



An investigative analysis of 463 incidents of single-victim child abductions identified through Federal Law Enforcement[☆]



Janet I. Warren^{a,*}, James M. Wellbeloved-Stone^a, Mark A. Hilts^b, William H. Donaldson^b,
Yvonne E. Muirhead^b, Sarah W. Craun^b, Anna Grace Burnette^a, Sara B. Millspaugh^c

^a Institute of Law, Psychiatry, and Public Policy, University of Virginia Health Systems, PO Box 800660, Charlottesville, VA 22908-0660, United States

^b Behavioral Analysis Unit, Federal Bureau of Investigation, 1 Range Road, CIRG/NCVC/BAU, Quantico, VA 22135, United States

^c Department of Psychology, Rosalind Franklin University of Medicine and Science, 3333 Green Bay Road, North Chicago, IL 60064-3095, United States

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ABSTRACT

We examined the characteristics of perpetrator, victim, and crime scene for 463 child abduction incidents involving a single perpetrator and single victim based upon case material submitted to federal law enforcement. The victims were predominantly female with sexual assault being the primary motivation for the abduction of both the female and male victims. Within this sample 55% of the female child victims and 49% of the male child victims were found dead or not recovered. Offenders who were identified as being criminally versatile were found more often to abduct the youngest and oldest children, to be between the ages of 30 to 59, and a stranger to their victim. In contrast, perpetrators with prior crimes against children tended more often to be below the age of 30 years, to demonstrate more of a propensity for abducting children of minority status, and to perpetrate crimes with a lower probability of holding their victims for more than 8 h. Only 5% of offenders who abducted a female child and none of the perpetrators who abducted male child victims during or after 1994 were found to be registered on a state or federal sex offender registry.

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1. Introduction

Child abductions are frightening events, which distress the larger community, and encapsulate some of the worst fears of parents. In the midst of the reactions to an abduction, law enforcement officers are expected to respond quickly and to manage these events effectively, ideally protecting the child victim from further harm. Prior research has indicated that almost half the children who are murdered in the course of an abduction are killed within an hour of their kidnapping, while nearly 80% are killed within 3 h (Brown, Keppel, Weis, & Skeen, 2006). These statistics underscore the importance of crime-specific research to support, inform, and expedite law enforcement's investigative efforts when abduction is the suspected or known cause of a child's disappearance.

Over the past 20 years, in order to assist investigative efforts into such crimes, a body of research has developed that mines large aggregate datasets to explore possible associations between the crime scene

behavior of identified offenders and their personal characteristics, these associations possibly being applicable or relevant to similar crimes that may be occurring. Rather predicting behavior based upon identity as seen in most social science research, this inversion of analytic thinking which predicts identity based upon behavior, is referred to as Criminal Investigative Analysis (CIA). CIA is an investigative adjunct that is used to inform cases in which more-direct investigative efforts have failed to bring any resolution to a crime or crime series. Specifically, CIA assists law enforcement by examining information about the victim, the apparent intent of the crime, and the circumstances and condition of the victim upon release or disposal (Morton & Lord, 2005). In so doing, CIA prioritizes suspects for further investigation and offers a framework for narrowing the suspect pool based upon the characteristics of the victim and the particular type of violent, interpersonal crime that is believed to have occurred (Morton & Lord, 2005).

One aspect of CIA involves the exploration of victim selection as it might relate to the motivation for the crime, the prior relationship between the perpetrator and victim, and the characteristics of perpetrator, including age, race, past criminal history, and history of violent offending. In our current study, we examined the dynamics of child abduction, with and without murder, involving a single victim and a single perpetrator, with a specific focus on the race, gender, and age of the victim as it informs possible descriptive characteristics of the then

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* Corresponding author: Institute of Law, Psychiatry, and Public Policy, University of Virginia Health Systems, PO Box 800660, Charlottesville, VA 22908-0660, United States.

E-mail address: jiw@hscmail.mcc.virginia.edu (J.I. Warren).

unidentified offender. These variables were identified for our study as they represent what is possibly the only information that is reported to law enforcement at the time that a child goes missing.

1.1. *Typologies of child abduction*

Previous research has categorized child abductions into typologies using different relationships, motivations, and characteristics of the crime to provide insight into both the victim and the offender, potentially offering insight into relevant investigative strategies. The U.S. Department of Justice's National Incident-Based Reporting System (NIBRS) organizes child kidnappings by relationship of the perpetrator to the victim (Finkelhor & Ormrod, 2000). An analysis of 1214 juvenile kidnapping cases in 12 states indicated that there are three primary types of kidnapping; those involving a family member, acquaintance, or stranger. Family kidnappings accounted for 49%, acquaintance kidnappings for 27%, and stranger kidnappings for 24% of all cases. Family kidnappings are typically perpetrated by a parent, most often a female, involve victims of both sexes, often under the age of six, and tend to originate in the family home. The acquaintance kidnapping category incorporates a larger proportion of juvenile offenders and adolescent female victims abducted from their homes, and is often associated with other types of violent and sexual crimes, thus increasing the chances of severe injury to the victim. Stranger kidnappings, which are perpetrated almost exclusively by males, more often involve public outdoor locations and the use of weapons, and include both school-aged and adolescent victims. Stranger kidnappings perpetrated against females tend to involve sexual motives, while those perpetrated against male victims are more likely to be based on immediate financial gain.

