | 48 | (28–69) |
| Perpetrator's initial approach | | | | |
| Deceptive or nonthreatening pretext | 69 | (41–88) | 37 | (21–58) |
| Surprise/blitz | 28 | (11–56) | 49 | (29–69) |
| Unknown | — [†] | — [†] | 14 | (7–26) |
| Child voluntarily went with perpetrator | 61 | (36–82) | Not asked | — |
| During the incident, the child was taken or moved | | | | |
| In a vehicle | 63 | (31–87) | 75 | (60–86) |
| Into a building | 32 | (16–53) | 24 | (13–40) |
| To the perpetrator's home | 24 | (9–50) | 16 | (9–26) |
| To an outside area | 26 | (9–54) | 42 | (22–65) |
| Distance child was moved during stereotypical kidnapping | | | | |
| Less than 1 mile | — [†] | — [†] | 25 | (11–47) |
| 1–9 miles | 19 | (9–36) | 17 | (8–34) |
| 10–49 miles | 20 ^{††} | (6–50) | 31 | (13–59) |
| 50 miles or more | 22 | (11–38) | 14 | (6–29) |
| Unknown | 34 ^{††} | (10–71) | 13 | (6–26) |

Notes: Numbers are rounded to the nearest percent. Some categories may not add to 100 percent because of rounding. The 95-percent confidence interval (95% CI) indicates that if the study were repeated 100 times, 95 of the replications would produce percentage estimates within the ranges noted. Missing data greater than 5 percent are shown in the table; the table does not show percentage estimates that are based on fewer than five cases.

[†]Estimate is based on fewer than five cases and not reliable. ^{††}The coefficient of variation is greater than 50 percent.

Values are significantly different for 2011 compared to 1997 at $p < .01$; *Values are significantly different at $p < .001$.

Stereotypical Kidnapping Events

Initial taking

In 2011, children were taken in about equal proportions from indoor or outdoor public locations, their homes or places where they were staying overnight (e.g., a friend’s home or a homeless shelter), and homes of the perpetrators (table 4). In most of the latter cases, children had gone willingly to the perpetrators’ homes but were unlawfully detained when they wanted to leave. For example, a 16-year-old girl ran away from home to be with an 18-year-old man she met on the Internet. When she wanted to return home, he would not let her leave. Thirty-six percent of children were taken from a place that

allowed public access, mostly outdoor locations such as playgrounds, sidewalks, and parking lots.

In 2011, usually a single child was taken, and children were usually taken when they were alone, but 18 percent of victims were with one or more other children at the time of the stereotypical kidnapping. Most children kidnapped in 2011 were taken by one perpetrator, but a small number were involved in incidents with two or three kidnapers (17 percent).

Perpetrators tended to use deception or a nonthreatening pretext when they first approached child victims. Almost 70 percent of children were approached without threats or violence. For example, a teenage boy was lured to an

Table 4. Characteristics of Stereotypical Kidnappings: 2011 and 1997 (continued)

| Kidnapping Characteristics | 2011 Victims (N = 105) Percent | 2011 Victims 95% CI | 1997 Victims (N = 115) Percent | 1997 Victims 95% CI |
|--|-----------------------------------|------------------------|-----------------------------------|------------------------|
| Length of time child was detained | | | | |
| Less than 1 hour | —† | —† | 6 | (3–12) |
| 1 hour to less than 24 hours | 36 | (19–58) | 41 | (21–64) |
| 1–3 days | 31†† | (8–70) | 8 | (5–12) |
| 4–7 days | —† | —† | —† | —† |
| More than 1 week | 10 | (5–20) | —† | —† |
| Not detained | —† | —† | —† | —† |
| Unknown | 0 | — | 33 | (17–54) |
| Child was detained overnight*** | 80 | (59–91) | 26 | (14–42) |
| Child was detained 1 day or longer** | 56 | (32–77) | 16 | (8–31) |
| Caretaker reported child missing | 69 | (42–87) | 78 | (64–87) |
| Perpetrator used force/threats in taking child from original location | | | | |
| Yes | 22†† | (7–50) | 58 | (39–74) |
| Unknown | —† | —† | 12 | (5–25) |
| Perpetrator used force/threats to detain child (excludes homicides) | 66 | (43–83) | 37 | (18–61) |
| Maltreatment by perpetrator | | | | |
| Sexual assault | 63 | (43–80) | 50 | (30–70) |
| Physical assault | 35 | (15–61) | 33 | (18–53) |
| Neglect of basic needs | 24 | (8–52) | —† | —† |
| The perpetrator | | | | |
| Threatened the child with or used a weapon | 20†† | (6–50) | 51 | (30–72) |
| Harmed or threatened to harm the child’s family or pets | 23†† | (8–52) | —† | —† |
| Forced the child to walk somewhere | 21 | (10–41) | 21 | (10–39) |
| Drugged the child | 15 | (7–27) | —† | —† |
| Robbed the child or damaged or destroyed belongings | 15 | (7–32) | 21 | (9–44) |
| Crime was connected with | | | | |
| Sex trafficking | 16 | (10–25) | —† | —† |
| Drug trafficking | —† | —† | 9 | (3–21) |
| Youth gang activity | —† | —† | —† | —† |
| Internet played role in commission of crime | 9 | (5–18) | Not asked | — |

