



The nature and influence of the victim-offender relationship in kidnapping incidents



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ABSTRACT

Purpose: Examine the nature of the victim-offender relationship in kidnapping incidents and test hypotheses about its association with victim injury, sexual victimization, arrest, and the correlates of arrest.

Methods: Data from the National Incident Based Reporting System were analyzed to examine the characteristics of familial, acquaintance, and stranger kidnappings. A series of logistic regression models were estimated to determine whether the victim-offender relationship was associated with victim injury, sexual victimization, arrest, and the correlates of arrest.

Results: Victim injury was more likely to occur in kidnappings perpetrated by non-strangers; the odds of sexual victimization were greater in stranger kidnappings; and the likelihood of arrest was greater in non-stranger kidnappings. In addition, variables hypothesized to influence the perceived seriousness of the crime – such as victim injury and the use of a knife – were related to arrest in non-stranger kidnappings. Conversely, variables that might help identify and/or provide evidence against a suspect – such as the co-occurrence of other crimes – were positively associated with arrest in stranger kidnappings.

Conclusions: The victim-offender relationship is important for understanding the nature and outcomes of kidnapping incidents. We discuss the implications of our findings.

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Introduction

Kidnapping has received relatively little attention from criminologists despite its serious nature, the challenges it presents for the police, and the concerns for society more broadly (Beyer & Beasley, 2003; Gibbs, Jones, Smith, Staples, & Weeks, 2013). Limited research coupled with intense media coverage of select and often atypical incidents contributes to misconceptions about the nature of kidnapping in the United States (Boudreaux, Lord, & Etter, 2000; Finkelhor, Hotaling, & Sedlak, 1992; Finkelhor & Ormrod, 2000; Miller, Kurlycheck, Hansen, & Wilson, 2008). In the stereotypical case, kidnapping is perpetrated by a stranger who transports a victim – usually a child – to a different location for a considerable length of time (Finkelhor et al., 1992). Legal definitions of kidnapping, however, are not limited to crimes perpetrated by strangers against children and do not require that the victim be transported or even detained for a lengthy period of time.¹ Indeed, descriptive studies on *juvenile* kidnappings confirm that many incidents differ considerably from the sensationalized cases represented in the media and frequently involve family member and acquaintance perpetrators (Finkelhor, Hammer, & Sedlak, 2002; Finkelhor & Ormrod, 2000; Finkelhor & Shattuck, 2012; Finkelhor et al., 1992).

One reason kidnapping has received limited scholarly attention is a lack of data; kidnapping is not included in the FBI's Uniform Crime Report (UCR) or the National Crime Victimization Survey (NCVS). The first systematic attempt to collect data on kidnapping cases in the U.S. was done through the National Incidence Studies of Missing, Abducted, Runaway, and Thrown-away Children (NISMA) in 1988 (Finkelhor, Hotaling, & Sedlak, 1990a).² Though informative, researchers have raised several concerns about these data, including their inability to capture information about multiple crimes in a single case, or co-occurring crimes (Finkelhor & Ormrod, 2000; Shutt, Miller, Schreck, & Brown, 2004). Further, NISMA only includes information on non-familial kidnappings of children. Researchers, therefore, have argued that the National Incident Based Reporting System (NIBRS) data are better suited for studying kidnapping in the U.S. (Finkelhor & Ormrod, 2000; Shutt et al., 2004). NIBRS data summarize official police reports and capture information about multiple crimes, victims, and offenders within a single incident, including more detailed information about the victim-offender relationship (see Maxfield, 1999).

The present study, therefore, analyzes 2011 NIBRS data to explore the nature of kidnapping in the United States with a focus on the victim-offender relationship. More broadly, we contribute to and extend crime event criminology, which has largely focused on the spatial and temporal distribution of crime events (Sacco & Kennedy, 2002; Wilcox & Gialopsos, in press), by examining the nature and outcomes of crime events. In his American Society of Criminology 2010

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Sutherland Address, Cullen (2011, p. 314) remarked that “most criminologists know a lot about criminality or propensity and almost nothing about crime or crime events.” Thus, he included “know something about the crime event” as part of his eight steps to building a new, more meaningful criminology, noting that understanding the details of the crime event may “uncover factors that can be manipulated to reduce opportunities for victimization” (Cullen, 2011, p. 314). To this end, our study joins a small but growing body of research that capitalizes on incident-level data to better understand crime events and their outcomes. Indeed, research on other types of interpersonal crimes using NIBRS data suggest that situational factors – such as time of day, location, the use of weapons, the number of offenders, and the victim-offender relationship – can influence how crime events unfold, including whether the victim sustains physical injuries, the co-occurrence of other crimes, and the likelihood that an arrest is made (e.g., Addington & Rennison, 2008; Tillyer, Miller, & Tillyer, 2011; Tillyer & Tillyer, in press).

We begin by comparing the characteristics of kidnappings perpetrated by family members, acquaintances, and strangers. Next, we examine how the victim-offender relationship influences kidnapping outcomes, including whether the victim sustains physical injuries, the co-occurrence of sexual victimization, and whether an arrest is made. We then explore whether the influence of situational characteristics on the likelihood of arrest varies by the victim-offender relationship. Finally, we conclude with a discussion of the implications of our findings and directions for future kidnapping research.

The victim-offender relationship and kidnapping in the U.S.

