



# An exploratory study of residential child abduction: An examination of offender, victim and offense characteristics



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## ARTICLE INFO

### Article history:

Received 11 January 2016

Received in revised form 22 June 2016

Accepted 23 June 2016

Available online 25 June 2016

### Keywords:

Child abduction

Kidnapping

Missing children

Child homicide

Sexual assault

Rape

Behavioral analysis

## ABSTRACT

Child abduction is every parent and community's worst nightmare. Specifically, a child abducted from inside a residence can be a source of great panic and give the perception that the four walls of one's home offer little or no protection from offenders who kidnap children. This emotionally charged crime can quickly overwhelm law enforcement agencies, particularly those with limited resources. The study, conducted by the FBI's Behavioral Analysis Unit III-Crimes Against Children, analyzed the characteristics of 32 cases in which a child was abducted from inside a residence. The findings are particularly salient to law enforcement officers who are confronted with a report of a child missing from a residence and initially must consider the possibility that an intruder kidnapped the child. The research was conducted for the purpose of identifying common characteristics of this unique type of child abduction in order to assist law enforcement agencies in narrowing the focus and scope of their investigation.

Published by Elsevier Ltd.

## 1. Introduction

Child abduction is one of America's greatest fears (Shutt, Miller, Schreck, & Brown, 2004). Incidents of Residential Child Abduction,<sup>1</sup> while rare, highlight that children are not immune from abduction solely because they are within their home (Brown, Keppel, Weis, & Skeen, 2006). However, myths, inaccuracies, sensationalism and the uncommon occurrence of child abduction may contribute to "commonly held beliefs" that have little to no basis in fact (Hanfland, Keppel, & Weiss, 1997). As a result, the general public, and even law enforcement agencies, may make incorrect assumptions about incidents of children who are abducted from their homes (Brown et al., 2006).

The purpose of the present research was to examine offender, victim and offense characteristics, the offenders' previous familiarity with the residences, and their behavior entering, while inside, and exiting from the homes. The findings of the study may assist law enforcement in more accurately narrowing their investigative focus and scope of this unique type of child abduction.

Research on child abduction is limited (Beyer & Beasley, 2003; Boudreaux, Lord, & Dutra, 1999; Boudreaux, Lord, & Jarvis, 2001;

Hanfland et al., 1997). This is likely due to at least two factors: (1) non-family child abductions have a relatively low prevalence rate as compared to other violence against children; and (2) the term abduction has been inconsistently defined in the literature. Even with a lack of research on the topic, a variety of definitions have been used by researchers. However, a central theme in most definitions is that a child abduction involves the unauthorized movement of a child regardless of the distance (Beyer & Beasley, 2003). For example, Finkelhor, Hotaling, and Sedlak (1992) defined abduction as the "coerced, unauthorized movement of a child, the detention of a child, or the luring of a child for the purposes of committing another crime" (p. 228). Whereas, Hanfland et al.'s (1997) definition included four potential scenarios: (1) the victim was kidnapped; (2) the victim was detained and his/her freedom of movement was restricted; (3) the victim of domestic violence was reported by the family (or someone else) as a missing child; and/or (4) the police were initially of the opinion that the victim was taken or held against his/her will, whether or not that was determined to be true. Finally, Boudreaux et al. (1999) defined abduction as "the coerced authorized or illegal movement of a child for the purposes of a criminal act" (p. 540).

## 2. Literature review

### 2.1. Offender characteristics

Research on non-family child abduction offenders has revealed that the vast majority are male (Beyer & Beasley, 2003; Boudreaux et al.,

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<sup>1</sup> For the purposes of this study, Residential Child Abduction was defined as the abduction of a child from the interior of a residence by a non-parental offender who did not have legitimate/permisible access to the residence at the time of the abduction.

1999; Finkelhor & Ormrod, 2000; Greenfield, 1996; Hanfland et al., 1997; Warren, Hazelwood, & Dietz, 1996). Although females do commit child abductions, they do so far less frequently than males, their motivations are typically different and they are less violent than their male counterparts (Beyer & Beasley, 2003). For instance, male child abductors are often motivated by sex, money, and/or power, while female offenders have emotion-based motivations (e.g., maternal desire, prolonging a relationship, child abuse, rage, revenge) (Ankrom & Lent, 1995; Beyer & Beasley, 2003; Boudreaux, Lord, & Etter, 2000; Brown et al., 2006; Burgess & Lanning, 1995). Maternal desire, a commonly reported motivation in the child abduction literature, rarely ends in the murder of the victim. This may explain why female offenders are even less represented in child abduction homicide studies (Beyer & Beasley, 2003).

Most offenders are Caucasian with a mean age in the late twenties (Beasley et al., 2009; Beyer & Beasley, 2003; Boudreaux et al., 1999; Greenfield, 1996; Hanfland et al., 1997). The majority are not married nor are they in an intimate relationship at the time of the abduction. Their relationship status may be reflective of their lack of intimate attachments (Beyer & Beasley, 2003; Brown et al., 2006; Hanfland et al., 1997).

