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National Estimates of Children Missing Involuntarily or for Benign Reasons

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The words "missing child" call to mind tragic and frightening kidnappings reported in the national news. But a child can be missing for many reasons, and the problem of missing children is far more complex than the headlines suggest. Getting a clear picture of how many children become missing—and why—is an important step in addressing the problem. This series of Bulletins provides that clear picture by summarizing findings from the Second National Incidence Studies of Missing, Abducted, Runaway, and Thrownaway Children (NISMART–2). The series offers national estimates of missing children based on surveys of households, juvenile residential facilities, and law enforcement agencies. It also presents statistical profiles of these children, including their demographic characteristics and the circumstances of their disappearance.

This Bulletin provides information on the numbers and characteristics of two groups of children not frequently recognized in the literature on missing children: those involuntarily missing because they were lost, injured, or stranded and those missing for benign reasons. The estimates reported in this Bulletin are derived from two components of the Second National Incidence Studies of Missing, Abducted, Runaway, and Thrownaway Children (NISMART–2): the National Household Survey of Adult Caretakers and the National Household

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NISMART–2 Definitions of Episode Types

Missing Involuntary, Lost, or Injured (MILI)
A missing involuntary, lost, or injured episode occurs when a child's whereabouts are unknown to the child's caretaker, who either contacts law enforcement or a missing children's agency to locate the missing child or becomes alarmed for at least 1 hour and tries to locate the child, and one of the following conditions applies: (1) the child was trying to get home or make contact with the caretaker but was unable to do so because the child was lost, stranded, or injured (defined as physical harm that required medical attention or resulted in injuries that were evident the next day, e.g., cuts, bruises, or sprains); or (2) the child was too young to know how to return home or make contact with the caretaker.

Missing Benign Explanation (MBE)
A missing benign explanation episode occurs when a child's whereabouts are unknown to the child's caretaker, who either contacts law enforcement or a missing children's agency to locate the missing child or (1) becomes alarmed for at least an hour, (2) tries to locate the child, and (3) contacts the police about the episode for any reason, as long as the child was not lost, injured, abducted, victimized, or classified as runaway/thrownaway.

Survey of Youth. These surveys were conducted during 1999 and reflect the experiences of children in the United States over a 12-month period. Because the vast majority of cases were concentrated in 1999, the annual period the Bulletin refers to is 1999.

Key Findings

- In 1999, an estimated 204,500 children were involuntarily missing from their caretakers because they were lost, injured, or stranded; 68,100 of these children were reported to authorities (for assistance in locating them).[1]
- An estimated 43,700 children were missing because they were injured; 10,200 of these children were reported to authorities (for assistance in locating them).
- An estimated 340,500 children missing from their caretakers and reported to authorities for purposes of being located were missing as a result of benign circumstances and miscommunications that resulted in no harm to the child. These children constituted 43 percent of the children reported missing in all categories.
- Children missing involuntarily because they were lost or injured were disproportionately white, male, and older. They disappeared most frequently in wooded areas or parks and from the company of their caretakers.
- Children missing as a result of benign circumstances and miscommunications were disproportionately teenagers who failed to come home or were gone longer than expected.

Conceptualizing the Problem

Conducted in 1988, the First National Incidence Studies of Missing, Abducted, Runaway, and Thrownaway Children, NISMART–1 (Finkelhor, Hotaling, and Sedlak, 1990) brought attention to a number of missing children who could not be classified as "abducted," "runaway," or "thrownaway." These children were classified as "lost, injured, and otherwise missing" in NISMART–1. Based on that study, the designers of NISMART–2 distinguished two subsets of missing children within this group: (1) children who were involuntarily missing and in potential danger because they became lost, injured, or stranded; and (2) children who were missing for benign reasons such as miscommunications and mistaken expectations.

The notion that children become missing because they get lost and cannot make their way back to their caretaker (for example, in a wilderness environment) is readily understood. However, a more serious reason that could prevent children from making their way back to their caretaker or home is an injury that impedes their mobility, such as a broken leg or a fall that renders them unconscious. Sometimes the need for immediate emergency medical attention requires taking these children to the hospital without notifying their families. In NISMART–2, these children are classified together into a new category called "missing involuntary, lost, or injured" (MILI).

Children missing because of a miscommunication or mistaken expectation are usually not in serious danger, despite the anxiety their absence causes their caretakers. NISMART–2 classified such situations as "missing benign explanation" (MBE). Classifying a child as "missing" for benign reasons is a new concept in the missing children field and therefore merits additional discussion. Today's complex world, where family members have hectic schedules and often are out of touch with one another for large parts of any given day, presents many opportunities

for children to become missing for benign reasons. Unforeseeable circumstances (e.g., a flat tire, missing a ride, or helping a friend) can cause a child to be late for an appointment or arrival home. Miscommunications also occur among family members (e.g., the father picks up the child, not knowing that the mother planned to do so an hour later). Caretakers and children can have different expectations (e.g., a teenager may think it is alright to stay out an hour or two past curfew without calling or leaving a note, when this is not the caretaker's view). In such circumstances, caretakers can become alarmed to the point of calling the police. However, the hallmark of these episodes is that the child was not harmed, lost, or stranded and did not qualify for any other category of episode that the NISMART–2 study targeted (i.e., nonfamily abductions, family abductions, and runaway/thrownaway episodes).

The NISMART–2 definition of "missing" extended beyond the caretaker's lack of knowledge about where the child was. Parents frequently do not know exactly where their children are, especially older children, and may regard this as normal. To classify a child as "missing," the study also required either that the caretaker had contacted law enforcement or a missing children's agency to locate the child or that the child's unknown whereabouts had caused the caretaker to be alarmed for at least 1 hour and to look for the child. Classification as an MBE episode required caretaker contact with law enforcement or a missing children's agency in all cases. The purpose of the contact could be to report the child as missing, to recover the child from a known location, or any other reason related to the episode, as long as the child was not lost, injured, abducted, victimized, or classified as runaway/thrownaway. See the sidebar on page 4 for examples of MILI and MBE episodes.

Methodology

MILI and MBE estimates are based on the NISMART–2 National Household Surveys of Adult Caretakers and Youth. The surveys were conducted during 1999, using computer-assisted telephone interviewing methodology to collect information from a national probability sample of households. Some 16,111 interviews were completed with an adult primary caretaker, resulting in an 80-percent cooperation rate among eligible households with children and a 61-percent response rate. The number of youth that adult caretakers in the Household Survey sample identified was 31,787. Each primary caretaker who completed an interview was asked for permission to interview a randomly selected member of the household between the ages of 10 and 18. Permission was obtained for 60 percent of the selected youth, yielding 5,015 interviews and a 95-percent cooperation rate among the youth whose caretakers granted permission to conduct an interview. Youth and adult interview data were weighted to reflect the census-based population of children.