Studies on the victim-offender relationship lend insight into the nature of crime in the U.S. Despite a greater fear of stranger crime (see, for example, Wilcox, Jordan, & Pritchard, 2006), research suggests there is a higher risk for attack by loved ones (Straus, Gelles, & Steinmetz, 2006). As Decker (1993, p. 592) noted in his study on homicides, “the greater frequency of interaction and attachment to others with whom one is intimately involved creates situations that are likely to lead disputes.” Indeed, though news media accounts of kidnapping cases tend to focus on crimes perpetrated by male strangers, NIBRS data confirm that familial kidnappings constitute nearly half of all juvenile cases reported, are often committed by parents, and are more likely to involve female offenders relative to kidnappings perpetrated by acquaintances or strangers (Finkelhor & Ormrod, 2000). Conversely, acquaintance and stranger kidnappings make up about 27% and 24% of all juvenile cases, respectively, and are typically perpetrated by males (Finkelhor & Ormrod, 2000).

Existing research on violent crime demonstrates that the victim-offender relationship is also important for understanding the nature of the incident and the criminal justice system response (Dawson, 2004; Miethe, 1987; Ruback & Ivie, 1988; Simon, 1996; Tillyer & Tillyer, 2014; Tillyer & Tillyer, in press). Kidnappings can stem from a range of motives – including sexual, financial, political, custodial, and emotional³ – which likely vary considerably by the victim-offender relationship and influence how these events unfold (e.g., Heide, Beauregard, & Myers, 2009). The following subsections review the literature on victim injury during criminal incidents, the co-occurrence of sexual victimization, and the situational correlates of arrest, with a focus on how the victim-offender relationship might influence these outcomes in kidnapping incidents.

Victim injury⁴

Criminologists have begun to examine victim injury as a dependent variable, arguing that it is important to understand not just the quantity of crime, but also the “quality” or “nature” of crime events (Baumer, Horney, Felson, & Lauritsen, 2003; Tillyer & Tillyer,

2014). Several studies focusing on crime types other than kidnapping find that the victim-offender relationship is related to the risk of victim injury once an attack is initiated. Yun and Lee (2014), for example, using NCVS data, report that the likelihood of victim injury is positively related to the degree of intimacy in assaults perpetrated by males against females (see also Melde & Rennison, 2008 for similar findings in gang-perpetrated crime). Other studies using NIBRS data also find that the likelihood of victim injury is greater in non-stranger assaults (Tillyer et al., 2011) and non-stranger robberies (Tillyer & Tillyer, 2014).

Research on robbery may be particularly useful in developing predictions about how the victim-offender relationship is related to victim injury during kidnapping, given the similarities with respect to the offender’s immediate goals and challenges. Kidnappers, like robbers, are trying to elicit victim compliance (by surrendering themselves or their valuables to the perpetrator), and both kidnappers and robbers face time constraints that pressure them to force quick compliance (see Katz, 1988; Wright & Decker, 1997). Violence, therefore, may be used instrumentally during incidents in which victims resist. Similar to robbery, victim resistance may mediate the relationship between situational factors, including the victim-offender relationship, and victim injury during kidnappings (Cook, 1986; Tark & Kleck, 2004). There is some research to suggest that rape victims are more likely to resist when they know their assailant (Feinstein, Humphreys, Bovin, Marx, & Resick, 2011; Ruback & Ivie, 1988); if it is also true for kidnapping victims, there may be an increased risk for victim injury in kidnappings perpetrated by non-strangers. Therefore, we predict the following:

H1. Victim injury is more likely to occur in kidnapping incidents perpetrated by non-strangers, net of incident, victim, and offender characteristics.

The co-occurrence of sexual victimization

Research suggests that fear of sexual assault, particularly among women, is what drives much fear of other “perceptually contemporaneous” crimes (see, for example, Ferraro, 1996; Lane & Meeker, 2003; Warr, 1984, 1985). In other words, there is an assumption that these crimes will lead to sexual victimization. With respect to kidnapping, this fear is likely reinforced by high profile media accounts of kidnappings that resulted in sexual victimization (e.g., Alcindor & Strauss, 2013; Brown, 2012; Salonga & Simerman, 2009). There is little systematic research, however, on the extent and correlates of sexual victimization in kidnapping incidents, including the role of the victim-offender relationship.

Studies of crime co-occurrence require incident-level data, such as NIBRS, that include information on multiple offenses within a single crime incident. Addington and Rennison (2008), for example, examined rape incidents using NIBRS data and found that crime co-occurrence was relatively common: 48% of rape incidents involved a kidnapping, 25% involved a burglary, and 17% included a robbery. Soothill, Francis, and Ackerley (2007) report that 40.7% of police recorded kidnapping offenses in England and Wales from 1979 to 2001 had accompanying sexual or violence convictions. It is unclear, however, what proportion of kidnappings in the U.S. involve sexual victimization, and how this might vary by the victim-offender relationship.

We predict that the co-occurrence of sexual victimization in kidnapping incidents will be inversely related to the degree of intimacy in the victim-offender relationship, with the risk of sexual victimization highest in stranger perpetrated kidnappings. Our logic is grounded in the assumption that kidnappings perpetrated by those known to the victim are primarily motivated by custodial disagreements and relationship conflict, rather than sexual offenses.

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