isolated area to buy drugs; a young girl was offered candy and toys to get into a truck; a sleepy boy taken from his bed was told his mother said it was okay; and a teenage girl was lured into sex trafficking through the offer of travel. Law enforcement respondents described about 61 percent of children as going voluntarily with kidnappers.

Most stereotypically kidnapped children were in the perpetrator's vehicle at some point during 2011 incidents (63 percent). About one-quarter (24 percent) were taken to or detained in the perpetrator's home, and 32 percent were taken to or detained in a building. About one-quarter (26 percent) were taken to or detained in an outdoor area. More than 40 percent of children were taken 10 miles or more.

Detainment

More than half (56 percent) of children stereotypically kidnapped in 2011 were detained for 24 hours or more. Sixty percent of children were detained in buildings (e.g., motels, apartments, vacant buildings, or their own or perpetrators' homes; not shown in table). About one in five children were detained in multiple locations, for example, in a vehicle and then a vacant building.

Children reported missing

Most 2011 stereotypical kidnappings (69 percent) were reported to law enforcement when parents or others contacted police to say that a child was missing. However, no one missed about 31 percent of the kidnapped children. In some of these cases, children were kidnapped and then returned before they were missed. For example, children were taken from their beds late at night, sexually assaulted, and returned while their families still slept. Other examples of children not reported missing are a child who was detained with her mother in a home invasion burglary that lasted about 24 hours, and children who were not missed because they lived in situations where no one kept track of where they were.

Use of force and sexual assault

Stereotypical kidnappings are often assumed to be violent crimes; about three-quarters of 2011 child victims endured violence or threats of violence in the course of the kidnapping (reported in table 1). However, only

about one in five children was involved in a kidnapping that *began* with violence, such as a child forced into a car or threatened with a weapon. Perpetrators used force or threats more frequently (66 percent) during the detainment of a child. This percentage does not include the 8 percent of child victims in 2011 who were murdered during a stereotypical kidnapping.

Sixty-three percent of victims were sexually assaulted during detainment. The sexual crimes in these cases included forcible rapes and subjection to sex trafficking. Thirty-five percent of stereotypically kidnapped children were physically assaulted (e.g., beaten, choked, or punched in the face), and 24 percent suffered neglect of basic needs, such as food and water. Twenty percent were threatened with weapons, including guns, knives, or clubs. In addition, some children suffered threats of harm to their families or pets (23 percent), were forced to walk somewhere during the kidnapping (21 percent), were drugged (15 percent), or were robbed or had belongings destroyed (15 percent).

Some stereotypical kidnappings were related to other criminal activities. Sixteen percent of victims were girls kidnapped into sex trafficking. The number of crimes connected to drug trafficking or youth gang activity was too small to give reliable results. None of the 2011 stereotypical kidnappings involved pedophile networks, serial killings, or ritual or occult activity.

Technology-facilitated stereotypical kidnappings

Some child safety advocates have expressed concern that technology may have made children more vulnerable to stereotypical kidnapping if kidnappers use the Internet and cell phones to meet or track the movements of potential victims. In 2011, technology-facilitated stereotypical kidnappings involved 9 percent of child victims. In these cases, technology played a role in prior contact between the perpetrator and victim that led to the kidnapping, or the perpetrator used electronic devices, such as cell phones or computers, to sexually exploit the kidnapped victim. The victim's Internet use led to prior contact with a kidnapper in only one case in the sample—a 16-year-old girl who met the perpetrator online. In other cases, a mother used the

Most perpetrators were not violent at first contact with victims; instead, they lured children through deception or nonthreatening pretexts.