The Household Surveys were designed to screen for potentially countable missing child episodes, to collect demographic information about the household and its members, to conduct indepth followup interviews specific to each type of missing child episode being studied, and to collect information about any actual or attempted sexual assaults that may have occurred during an episode. The types of episodes studied were family abductions; nonfamily abductions; runaway/thrownaway episodes; episodes that involved children who were involuntarily missing because they were lost, injured, or stranded; and episodes that involved children who were missing for a benign reason (e.g., a miscommunication between parent and child).

Adult caretakers and youth were screened with a set of 17 questions to determine their eligibility for an indepth followup interview pertaining to each type of missing child episode. The following three episode screening questions in the adult interviews led to the followup interview used to identify MILI and MBE episodes:

- In the past 12 months, was there any time when this child was seriously hurt or injured and as a result didn't come home and you were concerned about where the child was?
- Was there any time when you were concerned because you couldn't find this child or this child didn't come home?
- Was there any time when this child became lost or you were unable to locate this child's whereabouts and you became alarmed and tried to find this child?

These questions applied to all children in the household. The responses to the followup interview in turn were used to determine if a missing child would be counted as MILI or MBE. The episode screening questions used in the youth interviews were essentially identical.

Examples of NISMART–2 Missing Involuntary, Lost, or Injured and Missing Benign Explanation Episodes

Missing Involuntary, Lost, or Injured

A teacher put a 6-year-old boy on the wrong bus home on the first day of school. When the bus driver discovered the mistake, he returned the boy to the school, but the teacher had left. The only person still there was the secretary, who did not have a record of the boy's home phone number. The boy did not know how to contact his parents. During the interim, the parents were waiting at the bus stop, watching the buses come and go without dropping off their son. They became alarmed, called the school, and found that their son was unharmed and in the principal's office. The episode lasted an hour.

An 11-year-old girl was playing in a large wooded area behind her home and lost her direction. When the girl did not answer her mother's call for dinner, the mother became alarmed and called the police to help locate the missing child. While the police assisted in the search, the mother drove around the neighborhood asking if anyone had seen her daughter. It was 4 hours before the child found her way out of the woods behind a neighbor's house and was returned home safely.

A 16-year-old girl accompanied her friend to the doctor's office, and on the way home their car was involved in an accident. An ambulance transported the pair to the hospital, where they were examined and the girl was treated for a dislocation and a stress-induced asthma attack. The girl's mother became alarmed when she could not reach her daughter on her pager and called the girl's father and friends to find the girl. Nobody contacted the mother about her daughter's whereabouts until 5 hours after she became alarmed. The child was returned home 2 hours after she was located at the hospital. The episode lasted 7 hours.

A 2-year-old boy whose mother had taken him to a Christmas parade in a small community wandered into the crowd when she left him in the care of a neighbor while she went to use a restroom. The mother was alarmed and worried that her son might have been abducted. She contacted the police immediately to help locate her missing toddler. The police responded quickly and found the boy about a block away from where he disappeared. The episode lasted 10 minutes, and the child was returned to his mother unharmed.

A 14-year-old girl and her 10-year-old brother were hiking in a park with their father. With his permission, they went ahead on the trail and inadvertently got separated from him and lost. Losing sight of his children caused the father to be very alarmed, and he immediately backtracked the trails in search of them, asked any person he came across for help, and flagged down cars to ask where the trails ended. While he was searching for the children, they were trying to find him, and it took an hour before the father found his children unharmed.

Missing Benign Explanation

A 13-year-old boy skipped school without permission. The school called the police when the boy's absence was discovered, and both the police and the boy's frantic mother searched for him. At the time, the mother was convinced that her son was either injured or kidnapped because this had never happened before. The boy was gone for 3 hours before he returned home safely.

A 14-year-old boy was at his friend's house without permission. He failed to come home by his 11 p.m. curfew and did not call his parents. The boy's friend was someone his father knew but did not approve of. The father called all of the friends he expected his son to be with, and when he could not locate his son, he called the police to report the boy missing. The episode lasted 3 hours. During the interview, the father described the reason for the episode as a misunderstanding of what was expected. Apparently, the boy thought he did not need to come home by his curfew because there was no school the next day.

A 7-year-old boy was supposed to be watching television in the living room. His mother called him for dinner and discovered he was not there. Instead, the boy had gone outside to play and fallen asleep in the corner of the detached garage on their property. It was dark outside, and the parents searched for the boy with the assistance of their neighbors. When they could not find him, the neighbors called the police to assist in locating the missing child. The episode lasted 45 minutes.

A 1-year-old was out with her aunt, and when they were an hour late returning home, the baby's mother became alarmed and called the aunt and other family members to find her daughter. After 2 hours of trying to find the child, her grandparents called the police for help in locating her. Approximately 15–20 minutes after this call, the aunt returned the child home safely. During the interview, the mother explained that the episode was the result of unforeseen circumstances and the aunt's misunderstanding of what was expected.

A 15-year-old girl took a train to her friend's house right after school and spent the night there. The primary caretaker, who described herself as a friend of the child, thought that the girl was somewhere else and became alarmed when she did not call or come home later that night. The police were contacted to locate the missing child, who was found and returned home safely. The episode lasted 20 hours.

MILI and MBE estimates reported in this Bulletin are unified estimates that combine the number of countable children who experienced these types of episodes as adult caretakers and youth described them in the Household Surveys.[2] Any child is counted only once, even if the same type of episode was reported for the same child in both the adult and youth interviews. For details about the unification and weighting procedures and the variance estimation, see OJJDP's forthcoming *NISMART–2 Household Survey Methodology Technical Report* and *NISMART–2 Unified Estimate Methodology Technical Report.*

Results

In 1999, an estimated 204,500 children were involuntarily missing from their caretakers ("caretaker missing") because they were lost, injured, or stranded. Of these, 68,100 were reported missing to law enforcement or a missing children's agency (see table 1). The estimated number of caretaker missing children who were missing because they were injured was 43,700 (Sedlak et al., 2002). The MILI children constituted 16 percent of children missing from caretakers for any reason and 9 percent of all missing children reported to authorities.

Children missing from their caretakers in circumstances with benign explanations totaled 374,700. The caretakers of an estimated 340,500 of these children reported them missing to authorities.[3] MBE children constituted 28 percent of children missing from their caretakers for any reason and 43 percent of all missing children reported to authorities (Sedlak et al., 2002).