Unlike gender, race, age and marital status, there is more variability across studies when examining offenders' education and employment status. Although it is difficult to gather information about offenders' education level, Beyer and Beasley (2003) found that in a sample of 25 offenders, 40% possessed less than a high school education. Conversely, 30% of 20 sexually-sadistic serial killers, with adult and/or child victims, had an education beyond high school (Warren et al., 1996). Similarly, variations exist in the reporting of employment status and occupation among child abduction offenders from various samples. For example, Beyer and Beasley (2003) who conducted interviews with child abduction homicide offenders reported that 96% of their population was employed as compared to other archival record studies that found only 50% (Hanfland et al., 1997) and 75% (Warren et al., 1996) of offenders were employed at the time of the offense. There is, however, consistency in reporting the type of employment among offenders of various samples with many in the service, fast food, cleaning, and construction industries (Beyer & Beasley, 2003; Hanfland et al., 1997).

The research has also reported distinct childhood and personality factors among child abductors (Beauregard, Stone, Proulx, & Michaud, 2007; Beyer & Beasley, 2003; Chan & Heide, 2009; Chan, Heide, & Beauregard, 2010; Heide, Beauregard, & Myers, 2009). Negative experiences during child development, such as sexual abuse and dysfunctional family environments, can lead to insecure attachment to caregivers, as well as feelings of isolation in childhood and adolescence. This maladaptive attachment can later interfere with the creation and establishment of healthy relationships and the ability to control and fulfill emotional and sexual needs (Beauregard et al., 2007; Chan & Heide, 2009; Chan et al., 2010; Heide et al., 2009; Maniglio, 2010, 2012). Hanfland et al. (1997) describe child abduction homicide offenders as "social marginals" - "they are not active, successful participants in mainstream, conventional social life. They are not integrated, personally or socially, into the kinds of relationships or activities that produce and sustain effective self or social controls" (p. 32).

Criminal history also varies among the literature with 35–75% of offenders having prior arrests (Beasley et al., 2009; Beyer & Beasley, 2003; Greenfield, 1996; Hanfland et al., 1997; Warren et al., 1996). This wide range may be attributed to the kind of population studied and/or the criteria and definitions used for inclusion (e.g., committed, arrested, or convicted offenses). A recent Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) study found that approximately 75% of child abductors had a criminal arrest history, but most crimes were unrelated to sexual conduct or children, a surprising finding given that many non-family abductions are sexually motivated (Beasley et al., 2009). Further, only a few offenders were on a sex offender registry at the time of the abduction, demonstrating that investigators should be cautious about including or

excluding persons of interest based solely on their criminal arrest history (Beasley et al., 2009).

Of particular interest is that burglary, one of the most commonly committed offenses among the general population, is also prevalent in the criminal histories of child abductors (Beasley et al., 2009; FBI, 2011). A history of burglary may be particularly significant in the examination of Residential Child Abductions as both involve the unauthorized entry into a dwelling. Beasley et al. (2009) reported that more than one third of the child abductors in their study had a prior arrest for burglary and this percentage increased to 39% when isolating the child abductors who murdered their victims. In addition, burglary is also thought to be an underestimated crime, potentially due to lack of reporting to police, insolvability, or categorization under another offense and therefore, a history of committing burglaries may be significantly higher among child abductors than has been reported (FBI, 2011).

## 2.2. Level of familiarity

### 2.2.1. Offender/victim relationship

Despite conventional opinion, child abduction is often committed by an individual previously known to the victim (Boudreaux et al., 2000; Boudreaux et al., 1999; Cloud, 1996). The notion that child abduction is typically committed by a stranger is multifaceted but may be in part due to the widespread societal belief that "predators and adversaries originate from outside of one's social group" (Boudreaux et al., 2000, p. 58). Although stranger abductions do occur, research strongly indicates that an offender typically has some level of familiarity with the victim. For example, a study of 1214 child abductions revealed that 49% were committed by a relative of the victim, 27% were abducted by an acquaintance and 24% were considered stranger kidnappings (FBI, 1997; Finkelhor & Ormrod, 2000).

The offender/victim relationship can vary based on the age and gender of the victim. For example, the National Incidence Studies of Missing, Abducted, Runaway and Thrownaway Children (NISMAART) reported that teenagers were at a higher risk for abduction by non-family members. Hanfland et al. (1997) reported that offenders who abducted and murdered female victims were more likely to be strangers. Brown et al. (2006) found that females between the ages of one and five years old were more often killed by friends or acquaintances, while 16 to 17-year-old females were more often killed by strangers. Male victims, regardless of age, were more likely to be killed by strangers (Brown et al., 2006).

These results emphasize that victim age and gender can play a critical role in identifying potential suspects in child abduction investigations. These two victim characteristics are among the few facts that law enforcement typically knows at the onset of a missing child investigation (Boudreaux et al., 1999; Cloud, 1996; Finkelhor, 1997; Lanning, 1994). In addition, the routine activities of children, their level of supervision, and their accessibility are all factors that affect victimization (Boudreaux et al., 2000; Cohen & Felson, 1979). For example, younger children are more often victimized in and around their residences by offenders who are familiar to them, such as family members, caregivers, and acquaintances. Given their increased independence, older children are at a higher risk for being victimized away from their homes (Boudreaux et al., 1999; Miller, Kurlycheck, Hansen, & Wilson, 2008).

### 2.2.2. Familiarity with offense locations

Previous research has shown that crimes are often committed in areas which are previously known to and comfortable for the offender (Chan et al., 2010; Cohen & Felson, 1979). Specific to child abductions, studies have reported that offenders are often familiar with key locations associated with the crime, such as the abduction, homicide, and body disposal sites (U.S. Department of Justice, 2014). Additionally, many offenders often live, or have previously lived, in the same neighborhoods or communities as their victims (Hilts, Donaldson, MacKizer, Slater, & Sloan, 2015). For example, one study revealed that over one-

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