Internet to sell her daughter for sex to a man who held the child captive, and a woman communicated online with a man in prison who, when he was released, took and would not return her baby while he prostituted the woman. The other cases involved online advertising and cell phone use, which facilitated girls being kidnapped and forced into sex trafficking.

Kidnapping events in 2011 compared with kidnapping events in 1997

In 2011, fewer victims were taken from places with public access than in 1997 (36 percent versus 71 percent) or kidnapped by multiple perpetrators (17 percent versus 48 percent). Children kidnapped in 2011 endured longer detentions; more were detained overnight than in 1997 (80 percent versus 26 percent) or for 1 day or longer (56 percent versus 16 percent). The researchers could not statistically evaluate whether victims in 2011 suffered fewer forcible takings or more forcible detentions because data were missing regarding a considerable number of 1997 cases. These were mostly unsolved homicide cases in which police were unable to ascertain what occurred.

A Typology of Stereotypical Kidnappings

Because stereotypical kidnappings are relatively rare events, the public and policymakers have little information about the range of motives and dynamics involved in these crimes. The number of cases collected in the NISMART-2 and NISMART-3 Law Enforcement Surveys was not large, but there were enough cases to construct a typology that illustrates their diversity. What follows are descriptions of four categories based on the actions and apparent motives of the perpetrators: sexual, ransom, rage/homicide, and intent to keep. However, even within these categories, cases were diverse in terms of the tactics that perpetrators used and other characteristics. For example, sexual and ransom stereotypical kidnappings included both forcible and nonforcible tactics against children ranging in age from toddlers to older adolescents. On the other hand, intent-to-keep kidnappings usually involved infants and toddlers, and nonforcible tactics were used.

The stereotypical kidnappings described in the typology below are all part of the NISMART-3 Law Enforcement Survey and occurred between October 1, 2010, and September 30, 2011.

Sexual stereotypical kidnappings

In sexual cases, the common element was perpetrators who committed sexual offenses against the children they kidnapped. However, the cases varied greatly in terms of the ages of victims, the degree of force used, and the ways that perpetrators approached and interacted with victims. Sexual kidnappings constituted the largest category in the 2011 Law Enforcement Survey—63 percent of child victims overall. Following are some examples:

- A perpetrator removed a 3-year-old boy from his home late at night and beat and sexually assaulted the boy. The perpetrator returned the boy, covered in blood, a few hours later. The boy's mother knew the perpetrator slightly as a friend of her fiancé. The perpetrator was out on bail after a previous arrest for beating and choking a 5-year-old girl and, a few years before, had been acquitted of causing a head injury to a young child.
- An 8-year-old girl was playing in her front yard with a friend when a man lured her into his car with candy and toys. The perpetrator kept the child in the vehicle overnight. He verbally threatened her, sexually assaulted her, and deprived her of food and water. In the morning, a man recognized the perpetrator's car from an AMBER Alert. Seeing that he was being followed, the man pulled over, released the child, and sped away.
- A 16-year-old girl was babysitting for slight acquaintances. Around midnight, the father in the family asked her to drive him to a store because he had





been drinking. When she went to his car, he forced her into the passenger seat. There was no door handle and the windows would not open. The perpetrator drove her to an abandoned trailer and sexually assaulted her. He held a gun to her head, choked her, and forced her to take drugs. After the assault, he drove around until a flat tire required them to walk. By then it was morning. They ended up near a park where she managed to flee to a security guard's office. The guard called 911.

- A girl, age 15, was walking home from a convenience store when the 19-year-old perpetrator forced her at knifepoint from the sidewalk into a large undeveloped lot, where he raped and murdered her and later burned her body. He had used the Internet to research rape, murder, and disposal of bodies.
- Three girls, ages 15 and 16, agreed to drive across the country with a 25-year-old man whom they knew slightly from their neighborhood. He drove them more than 1,000 miles, took them to a motel, and forced one of them into prostitution. They had no phones or money and did not know where they were. Police found them after one of the girls managed to call her family secretly on the perpetrator's cell phone.

The perpetrators in the cases described above all used force or threats to commit sexual crimes during kidnappings, although the degree of force varied considerably, from extreme brutality to threats of harm. However, a small number of the sexual stereotypical kidnappings involved nonforcible sexual offenses committed during incidents that qualified as stereotypical kidnappings, usually because a child younger than 15 was held overnight or taken more than 50 miles. These stereotypical kidnapping cases are consistent with many child molestation cases in which sex offenders use nonforcible tactics, such as feigned friendship, affection, coaxing, seduction, and subtle exercises of authority. Here are some examples from the survey.