Children younger than 12 were underrepresented in both categories (see table 2). Although children younger than 12 constituted 66 percent of the child population in 1999, they represented only 35 percent of MILI children and 36 percent of MBE children. Teenagers were overrepresented in both categories; however, the disproportionality was only significant for MBE episodes. Boys were overrepresented in the MILI category as compared with girls. Whites were overrepresented and blacks underrepresented in the MILI category. Further information will be needed to explain the significantly higher number of MBE children in the Midwest relative to their prevalence in the child population.

Table 1: Estimates of Missing Involuntary, Lost, or Injured and Missing Benign Explanation Children in the United States, 1999

Type of Missing Child Episode	Estimated Number of Children	95% Confidence Interval	Percent
Missing involuntary, lost, or injured (MILI)	**204,500**	**131,300–277,800**	**100**
Caretaker missing‡	204,500	131,300–277,800	100
Caretaker missing due to injury	43,700†	17,700–69,700†	21†,§
Reported missing¶	68,100	24,800–111,300	33§
Reported missing due to injury	10,200†	200–20,200†	5†,§
Missing benign explanation (MBE)	**374,700**	**284,900–464,400**	**100**
Caretaker missing‡	374,700	284,900–464,400	100
Reported missing¶	340,500	251,300–429,600	91

Notes: The estimates provided here for the MILI category are marginally higher than estimates provided in a previous Bulletin, *National Estimates of Missing Children: An Overview* (Sedlak et al., 2002). The change resulted from the discovery of one child in the survey who had an experience that qualified as a MILI episode but who was inadvertently left out of that category because the child also had experienced another, separate missing child episode that came under a different category. The change does not affect the overall estimate of missing children. All estimates are rounded to the nearest 100.

† Estimate based on too few sample cases to be reliable.

‡ Child's whereabouts unknown to the parents or caretakers, causing them to become alarmed and try to locate the child. Includes children who were reported missing.

§ Percent uses caretaker missing (204,500) as the base.

¶ Subset of caretaker missing children whose parents or caretakers reported them to the police or a missing children's agency for purposes of locating them.

Table 2: Characteristics of Missing Involuntary, Lost, or Injured and Missing Benign Explanation Children in the United States, 1999

Characteristic	MILI (*n* = 204,500) Estimated Number	MILI (*n* = 204,500) Percent	MBE (*n* = 374,700) Estimated Number	MBE (*n* = 374,700) Percent	Percent of U.S. Child Population‡ (*N* = 70,172,700)
Age (years)					
0–2	11,200†	5**	15,200†	4†	15
3–5	9,500†	5**	41,500	11	17
6–11	51,900	25	77,100	21*	34
12–14	73,300	36	117,300	31*	17
15–17	58,600	29	123,600	33*	17
Gender					
Male	143,500	70*	229,700	61	51
Female	61,000	30*	145,000	39	49
Race/ethnicity					
White, non-Hispanic	158,200	77*	215,100	57	65
Black, non-Hispanic	14,800†	7**	68,100	18	15
Hispanic	21,100†	10†	69,200	18	16
Other	10,400†	5†	20,700†	6†	6
No information	—	—	1,600†	<1†	—§
Region					
Northeast	32,600†	16†	59,800	16	18
Midwest	40,000	20	134,200	36*	23
South	63,100	31	102,300	27	35
West	68,900	34	78,300	21	24

Notes: MILI = missing involuntary, lost, or injured; MBE = missing benign explanation. Because all estimates have been rounded to the nearest integer, percentages may not sum to 100.

* Statistically significant difference.

** Although the sample is too small to provide a reliable estimate of the exact percentage of missing children in this category, the difference between missing children and children in the general population is so great that it is statistically significant. That is, the information from the sample is sufficient to tell that the percentage for missing children is significantly below that for children in the general population in this group, although it is not sufficient to pinpoint the estimate itself reliably.

† Estimate based on too few sample cases to be reliable.

‡ Age, gender, and race for the U.S. population were based on the average monthly estimates of the population ages 0–17 years for 1999 (U.S. Census Bureau, 2000a). The regional distribution of the population was computed from state-by-state estimates of the population ages 0–17 as of July 1, 1999 (U.S. Census Bureau, 2000b).

§ Category does not apply to the census data.

Most of the MILI and MBE children were gone less than 6 hours (table 3). Only 3 percent of MILI children and 5 percent of MBE children were gone for more than 1 day. MILI children disappeared primarily in wooded areas and parks and were often in the presence of their caretakers at the time they disappeared. In contrast, MBE children disappeared most often from a home other than their own. They did not disappear from their caretaker's presence as often as they simply failed to contact their caretakers or to come home when they were expected.

Table 3: Characteristics of Missing Involuntary, Lost, or Injured and Missing Benign Explanation Episodes in the United States, 1999

Episode Characteristic	MILI (*n* = 204,500) Estimated Number	MILI (*n* = 204,500) Percent	MBE (*n* = 374,700) Estimated Number	MBE (*n* = 374,700) Percent
Duration				
Less than 1 hour	17,200†	8†	58,400	16
1 hour to 6 hours	158,200	77	256,900	69
7 hours to less than 24 hours	17,200†	8†	39,800	11
24 hours to less than 1 week	5,200†	3†	12,300†	3†
1 week to less than 6 months	600†	<1†	7,200†	2†
Don't know	6,100†	3†	—	—
Location				
Park or wooded area	113,500	56	12,300†	3†
School or daycare	32,600	16	8,900†	2†
Shopping area or mall	22,600†	11†	40,100†	11†
Street	12,100†	6†	34,600	9
Own home or yard	9,700†	5†	46,000	12
Other home or yard	6,700†	3†	125,700	34
Other public area	4,500†	2†	40,100†	11†
On vacation	900†	<1†	—	—
Parent or caretaker's car	—	—	29,600†	8†
On public transportation	—	—	9,000†	2†
Other	1,900†	<1†	24,600†	7†
Don't know	—	—	3,800†	1†
How caretaker knew child was missing				
Child disappeared from caretaker's supervision	79,600	39	43,100	12
Child failed to come home	58,300	29	122,800	33
Child was gone longer than expected	18,600†	9†	104,200	28
Child failed to call caretaker	18,000†	9†	48,000	13
Other reason	26,800†	13†	56,600	15
No information	3,300†	2†	—	—
Child was missing due to injury				
Yes	43,700†	21†	—‡	—‡

Notes: MILI = missing involuntary, lost, or injured; MBE = missing benign explanation. Estimated numbers for episode characteristics may not sum to totals for episode type (MILI or MBE) because of rounding.

† Estimate based on too few sample cases to be reliable.

‡ Category does not apply to missing benign explanation children by definition.