Although abductions by family members are common, the majority of the literature focuses on abductions committed by non-family perpetrators. Finkelhor, Hammer, and Sedlak (2002), using a randomized national household survey combined with a survey of law enforcement agencies in the NISMART-2 study, estimated that over a one-year period, 58,200 children experienced some type of nonfamily abduction and 115 experienced what was defined as a stereotypical kidnapping. Nonfamily kidnappings are defined as criminal events designed to obtain ransom or permanent possession of a child, which involve a victim taken by force or threat of force and held for over an hour, or a victim under the age of 15 or otherwise mentally incompetent who voluntarily leaves with the perpetrator. Stereotypical kidnappings are characterized by the holding of the victim overnight, the transportation of the victim at least 50 miles, and the perpetration of the crime with the intent to obtain a financial gain, hold the victim indefinitely, or commit murder (Finkelhor et al., 2002). Brown et al. (2006) confirmed the potentially-violent relationship between the non-family perpetrators to murder-abduction victims by concluding that 44.4% of all murdered abduction victims were killed by strangers, 41.9% by a friend or acquaintance, and 13.7% by family or intimate individuals.

A second way of categorizing abductions derives from the perceived motivation of the offender. Erickson and Friendship (2002), using a British sample of 149 offenders, developed a motivational framework for identifying different types of child abductions. They found that the sexually-motivated group, which made up the preponderance of the cases, was the only motivational group in which the offenders were found to have a previous criminal history of child abductions. Abductions motivated by maternal desire were primarily committed by non-family female offenders; these women were found to have the lowest rate of prior criminal offending, and were prompted in their criminal behavior by the desire to obtain a child to represent as their own, to maintain relationships with intimate partners, or to become mothers.

Boudreaux, Lord, and Dutra (1999) examined 550 cases of abducted children obtained through two databases: the Violent Criminal Apprehension Program (ViCAP) and the data maintained by the Child Abduction and Serial Killer Unit (CASKU). The authors identified five motivational themes: sex, emotion-based, profit, infant abduction

(also known as maternal desire), and unknown. Sexually-motivated abductions required physical evidence of a sexual act, and were almost exclusively perpetrated by male offenders. They were also the most common type of abduction perpetrated by men and accounted for 60% of all male-perpetrated abductions. Emotion-based abductions included crimes that occurred in response to, or as an effect of the offender's heightened emotions; for example, anger, resentment, and hatred. They were found to be associated with the abduction of infants, toddlers, and preschoolers, but less often with older youth who were reaching the age associated with puberty. Emotion-based abductions accounted for 51% of female-perpetrated abductions, and 27% of male-perpetrated abductions. Profit-based offenses were found to be more prevalent among high school male victims, and were seldom associated with any type of sexual motivation; this category accounted for 13% of male-perpetrated abductions. Infant abductions involved the abduction of a child with the intent to keep him or her as the abductor's own and were exclusively committed by female offenders—accounting for 44% of all female-perpetrated abductions.

Lanning and Burgess (1995) produced another motivational typology which they derived from an examination of data obtained through the Massachusetts Treatment Center and the FBI. They propose seven motivational categories: nontraditional, ransom, profit, sexual, killing, miscellaneous criminal, and political. In describing the sexually motivated abductions, they conclude that there can be multiple motivations for a single abduction, particularly when multiple perpetrators are involved. They also comment on the efforts made by some perpetrators to camouflage, even to themselves, the sexual motivation of their crimes. The typology of child molesters developed by Lanning (1992), which identifies situational and preferential offenders, is also thought to be applicable to sexually motivated child abductions. Lanning and Burgess (1995) concluded that nonfamily child abductors who are sexually motivated manifest diverse patterns of behavior, including relationship to victim, degrees of force used in the abduction, and methods used to obtain access to a particular victim.

1.2. *Demographic characteristics of victims*

Research concerning victim characteristics has been consistent in documenting that the majority of children abducted by non-family members are females. Finkelhor et al. (2002) attribute this overrepresentation of female victims to the sexual motivation of these crimes, and report that 65% of nonfamily abductions and 69% of stereotypical abductions involved female victims. They further underscore that the targets of many abductions are teenage girls, and contrast this finding with popular media misrepresentation of very young abduction victims. Finkelhor and Ormrod (2000) similarly found acquaintance abduction victims to be predominantly female, which they contrasted with family abductions, which were determined to be approximately equal between male and female victims.

Based upon their prior research, Boudreaux et al. (1999) explored the effects of victim gender on different patterns of victimization. They found that although females were at higher risk and accounted for 70% of abduction victims, there was no significant difference in gender between identified victims when the victim was of a younger age (Boudreaux et al., 1999). The authors propose that the presence of maternal desire as a motivation for abduction explains the lack of gender specificity when neonates and infants are victimized. Boudreaux et al. (1999) also analyzed the gender of abductors with the abducted children's ages, and found that females who abducted children accounted for 91% of neonates, 54% of infants, 41% of toddlers, 15% of children in preschool, 1% of children in elementary school, 3% of children in middle school, and 2% of children in high school. They further found that females were more likely to be abducted for sexual motivations, and that males and females were equally abducted for emotional, profit-based, and infant-obtaining reasons.

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