- An 8-year-old-girl, walking home from a playground, went with a man who invited her to see his dog. The kidnapper drove her more than 50 miles. He took her to a fast food restaurant, bought her clothing and candy, and took her swimming. He molested her in his apartment and then left her on a street near her home. He was identified with the help of a store clerk who recognized a picture of the girl from an AMBER Alert. The kidnapper disclosed the details of the incident, but the child did not divulge the molestation. According to the law enforcement investigator the researchers interviewed, the perpetrator did not use force, and the child was not afraid of him.
- A woman, age 25, took a girl, 14, to Las Vegas while the girl's mother was in jail and her previous caretaker was ill. The perpetrator had sex with the girl and involved her in a sexual relationship with a man they met on the road, both situations of statutory rape. The girl was missing for about 3 weeks; the perpetrator had taken her more than 600 miles from home. Police believe the perpetrator intended to prostitute her.

Ransom stereotypical kidnappings

In ransom stereotypical kidnappings, the common motive was to obtain money, drugs or other goods, or cooperation, often from a parent of the victim. There were relatively few victims of ransom kidnappings in 2011 (12 percent). As was true with the sexual cases, ransom stereotypical kidnappings involved a wide age range of children and varying degrees of force.

- A pimp prostituted a young mother. He offered to find childcare for her 7-month-old baby and then refused to allow the mother contact with her child unless she brought in specific amounts of money. At times, the mother did not see her child for weeks or did not know the child's whereabouts. After several months of this, she called the police, who located the child and arrested the perpetrator. The child did not appear to have been neglected or otherwise mistreated.

Sixty-three percent of victims were sexually assaulted, 35 percent were physically assaulted, 20 percent were threatened with weapons, and 24 percent suffered neglect of basic needs.

- A 9-year-old boy walking with friends was grabbed, thrown in the trunk of a car, and held in the basement of a vacant house. The three kidnappers knew that his father was a drug dealer who would have access to cash and drugs. They demanded \$30,000 and heroin. The boy's friends alerted law enforcement, and other witnesses to the kidnapping called 911. When the case hit the news media, two of the perpetrators fled, leaving the boy unguarded. A witness saw him looking out a window and notified the police. Only one perpetrator was found; he was a slight acquaintance of the child, who had seen the kidnapper in the neighborhood but had never spoken to him.
- A woman and a man lured a 17-year-old boy and his 18-year-old friend to an isolated place, with the promise that they would sell them marijuana. The perpetrators robbed the boy of \$20 and made his friend strip naked and beat him. They threatened to kill the two unless the boy came up with \$300. The boy called his stepfather, who agreed to pay the money. When the money was exchanged, the boy was not released, but he managed to tell his stepfather to call the police. Later, the perpetrators demanded that the boy call his stepfather again for more money. By this time, police had been notified. They listened in on the call and located and rescued the boy and his friend.

Rage/homicide stereotypical kidnappings

Rage/homicide stereotypical kidnappings are violent incidents that do not involve sexual assaults. There were relatively few such kidnappings in 2011 (8 percent of all victims).

- A woman abducted and killed a 12-year-old boy after she became enraged when the boy refused to admit her to an apartment. The boy and his mother were staying in a friend's apartment, but the boy was there alone, with instructions not to let anyone in. He disappeared from the apartment and was missing for several days before his body was found. The perpetrator, a friend of the woman who owned the apartment, was known as volatile and violent. Police believe that she dragged

the child from the apartment in a rage and killed him unintentionally.

- A 16-year-old boy wanted to buy drugs from two perpetrators, both teenage boys he knew slightly. The perpetrators agreed but, in a moment when they were alone, decided to take the boy to an isolated field, kill him, and steal his money. The victim became suspicious as they led him to the field so he tried to run, but they caught him and stabbed him to death. Police said one of them held a grudge against the boy over personal comments the boy had made about him.
- The perpetrator, a 30-year-old woman, was staying with family members, including three young children. She became enraged during an altercation, stole the family's van, and took the children, including a 9-year-old girl whom she did not know but who was spending the night at the house. The perpetrator was drunk and driving erratically at speeds as high as 120 miles per hour. She crashed the van in a ditch and ran away, abandoning the children at 1:00 a.m. on a wet night, with temperatures in the 30s. The 9-year-old girl was lost in the woods for 2 or 3 hours before police found her.