Table 4: Police Contact for Missing Involuntary, Lost, or Injured and Missing Benign Explanation Children in the United States, 1999

Episode Characteristic	MILI (*n* = 204,500) Estimated Number	MILI (*n* = 204,500) Percent	MBE (*n* = 374,700) Estimated Number	MBE (*n* = 374,700) Percent
Police contact				
Yes	80,400	39	374,700	100
No	124,200	61	—‡	—‡
Reason for police contact§				
Locate missing child	68,100	85	340,500¶	91
Recover child from unknown location	6,200†	8†	21,700†	6†
Other reason	6,000†	8†	11,700†	3†
No information	—	—	800†	<1†
Reason police were not contacted				
Child was not gone long enough	50,100†	40†	—‡	—‡
Did not think police were needed	23,100†	19†	—‡	—‡
Child located without police assistance	13,000†	10†	—‡	—‡
School took care of problem	5,000†	4†	—‡	—‡
Don't know	33,000†	27†	—‡	—‡

Notes: MILI = missing involuntary, lost, or injured; MBE = missing benign explanation. Estimated numbers for episode characteristics may not sum to totals for episode type (MILI or MBE) because of rounding.

† Estimate based on too few sample cases to be reliable.

‡ Does not apply to missing benign explanation children, as police contact was required by definition for this category.

§ Percents for missing involuntary, lost, or injured children use 80,400, the number of children in this category whose caretakers contacted the police, as the base. Percents for missing benign explanation children use 374,700 as the base, as police contact was required for inclusion in this category.

¶ Of the estimated 340,500 MBE children reported missing, 119,100 (35 percent) were youth who disclosed in the youth interview that their caretakers had contacted the police during an MBE episode. Because the youth interview questionnaire did not ask respondents why the police were contacted, researchers assumed that police were contacted in these 119,100 MBE cases to locate the missing child.

Caretakers of 39 percent of MILI children contacted the police or a missing children's agency, mostly for the purpose of locating the child (85 percent) (table 4). In 8 percent of these cases, the contact was to recover a child whose whereabouts had been identified in some other way, and in 8 percent, the contact was made for some other reason. Caretakers who did not contact the police explained most frequently that the episode did not last long enough to necessitate police involvement. By definition, the caretakers of all MBE children contacted the police. As with police contact in MILI cases, the police contact in MBE cases was mostly for the purpose of locating the child (91 percent). In 6 percent of MBE cases, the contact was to recover a child whose whereabouts had been identified in some other way, and in 3 percent, the contact was made for some other reason.

Historical Trends

The research team conducted a special comparative analysis of NISMART–1 and NISMART–2 data, using the most equivalent definitions and methodology to examine possible historical trends in various types of missing children episodes.[4] This analysis found that, between 1988 and 1999, the incidence rate of children who experienced what NISMART–1 defined as a "lost, injured, or otherwise missing" episode declined (Hammer et al., 2004:6). (This NISMART–1 category included both MILI and MBE children; however, the exact definitions were somewhat different.) One possible explanation for the decline is the introduction and broad dissemination of new communications technologies, such as cell phones, car phones, and pagers, between 1988 and 1999. These

devices have enabled family members, including children and youth, to contact each other more readily in exactly the types of situations that may have triggered alarm about a child being lost or missing in the past.

Policy Implications

Children missing involuntarily because they were lost, injured, or stranded and those missing for benign reasons constitute a substantial number of missing children who do not fall neatly into the more conventional categories of abducted, runaway, or thrownaway. In 1999, children missing for benign reasons constituted a major portion—43 percent—of all missing children reported to the police, second only in size to those classified as runaway/thrownaway.[5] During the same year, an estimated 43,700 children were missing because they were injured. Yet interest in missing children has largely focused on those who have been abducted or have run away, and scant attention has been paid to children who become missing for other reasons.

Policymakers should recognize that children who become missing involuntarily because they are lost, injured, or stranded are a significant part of the overall missing children problem. MILI cases call for collaboration between law enforcement and a variety of other agencies, including the medical and public health community, forest rangers and game wardens, and other civil authorities. Agencies that respond to missing children cases should be prepared to respond in MILI cases, and responders should receive training in how to differentiate MILI episodes from other kinds of missing children episodes. MBE episodes are equivalent to mistakenly triggered burglar or fire alarms. Minimizing the amount of time and effort these situations demand from law enforcement should be an important policy goal. Public education on ways to avoid such mishaps and miscommunications and using successful search strategies for resolving such episodes may be helpful.

The most encouraging news is that the incidence of these episodes may have declined over the past decade, perhaps, in part, as a result of the introduction and dissemination of new communications technologies. Because keeping family members in touch with one another is an important outgrowth of new technologies, continued reductions in the number of children who become missing for preventable reasons may be expected. Moreover, technological advances in communications may also help reduce the number of children who become missing because they are lost, stranded, or have experienced a medical emergency.

Endnotes

1. The estimates provided here for the MILI category are marginally higher than estimates provided in a previous Bulletin, *National Estimates of Missing Children: An Overview* (Sedlak et al., 2002). The change resulted from the discovery of one child in the survey who had an experience that qualified as a MILI episode but who was inadvertently left out of that category because the child also had experienced another, separate missing child episode that came under a different category. The change does not affect the overall estimate of missing children.

For Further Information

This is the sixth Bulletin in the NISMART series and the fourth in the series to report NISMART–2 findings on specific categories of missing children. The other three series Bulletins that report findings from the NISMART component studies are *Children Abducted by Family Members: National Estimates and Characteristics, Nonfamily Abducted Children: National Estimates and Characteristics,* and *Runaway/Thrownaway Children: National Estimates and Characteristics.* The first NISMART Bulletin, *National Estimates of Missing Children: An Overview,* describes the NISMART–2 component studies and estimating methodology, defines the types of episodes studied, and summarizes NISMART–2 estimates of missing children. The fifth Bulletin in the series, *National Estimates of Missing Children: Selected Trends, 1988–1999,* presents results of a special analysis comparing selected findings from NISMART–2 and its predecessor, NISMART–1.

NISMART Questions and Answers, a fact sheet, offers a straightforward introduction to NISMART–2. It answers anticipated questions—such as *What is NISMART? Have abductions by strangers declined or increased?* and *Why can't I compare NISMART–1 statistics with NISMART–2 statistics?*—to help explain NISMART's purpose, methodology, and findings.

All NISMART-related publications are available at OJJDP's Web site, www.ojp.usdoj.gov/ojjdp.

2. One obvious limitation to the Household Surveys is that they may have undercounted children who experienced episodes but were living in households without telephones or were not living in households during the study period, including street children and homeless families. Although these are not large populations, they may be at risk for episodes.