Intent-to-keep stereotypical kidnappings

This category involves cases in which perpetrators kidnapped children whom they intended to keep permanently as their own. All of the victims were infants or toddlers. In general, these cases involved little or no force or threats. Eight percent of victims belonged in this category. The following are some examples:

- The perpetrator, a 31-year-old woman, approached a teenager with an infant, claiming to work for a state agency that helped mothers with babies. She took the mother shopping for baby clothes, bought her lunch, and convinced her to enroll in a nearby high school, offering to take the baby to the school's childcare center while the mother enrolled. The mother agreed. She discovered her child was missing when she went to the childcare center about 30 minutes later and immediately notified police. They found the perpetrator



and the baby about 2 hours later at a bus stop more than 10 miles away.

- A 16-year-old girl who had run away from a group home kidnapped a baby from the baby's father. The perpetrator had come to the father's apartment, looking for a mutual friend. The father invited her in and gave her food. When the perpetrator asked for cigarettes, the father offered to get some if she would watch the baby briefly. While he was gone, the girl took the child and rode a bus to a nearby city. She stayed at the home of an acquaintance, got food from a shelter, and panhandled for money to buy diapers. In the meantime, the father notified the police, and there was widespread media coverage of the kidnapping. The perpetrator was spotted at a bus stop about 2 days after she had taken the baby. Officials believe that she thought having a baby would make it easier for her to obtain shelter, food, and money.

Law Enforcement Response

At the time interviews for the 2011 Law Enforcement Study were conducted, cases involving 95 percent of kidnapping victims were cleared by arrest (table 5). The remaining cases involved perpetrators who were not identified or were still at large.

Single law enforcement agencies handled investigations of stereotypical kidnappings involving about half of child victims (47 percent). Two or three agencies handled crimes involving about 26 percent of victims, and four or more agencies handled the remaining cases. Federal law enforcement agencies supported investigations in cases involving 29 percent of child victims. None of the investigators interviewed reported conflict among multiple agencies in the course of investigations. Investigations for about one in five victims used a telephone hotline (21 percent) or a leads management system (23 percent), or issued an AMBER Alert (22 percent). About 8 percent of child victims were eligible for AMBER alerts that were not issued, usually because

cases were resolved quickly. Forty-four percent of victims were involved in incidents reported to the National Center for Missing & Exploited Children (NCMEC); 20 percent included technical assistance from a NCMEC Project Alert Team. Law enforcement entered information on most victims (71 percent) into the National Crime Information Center database.

In cases involving two-thirds of victims (67 percent), law enforcement respondents stated that electronic devices such as cell phones and computers provided evidence, leads, or other information that was key to recovering the child or identifying the perpetrator. For example, investigators traced ransom or other perpetrator calls made on cell phones to identify kidnappers. They located children through global positioning systems (GPS) on cell phones that victims used to call or text for help. In several cases, surveillance cameras recorded kidnappings. Cameras recorded a woman at a playground picking up and walking away with a toddler, a man leaving an apartment building late at night with a child wrapped in a blanket, and a stranger on the street approaching a boy who was later missing. Some victims used social networking sites to get help. A girl being held and sold for sex in a motel room escaped to the motel lobby and used a computer there to contact her family via Facebook. Electronic databases allowed investigators to quickly acquire information, such as vehicle ownership. In one case, a woman alerted law enforcement when she received an AMBER Alert on her cell phone; she provided crucial information on an electronic credit card transaction, allowing them to identify the perpetrator.

Information on Stereotypical Kidnappings From Other Sources

One of the reasons for the NISMART research is that no other sources of information about stereotypical kidnappings apply clear definitions and systematically collect nationally representative data. However, there is value in briefly reviewing the other data sources that are available to examine the degree to which they validate the NISMART estimate or provide other perspectives on the crime of kidnapping. The sources described below record data about nonfamily abductions that are mostly based on reports of such crimes to law enforcement or related agencies.

National Center for Missing & Exploited Children

Established in 1984, NCMEC is the leading nonprofit organization in the United States working with law enforcement, families, and the professionals who serve them on issues related to missing and sexually exploited children. As part of its congressional authorization, NCMEC has

created a unique public and private partnership to build a coordinated national response to the problem of missing and sexually exploited children, establish a missing children hotline, and serve as the national clearinghouse for information related to these issues.

In 2011, NCMEC received reports of 122 children who had suffered a nonfamily abduction, which the center defined as “the unauthorized taking, retention, luring,

confinement, or concealment of a child younger than age 18 by someone other than a family member.” Although the NCMEC count appears to be in the same range and within the confidence interval of the NISMART–3 Law Enforcement Survey estimate, there are crucial differences in these two measures. The NCMEC definition of stereotypical kidnapping is broader than NISMART’s definition, which was created to capture the most egregious cases that strangers or slight acquaintances perpetrate.

Table 5. Law Enforcement Response to Stereotypical Kidnappings in 2011

| Law Enforcement Agency Response | 2011 Victims (N = 105) Percent | 2011 Victims 95% CI |
|---|-----------------------------------|------------------------|
| Status of case at time of interview | | |
| Under active investigation | —† | —† |
| Cleared by arrest | 95 | (87–98) |
| Status unknown | —† | —† |
| Other law enforcement agencies were involved in case | 53 | (24–80) |
| Number of agencies involved in case | | |
| One | 47 | (20–76) |
| Two or three | 26 | (12–47) |
| Four or more | 27 | (10–54) |
| Investigation was supported by a federal agency | 29 | (13–53) |
| How smoothly did agencies work together? | | |
| No conflict | 50 | (23–77) |
| One agency only | 47 | (20–76) |
| Telephone hotline was established | 21†† | (6–53) |
| Leads management system was established | 23†† | (7–53) |
| AMBER Alert was issued | 22 | (10–41) |
| Victim was eligible for AMBER Alert but alert was not issued | 8 | (5–13) |
| Case was submitted to | | |
| FBI ViCAP system | —† | —† |
| NCIC | 71 | (40–90) |
| National Center for Missing & Exploited Children | 44 | (20–72) |
| NCMEC Project Alert Team participated in investigation | 20†† | (6–52) |
| CODIS | | |
| DNA profile entered | 20 | (9–39) |
| Match found | —† | —† |
| Electronic devices provided evidence, leads, or other information that were key to recovering child or identifying perpetrator | 67 | (47–82) |

ViCAP = Violent Criminal Apprehension Program; NCIC = National Crime Information Center; CODIS = Combined DNA Index System.

Notes: Numbers are rounded to the nearest percent. Some categories may not add to 100 percent because of rounding. The 95-percent confidence interval (95% CI) indicates that if the study were repeated 100 times, 95 of the replications would produce percentage estimates within the ranges noted. Missing data greater than 5 percent are shown in the table; the table does not show percentage estimates that are based on fewer than five cases.

†Estimate is based on fewer than five cases and not reliable. ††The coefficient of variation is greater than 50 percent.

In contrast to the NISMART data, NCMEC reports include a broader range of nonfamily perpetrators (e.g., dating partners or close family friends) and incidents with shorter durations or in which children were taken shorter distances. In addition, NCMEC reports do not include cases of kidnapped children whose legal guardians never reported them to law enforcement as missing because the child was found quickly or was never missed.

State Clearinghouses for Missing Children

Individual states maintain missing children's clearinghouses that provide assistance to law enforcement in locating missing children. A few of these states collect and publish statistics on the number of reports they receive, and some of these states break down the cases by type of episode. In 2011, California, New York, and North Carolina published statistics on nonfamily abductions, reporting a total of 29 cases in a collective population of about 14 million children. If the remaining 47 states and the District of Columbia had similar rates, the national total based on these numbers would be within the confidence interval of the NISMART estimate. However, because these state clearinghouse cases differ from the NISMART cases in the same ways the NCMEC cases differ (a broader range of nonfamily perpetrators, incidents of shorter duration, and children taken shorter distances), the apparent similarity of the estimates is not a strong validation.

National Incident-Based Reporting System

The Federal Bureau of Investigation maintains the National Incident-Based Reporting System (NIBRS), which contains considerable detail about crimes known to police, including whether they involved an abduction. In 2011, police jurisdictions participating in NIBRS covered 28 percent of the U.S. population (Federal Bureau of Investigation, n.d.). In these jurisdictions, 575 abductions of children ages 0–17 were committed by a stranger. Although it is not possible to make a national estimate based on NIBRS, the number reported is considerably higher than the NISMART estimate for stereotypical kidnappings. This is primarily because NIBRS includes cases that meet the broad definition of child abduction found in state statutes, which only require that a child be moved for a short distance or held for a short amount of time. Many crimes—such as sexual assaults, robberies, and other violent crimes—include elements of forced movement or unlawful detention but do not meet the more restrictive NISMART definition of stereotypical kidnapping, which was created to distinguish the most severe cases (e.g., lengthy detentions, movement over long distances, homicides, or motives such as ransom or stealing a child to keep as one's own).