3. The caretaker missing and reported missing estimates are close but not identical because caretaker MBEs required, by definition, a report to law enforcement or a missing children's agency for any reason, and 9 percent of these reports were for purposes other than to locate the missing child. Classification as "reported missing" required that the report to law enforcement or a missing children's agency be made for the purpose of locating the missing child.

4. Because of important differences in both definitions and methodology, the NISMART–1 and NISMART–2 data and findings should not be compared directly. For details about the comparison, see *National Estimates of Missing Children: Selected Trends, 1988–1999* (Hammer et al., 2004).

5. For definitions of the NISMART–2 categories, see *National Estimates of Missing Children: An Overview* (Sedlak et al., 2002).

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Children Abducted by Family Members: National Estimates and Characteristics

Heather Hammer, David Finkelhor, and Andrea J. Sedlak

The words "missing child" call to mind tragic and frightening kidnappings reported in the national news. But a child can be missing for many reasons, and the problem of missing children is far more complex than the headlines suggest. Getting a clear picture of how many children become missing—and why—is an important step in addressing the problem. This series of Bulletins provides that clear picture by summarizing findings from the Second National Incidence Studies of Missing, Abducted, Runaway, and Thrownaway Children (NISMART–2). The series offers national estimates of missing children based on surveys of households, juvenile residential facilities, and law enforcement agencies. It also presents statistical profiles of these children, including their demographic characteristics and the circumstances of their disappearance.

This Bulletin presents results from the initial analysis of family abduction data collected by the Second National Incidence Studies of Missing, Abducted, Runaway, and Thrownaway Children (NISMART–2), National Household Surveys of Adult Caretakers and Youth. These surveys were conducted during 1999 and reflect a 12-month period. Because the vast majority of cases were concentrated in 1999, the annual period referred to in the Bulletin is 1999.

Defining Family Abduction

For the purposes of NISMART–2, family abduction was defined as the taking or keeping of a child by a family member in violation of a custody order, a decree, or other legitimate custodial rights, where the taking or keeping involved some element of concealment, flight, or intent to deprive a lawful custodian indefinitely of custodial privileges.

Some of the specific definitional elements are as follows:

- **Taking:** Child was taken by a family member in violation of a custody order or decree or other legitimate custodial right.
- **Keeping:** Child was not returned or given over by a family member in violation of a custody order or decree or other legitimate custodial right.
- **Concealment:** Family member attempted to conceal the taking or whereabouts of the child with the intent to prevent return, contact, or visitation.
- **Flight:** Family member transported or had the intent to transport the child from the State for the purpose of making recovery more difficult.
- **Intent to deprive indefinitely:** Family member indicated an intent to prevent contact with the child on an indefinite basis or to affect custodial privileges indefinitely.
- **Child:** Person under 18 years of age. For a child 15 or older, there needed to be evidence that the family member used some kind of force or threat to take or to detain the child, unless the child was mentally disabled.
- **Family member:** A biological, adoptive, or foster family member; someone acting on behalf of such a family member; or the romantic partner of a family member.

Key Findings

Family abduction is a type of crime and child welfare problem for which only limited statistical information has been available. Among the key findings from this Bulletin are the following:

- An estimated 203,900 children were victims of a family abduction in 1999. Among these, 117,200 were missing from their caretakers, and, of these, an estimated 56,500 were reported to authorities for assistance in locating the children.
- Forty-three percent of the children who were victims of family abduction were not considered missing by their caretakers because the caretakers knew the children's whereabouts or were not alarmed by the circumstances (see "Conceptualizing the Problem," below).
- Forty-four percent of family abducted children were younger than age 6.
- Fifty-three percent of family abducted children were abducted by their biological father, and 25 percent were abducted by their biological mother.
- Forty-six percent of family abducted children were gone less than 1 week, and 21 percent were gone 1 month or more.
- Only 6 percent of children abducted by a family member had not yet returned at the time of the survey interview.

Conceptualizing the Problem

Family abducted children are typically thought of as simply one subcategory of missing children; yet, in reality, family abductions are part of a larger problem. It is possible for a child to have been unlawfully removed from custody by a family member, but for that child's whereabouts to be fully known. Thus, a child can be abducted, but not necessarily missing. (See sidebar on defining family abduction.) An example would be a situation in which a child is abducted by a noncustodial father and taken to the father's home in a different State, at an address well known to the custodial mother, and the father simply refuses to return the child.

NISMART–2 estimated the number of children who were abducted by a family member in the course of a year; the number of such children who were missing to their caretakers ("caretaker missing"), in that the child's whereabouts were unknown, causing the caretaker to be alarmed for at least an hour and to look for the child; and the number of family abducted children who were "reported missing," meaning that the caretaker contacted the police or a missing children's agency to help locate a child whose whereabouts were unknown.

In considering the estimates of family abducted children, several issues should be kept in mind. First, the Household Survey respondents were predominantly female caretakers of children. Second, it was generally the aggrieved caretaker who provided all of the information about custodial rights and privileges and other elements

of the episode used to decide whether an episode qualified as a family abduction. In family abductions, these elements typically are a matter of dispute between the parties involved. NISMART researchers did not attempt to verify respondent statements.

Methodology

The family abduction estimates are based on the NISMART–2 National Household Surveys of Adult Caretakers and Youth. The surveys were conducted during 1999, using computer-assisted telephone interviewing methodology to collect information from a national probability sample of households. A total of 16,111 interviews were completed with an adult primary caretaker, resulting in an 80-percent cooperation rate among eligible households with children, and a 61-percent response rate. The total number of children identified by adult caretakers in the Household Survey sample was 31,787. Each primary caretaker who completed an interview was asked for permission to interview one randomly selected youth in the household between the ages of 10 and 18. Permission was obtained for 60 percent of the selected youth, yielding 5,015 youth interviews and a 95-percent response rate among the youth for whom permission to interview was granted. Both youth and adult interview data were weighted to reflect the Census-based population of children.

The Household Surveys were designed to screen for potentially countable NISMART–2 episodes, to collect demographic information about the household and its members, to conduct indepth followup interviews specific to each type of episode being studied, and to collect information about any actual or attempted sexual assaults that may have occurred during an episode. The types of episodes studied were family abductions, nonfamily abductions, runaway/thrownaway episodes, and missing child episodes that involved a child being lost or injured or missing due to a benign explanation (e.g., a miscommunication between parent and child).

Respondents were screened with a set of 17 questions to determine their eligibility for an indepth followup interview pertaining to each type of missing child episode. Table 1 presents the five adult screening questions that led to a family abduction followup interview; the youth screening questions were essentially identical.