National Crime Information Center

Local law enforcement is mandated to report missing children to the Federal Bureau of Investigation's National Crime Information Center (NCIC) to help other law enforcement locate them. NCIC maintains a category of Juvenile Involuntary Missing that, in 2012, included 4,547 persons younger than age 18 and a category of Juvenile Endangered Missing, which included 10,191 persons younger than age 18. (The 2012 data are cited because the 2011 data are categorized as youth younger than 21, not younger than 18.)

NCIC is intended primarily to assist law enforcement and is not intended as a crime estimation source. The NCIC involuntary category includes family-abducted youth and, in the endangered category, includes runaway youth endangered by their companions or because of health, suicide risk, drugs, or involvement in crime. NCIC also includes cases held over from previous years.

Study Limitations and Strengths

The NISMART–3 findings pertain only to abductions that occurred between October 1, 2010, and September 30, 2011, and that met the NISMART definition of stereotypical kidnapping. The findings do not include abductions by nonfamily perpetrators who were more than slight acquaintances or nonfamily abductions that did not meet the severity criteria previously listed.

A strength of the NISMART Law Enforcement Survey methodology is that it has succeeded in gathering detailed data on a large sector of the national total of stereotypical kidnapping cases. In 2011, 45 percent of the estimated number of victims was included in the sample, and in 1997, 46 percent was included. The sample sizes are small only because the targeted cases, stereotypical kidnappings, are rare. Nonetheless, the small sample size limits data analysis in some respects. The confidence intervals for the estimates are wide relative to the sizes of the estimates, which is common for sample-based estimates of rare phenomena. Researchers are unable to explore subgroup profiles, such as differences in sexually motivated stereotypical kidnappings between the two study years, 1997 and 2011. Also, there was a considerable interval between the two studies. Although some changes in the nature of stereotypical kidnappings occurred between 1997 and 2011, the lower rate of homicides in 2011 cases, for example, may have driven some of those changes. Future data collection spanning multiple years could reveal how case profiles differ across years and provide larger samples of cases for more detailed analysis.

Implications

The finding that there were 105 stereotypical kidnappings in 2011 (95% CI = 40–165) can and will be cited as evidence that these serious crimes are relatively rare. However, this finding should not be interpreted to mean that all crimes by strangers against children are rare. Although less frequent than crimes by family and acquaintances, crimes committed by strangers made up about 10 percent of the violent crimes against children reported to law enforcement in a recent year (Finkelhor and Shattuck, 2012). Precise national estimates are lacking, but this certainly means that tens of thousands of crimes by strangers are committed against children each year. Although media and law enforcement should not frighten the public about the dangers of stereotypical kidnapping, it is not appropriate to conclude that “stranger danger” is a myth and that children need no education about such crimes. It is one among many perils that must be viewed in perspective, and it certainly merits education and discussion.

The comparison of the current findings with the findings from the 1997 NISMART–2 study suggests that, even though stereotypical kidnappings have not decreased, the likelihood of recovering children has risen and the proportion of stereotypical kidnappings that involve homicides has declined—both of which are good news. These changes may relate to improved law enforcement activity, more active reporting or vigilance among the public and families, or even some changes in the motives and behaviors of the offenders. These results coincide with and may relate to a decline in homicides in general.

The NISMART–3 Law Enforcement Survey findings also suggest that stereotypical kidnappings are diverse in their nature. Although a common assumption is that a majority of such kidnappings involve sexually motivated perpetrators who mostly target young girls, this is true of only some of these crimes. In fact, the particular risk is more to teenage girls and less to pre-adolescent children. Moreover, a

substantial minority of kidnappings do not involve sexual assaults but have other motives, such as ransom, rage, and intent to keep a child as the kidnapper’s own.

This study also has implications for those concerned about the impact of technology on child safety. Although some have worried that electronic communications may put children in danger and facilitate kidnappings of the type described here, the findings do not appear to support this. Technology facilitated relatively few of the episodes and, in fact, may have played a more prominent role in the recovery of victims and in the investigation and prosecution of these cases. However, this study should not be interpreted as minimizing the number of crimes against children that are facilitated by technology. A study of arrests for technology-facilitated sex crimes against children in a national sample of more than 2,500 local, state, and federal law enforcement agencies found there were more than 800 arrests in 2009 for crimes against identified children by individuals they met online or in the electronic environment (Wolak and Finkelhor, 2013). Many of these crimes involved statutory sex offenses and may also fulfill the legal definition of abduction (an unauthorized person having custody of a minor). However, most do not fulfill the definition of a stereotypical kidnapping. Nonetheless, providing education and training about Internet safety is certainly warranted.