The family abduction estimates reported in this Bulletin are unified estimates that combine the countable family abductions described by adult caretakers and youth in the Household Surveys.[1] Any individual child is counted only once, even if an abduction was reported for the same child in both the adult and youth interviews. For details about the unification, weighting procedures, and variance estimation, see OJJDP's forthcoming *NISMART–2 Household Survey Methodology Technical Report.*

Table 1: Household Survey Family Abduction Screening Questions

- Was there any time when anyone tried to take [this child/any of these children] away from you against your wishes?

  In the past 12 months, did any family member outside your household, such as a spouse, an ex-spouse, an ex-partner, brother, sister, parent, in-law, or any other person you consider a family member or someone acting for them, do any of the following things:

- Did any family member or someone acting for them take or try to take [this child/any of these children] in violation of a custody order, an agreement, or other child living arrangement?
- Did any family member outside of your household keep or try to keep [this child/any of these children] from you when you were supposed to have [him/her/them] even if for just a day or weekend?
- Did any family member conceal [this child/any of these children] or try to prevent you from having contact with [him/her/them]?
- Has anyone ever kidnapped or tried to kidnap [this child/any of these children]?

Results

Table 2 shows that the total number of children who were abducted by a family member in 1999 is estimated to be 203,900. Of these, the number counted as "caretaker missing" (i.e., the caretaker did not know where the child was, became alarmed for at least an hour, and looked for the child) is estimated to be 117,200 (about 57 percent of all children who experienced a family abduction), and the number "reported

Table 2: Estimates of Family Abducted Children

Category	Estimated Number (95% Confidence Interval)*	Percent
All family abductions	203,900 (151,700–256,100)	100
Caretaker missing†	117,200 (79,000–155,400)	57
Reported missing‡	56,500 (22,600–90,400)	28

Note: All estimates are rounded to the nearest 100.

* The 95-percent confidence interval indicates that if the study were repeated 100 times, 95 of the replications would produce estimates within the ranges noted.

† Whereabouts unknown to caretaker, caretaker alarmed and tried to locate child. Includes reported missing cases.

‡ Reported to police or a missing children's agency for purposes of locating the child. This is a subset of caretaker missing cases.

missing" (i.e., reported to police or a missing children's agency for purposes of being located) is estimated to be 56,500 (28 percent of all children who experienced a family abduction). The diagram on this page illustrates the proportional relationships between all family abducted children and the subsets of children who were caretaker missing and reported missing. It also shows that the children who were reported missing are a subset of those who were caretaker missing. (Note that this Bulletin presents data on the characteristics of all family abducted children, not just those who were classified as caretaker missing or reported missing.)

Estimates of Family Abducted Children

* Whereabouts unknown to caretaker, caretaker alarmed and tried to locate child.

† Reported to police or a missing children's agency for purposes of locating the child.

Characteristics of Family Abducted Children

Table 3 indicates that, although children of any age can be victims of family abduction, younger children appear to be particularly vulnerable. In 1999, 44 percent of family abducted children were younger than age 6. Older teenagers (ages 15–17) accounted for a small proportion of family abduction victims; this finding may reflect the relative independence of teenagers, which makes it more difficult for parents to control where they go and stay. Boys and girls were equally likely to experience family abductions.

The racial/ethnic distribution of family abducted children corresponds to the distribution of children in the general population. This indicates that family abductions do not occur disproportionately in any one racial/ethnic group.

Not surprisingly, family abductions were much more likely to occur in families where children were not living with both parents—the circumstance that gives rise to motives for family abduction. Forty-two percent of the family abducted children were living with one parent, and another 17 percent were living with one parent and that parent's partner. Fifteen percent of children abducted by family members were abducted from relatives or foster parents.

Characteristics of Family Abduction Perpetrators

As shown in table 4, a little more than one-third (35 percent) of family abducted children were abducted by multiple offenders (e.g., a father and his girlfriend). The following discussion of perpetrator characteristics refers to the perpetrator most closely related to the abducted child.

Table 5 shows that just more than half (53 percent) of children abducted by a family member in 1999 were abducted by the biological father. Twenty-five percent were abducted by the biological mother. Fourteen percent were abducted by a grandparent, and there were also some abductions by a sibling, uncle, aunt, and

Table 3: Characteristics of Family Abducted Children

Child Characteristic	Estimated Number	95% Confidence Interval*	Percent (*n* = 203,900)	95% Confidence Interval*	Percent of U.S. Child Population† (*N* = 70,172,700)
Age					
0–2	43,400	(11,000–75,700)	21	(7–35)	16
3–5	47,100	(22,800–71,400)	23	(13–34)	16
6–11	71,000	(42,100–100,000)	35	(23–46)	34
12–14	35,200	(14,900–55,500)	17	(8–26)	17
15–17	7,200‡	(<100–15,400)	4‡	(<1–8)	17
Gender					
Male	100,300	(60,500–140,100)	49	(36–62)	51
Female	103,500	(69,700–137,400)	51	(38–64)	49
Race/ethnicity					
White, non-Hispanic	119,400	(78,100–160,600)	59	(44–73)	65
Black, non-Hispanic	23,900‡	(8,200–39,600)	12‡	(4–19)	15
Hispanic	40,600	(7,900–73,300)	20	(5–34)	16
Other	16,200	(3,400–29,000)	8	(2–14)	5
No information	3,800‡	(<100–11,200)	2‡	(<1–12)	—
Family structure					
Two parents	7,200‡	(<100–15,700)	4‡	(<1–8)	—
Single parent	85,500	(51,400–119,600)	42	(26–58)	—
One parent and partner	35,300	(15,700–54,900)	17	(7–27)	—
One parent, partner unknown	800‡	(<100–2,500)	<1‡	(<1–1)	—
Relative or foster parent	30,300	(<100–62,100)	15	(1–29)	—
No parent	3,700‡	(<100–8,700)	2‡	(<1–4)	—
No information	41,000	(12,300–69,700)	20	(8–32)	—

Note: All estimates are rounded to the nearest 100. Percents may not sum to 100 because of rounding.

* The 95-percent confidence interval indicates that if the study were repeated 100 times, 95 of the replications would produce estimates within the ranges noted.

† Age, gender, and race for the U.S. population were based on the average monthly estimates of the population ages 0–17 for 1999 (U.S. Census Bureau, 2000).

‡ Estimate is based on too few sample cases to be reliable.

mother's boyfriend.[2] Given the likelihood of being abducted by the biological father, it is not surprising that 66 percent of the family abducted children were abducted by a male. The age distribution in table 5 shows that 45 percent of the family abducted children were abducted by perpetrators in their 30s.

Characteristics of Family Abduction Episodes

Location and season. Table 6 shows that children abducted by a family member usually were in their own home or yard (36 percent) or in someone else's home or yard (37 percent) just prior to the abduction. Removal from school or daycare was relatively infrequent (7 percent). Sixty-three percent of children abducted by a family

Table 4: Multiple Perpetrators in Family Abductions

	Estimated Number of Family Abducted Children	Percent (n = 203,900)
More than one perpetrator		
Yes	72,400	35
No	123,500	61
No information	8,000*	4*
Number of perpetrators		
One	123,500	61
Two	59,800	29
Three	7,200*	4*
Four or more	5,400*	3*
No information	8,000*	4*

Note: All estimates are rounded to the nearest 100. Percents may not sum to 100 because of rounding.

* Estimate is based on too few sample cases to be reliable.

member were with the abductor, under lawful circumstances, immediately prior to the abduction. Some seasonal variation in family abductions is evident. Thirty-five percent of children were abducted in the summer (June through August), probably because children tend to spend time with noncustodial parents in the summer, thus increasing opportunities for abduction.

Duration. Table 6 also shows that the vast majority of children abducted by a family member had been returned at the time of the interview (91 percent). Forty-six percent of all family abducted children were gone less than 1 week, and 23 percent were gone less than 1 day. The proportion gone for 1 month or longer was 21 percent, and 6 percent were gone for 6 months or longer. Only 6 percent had not yet returned at the time of the survey interview; all of these children had, however, been located.[3] (Seventy-eight percent of the children who had not returned had been gone 6 months or more; the remaining 22 percent had been gone at least 1 month but less than 6 months. These figures are not shown in the table.)

Table 5: Characteristics of Family Abduction Perpetrators

Perpetrator Characteristic	Estimated Number of Family Abducted Children	Percent (n = 203,900)
Relationship to child		
Child's father	108,700	53
Child's mother	50,500	25
Child's stepfather	3,300*	2*
Child's sister	1,900*	1*
Child's uncle	6,000*	3*
Child's aunt	3,000*	1*
Child's grandfather	13,700*	7*
Child's grandmother	13,400*	7*
Child's mother's boyfriend	3,200*	2*
Gender		
Male	135,000	66
Female	68,900	34
Age		
Teens	1,300*	1*
20s	45,000	22
30s	91,400	45
40s	55,200	27
50s	3,000*	1*
60s	1,400*	1*
No information	6,600*	3*

Note: All estimates are rounded to the nearest 100. Percents may not sum to 100 because of rounding.

* Estimate is based on too few sample cases to be reliable.

Indicators of serious episodes. Table 7 shows that the use of threats, physical force, or weapons was relatively uncommon in family abductions. Seventeen percent of family abducted children were moved out of State with intent to make recovery difficult. Forty-four percent were concealed from the aggrieved caretaker. The most common serious elements were attempts to prevent contact (76 percent) and intent to affect custodial privileges permanently (82 percent).

Table 6: Characteristics of Family Abductions

Abduction Characteristic	Estimated Number of Family Abducted Children	Percent (*n* = 203,900)
Child's location prior to episode		
Own home or yard	73,800	36
Other home or yard	76,300	37
Public area	15,700*	8*
School or daycare	13,700*	7*
Parent's or caretaker's car	5,100*	3*
Street	3,300*	2*
On vacation	3,200*	2*
No information	12,600*	6*
Child with perpetrator immediately prior to episode		
Yes	128,000	63
No	73,900	36
No information	2,000*	1*
Season		
Winter	48,300	24
Spring	29,700	15
Summer	72,300	35
Fall	53,600	26

Abduction Characteristic	Estimated Number of Family Abducted Children	Percent (*n* = 203,900)
Duration		
Less than 1 hour	6,300*	3*
1 hour to 6 hours	33,600*	16*
7 hours to less than 24 hours	7,500*	4*
24 hours to less than 1 week	46,600	23
1 week to less than 1 month	48,000	24
1 month to less than 6 months	29,700	15
6 months or more	12,400*	6*
Not returned, but located	12,700*	6*
No information	7,100*	3*
Episode outcome		
Child returned	186,400	91
Child not returned, but located	12,700*	6*
Child not returned and not located	<100*	<1*
No information	4,800*	2*

Note: All estimates are rounded to the nearest 100. Percents may not sum to 100 because of rounding.

* Estimate is based on too few sample cases to be reliable.

Police Contact

As shown in table 8, aggrieved caretakers contacted the police regarding 60 percent of the family abducted children. However, not all of these contacts were for the purpose of locating the child. Fifty percent of the contacts were to recover the child from a known location; 42 percent were to locate the child.

Caretakers did not contact the police regarding 40 percent of the family abducted children, citing a variety of reasons. In some cases, they resolved the episode on their own (23 percent) or with a lawyer (6 percent). Some believed that police assistance was not necessary because they knew the child's location (10 percent) or knew that the child would not be harmed (6 percent). Some caretakers feared the child would be harmed if they contacted the police (6 percent). Others did not think the police could help (15 percent), were dissatisfied with police response to a previous contact (8 percent), or had been advised by others not to contact the police (3 percent).

Historical Trends

A special analysis of NISMART–1 and NISMART–2 data was conducted to identify historical trends in family abduction.[4] The analysis suggests that, between 1988 and 1999, the incidence rate of children who were victims of serious family abductions did not change, but there may have been a decline in the rate for children who were victims of less serious episodes involving various forms of custodial interference. Details of this

Table 7: Indicators of More Serious Family Abductions

Abduction Characteristic	Estimated Number of Family Abducted Children	Percent (n = 203,900)
Use of threat		
Yes	9,000*	4*
No	183,900	90
No information	11,000*	5*
Use of force		
Yes	15,000*	7*
No	177,900	87
No information	11,000*	5*
Use of weapon		
Yes	2,700*	1*
No	190,200	93
No information	11,000*	5*
Child taken out of State with intent to make recovery more difficult		
Yes	35,200	17
No	168,700	83
Child concealed		
Yes	90,600	44
No	113,300	56
Intent to prevent contact		
Yes	153,900	76
No	46,900	23
No information	3,000*	1*
Intent to affect custody permanently		
Yes	166,600	82
No	37,300	18

Note: All estimates are rounded to the nearest 100. Percents may not sum to 100 because of rounding.

* Estimate is based on too few sample cases to be reliable.