Finally, the findings in this study showcase the active and effective role of law enforcement. Although not all cases in this study were reported to AMBER Alert systems, the National Center for Missing & Exploited Children, or the National Crime Information Center, this should not be interpreted as a shortcoming of law enforcement. Some of the crimes in this study were resolved quickly and did not involve children who were actually missing, so involvement of these agencies and systems would not have been useful or expected. The increase in the proportion of recovered children may, in fact, be an indicator of more effective law enforcement.

METHODOLOGY

The researchers designed the NISMART–3 Law Enforcement Survey (LES–3) to measure the national incidence of stereotypical kidnappings that occurred between October 1, 2010, and September 30, 2011. It closely replicates the methodology of the NISMART–2 Law Enforcement Survey, which pertained to stereotypical kidnappings occurring in 1997. Both NISMART Law Enforcement Surveys defined stereotypical kidnapping to include cases in which a stranger or slight acquaintance moves a child (age 0–17) at least 20 feet or holds the child for at least 1 hour, and one or more of the following circumstances occurs: The child is detained overnight or longer, transported 50 miles or more, held for ransom, abducted with intent to keep the child permanently, or killed.

The LES–3 obtained a sample of stereotypical kidnapping cases through a survey of all law enforcement agencies located in a sample of 433 counties. The research team sampled counties from a national list of counties by clustering small adjacent counties, using a stratified probability-proportional-to-size design. Strata reflected census region and metropolitan status, and size was based on the age 0–17 population from the 2009 Census Population Estimates. Within each sampled county, researchers identified all of the law enforcement agencies and took them into the sample ($n = 4,644$). Data collection occurred in two phases. In the first phase, the researchers sent the sample agencies a mail survey that asked whether the agency investigated any stereotypical kidnappings in their jurisdiction between October 1, 2010, and September 30, 2011. The response rate for the mail survey was 86 percent of eligible agencies. In the second phase, the researchers conducted extensive telephone interviews with investigating officers to obtain details of the cases reported in the mail survey. Interviews were completed for 91 percent of the targeted cases ($n = 145$). The researchers evaluated and coded the interviews to ensure that they described events that met the definition of stereotypical kidnapping ($n = 92$). Finally, for this report, the researchers retained only cases in which

the stereotypical kidnapping actually occurred in the study year (40 cases, 46 victims, and 50 perpetrators), eliminating cases that were investigated in the study year but occurred in previous years.

The researchers created weights for each agency and case to allow the responding agencies and case interviews to represent all law enforcement agencies in the United States. Agency weights reflect the probability of selection for the county where the agency was located and for nonresponse at the agency level. The researchers adjusted the case weights for case interview nonresponse by region and agency size. After the nonresponse adjustment, the researchers examined the case weights and determined that two outliers with very large weights were exerting undue influence on the estimates. They used a standard weight-trimming procedure to prevent those cases from dominating the estimates, trimming the weights to 4.5 times the average case weight, and ratio-adjusting the remaining weights to preserve the original sum of the weights. Finally, as in NISMART–2, the researchers created a set of 80 jackknife replicate weights for each agency and case to account for the stratification, clustering, and unequal weighting in the LES–3 sample design and to produce correct standard errors for the survey estimates.

The researchers used weighted data to estimate the number of victims and perpetrators of stereotypical kidnappings in 2011 and for other analyses. To conduct analyses, they used Stata Survey Data software, which takes into account the complex survey design (i.e., clustering, stratification, and unequal probabilities of selection) for estimation, to conduct chi-square tests of cross-tabulations that compared the characteristics of kidnappings in 2011 to those in 1997, and to calculate 95-percent confidence intervals. Stata Survey Data calculates confidence intervals for percentage estimates, using a logit transformation so that the endpoints lie between 0 and 1 but are not symmetric around the point estimate. Jackknife, a replication-based estimator, was used to calculate standard errors.

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Acknowledgments

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The authors are grateful to the many law enforcement investigators who participated in this research; for the support of Pamela Broene, Westat statistician, in developing the sample, weighting the data, and constructing the replicate weights for variance estimation; and to the perseverance and skills of research assistants Samantha Bouvier, Lisa Cloyd, Sami Limoges, Kaitlin Lounsbury, Taylor Page, Alli Puchlopek, Dianne Ramey, Tanya Rouleau, and Lynn Russ.

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This bulletin was prepared under grant number 2010-MC-CX-0004 from the Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention (OJJDP), U.S. Department of Justice.

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