Table 8: Police Contact for Family Abductions

	Estimated Number of Family Abducted Children	Percent
Police contact		
Yes	121,800	60
No	82,100	40
Total	203,900	100
Reason police were contacted		
Recover child from known location	61,100	50
Locate missing child	50,800	42
Other reason	6,900*	6*
No information	3,000*	2*
Total	121,800	100
Reason police were not contacted		
Resolved problem alone or with family	19,100*	23*
Did not think police could help	12,200*	15*
Knew child's location	7,900*	10*
Dissatisfied with prior police contact	6,300*	8*
Afraid that child would be harmed	5,300*	6*
Handled problem with lawyer	4,900*	6*
Knew that child would not be harmed	4,500*	6*
Advised by others not to contact police	2,400*	3*
Other	3,800*	5*
No information	15,700*	19*
Total	82,100	100

Note: All estimates are rounded to the nearest 100. Percents may not sum to 100 because of rounding.

analysis will be presented in OJJDP's forthcoming Bulletin, *Historical Change in the Incidence of Missing, Abducted, Runaway, and Thrownaway Children, 1988–1999.*

Conclusions and Policy Implications

Family abductions constitute an important peril in the lives of children, particularly children living in households without one of their biological parents. The estimated 203,900 children who were victims of a family abduction in 1999 represent a large group of children caught up in divisive and potentially disturbing family dynamics.

Need for Services That Address Underlying Conflicts

Fifty-seven percent of the children who were abducted by a family member were caretaker missing (in the sense that their caretaker did not know where they were, became alarmed, and tried to locate them). Family abducted children constituted only 9 percent of all children classified as caretaker missing and only 7 percent of all children reported missing. In considering these statistics, however, it is important to remember that the potential for harm to family abducted children exists whether or not they are classified as missing. Family abduction is not just a problem of missing children.

In addition to locating and returning family abducted children, agencies seeking to help these children must address the conflicts that produce and prolong the abduction of children by family members. The fact that fully 40 percent of family abductions were not reported to the police underscores the importance of agencies that can provide a response to threatened and actual family abductions over and above the important location and recovery function performed by law enforcement.

Reality vs. Stereotype

Although the family abductions described in this study typically had certain disturbing elements such as attempts to prevent contact or alter custodial arrangements permanently, they did not generally involve the most serious sorts of features associated with the types of family abductions likely to be reported in the news. Actual concealment of the child occurred in a minority of episodes. Use of force, threats to harm the child, and flight from the State were uncommon. In contrast to the image created by the word "abduction," most of the children abducted by a family member were already in the lawful custody of the perpetrator when the episode started. In addition, nearly half of the family abducted children were returned in 1 week or less, and the majority were returned within 1 month.

Limitations of the Findings

The fact that family abductions in this study tended to resolve themselves in time should not lead one to assume that most family abductions are relatively benign and can be resolved without the intervention of authorities. The researchers in this study were not in a position to provide a full assessment of the types of harm that family abductions inflicted on children or the extent to which intervention by outside authorities facilitated the resolution of family abductions.[5]

Focus on Younger Children

This study's finding that younger children are the ones at greater risk of family abduction parallels findings from previous NISMART studies and other studies as well. Family abduction is one of the few victimization perils that younger children experience to a greater extent than older children. Thus, prevention efforts should focus on younger children, especially those who do not live with both biological parents. Programs that specifically promote child well-being and those that address child safety issues generally may be appropriate forums in which to raise awareness about family abduction.

The estimate of the number of family abducted children known to police from this NISMART–2 study, approximately 121,800 in 1999, contrasts with a 1992 estimate of 30,500 family abductions known to police based on a survey of law enforcement agencies (Grasso et al., 2001). The discrepancy could reflect a change in help-seeking patterns during the 1990s in the wake of family abductions. It may be that victims of family abduction in NISMART–2 overstated to interviewers their propensity to contact police. But more likely, it reflects the fact that police do not keep full records of all the individuals who contact them about family abductions and may not categorize the episodes as such in their databases.

An Area in Need of Further Attention

Despite close to 20 years of organized concern about missing children, and despite the creation of missing child prevention and intervention programs, the family abduction problem remains one area where efforts may be the least developed. Knowledge about the number of children who experience family abductions should spur efforts to prevent the occurrence of family abductions and help children and their aggrieved caretakers recover from the effects of these abductions when they occur.

Endnotes

1. One obvious limitation of the Household Surveys is that they may have undercounted children who experienced episodes but were living in households without telephones or were not living in households during the study period, including street children and homeless families. Although these are not large populations in comparison to the overall child population, they may be at risk for episodes. Other methodological factors, such as a preponderance of female caretaker interviewees and a greater likelihood of getting information about children in their primary residential household, may have resulted in some undercounting of family abductions perpetrated by females and caretakers with primary custody.

2. The absence of any stepmother perpetrators does not mean that there are no such abductions, only that they were too infrequent to have been detected in this study.

3. The absence of any family abducted children who were not located does not mean that these children do not exist, only that they were too infrequent to have been detected in this study.

4. Because of important differences in both definitions and methodology, the NISMART–1 and NISMART–2 data and findings should not be compared directly. In drawing comparisons to identify trends, researchers used the closest possible approximations of NISMART–1 methodology and definitions.

5. NISMART–1 found that family abduction can result in psychological harm to the child (Finkelhor, Hotaling, and Sedlak, 1990). Other studies (e.g., Grasso et al., 2001) have also found that family abduction cases may not receive the attention needed from the criminal justice system and that international family abductions in particular may be more difficult to resolve and often involve serious characteristics (e.g., concealment, threats).

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For Further Information

NISMART Questions and Answers, a fact sheet, offers a straightforward introduction to NISMART–2. It answers anticipated questions—such as *What is NISMART? Have abductions by strangers declined or increased?* and *Why can't I compare NISMART–1 statistics with NISMART–2 statistics?*—to help explain NISMART's purpose, methodology, and findings.

The first Bulletin in the NISMART series, *National Estimates of Missing Children: An Overview,* describes the NISMART–2 component studies and estimating methodology, defines the types of episodes studied—nonfamily abduction (including stereotypical kidnapping); family abduction; runaway/thrownaway; missing involuntary, lost, or injured; and missing benign explanation—and summarizes NISMART–2 estimates of missing children.

All NISMART-related publications are available at OJJDP's Web site, ojjdp.ncjrs.org.

Acknowledgments

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NISMART

National Incidence Studies of Missing, Abducted, Runaway, and Thrownaway Children

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Nonfamily Abducted Children: National Estimates and Characteristics

David Finkelhor, Heather Hammer, and Andrea J. Sedlak

The words "missing child" call to mind tragic and frightening kidnappings reported in the national news. But a child can be missing for many reasons, and the problem of missing children is far more complex than the headlines suggest. Getting a clear picture of how many children become missing—and why—is an important step in addressing the problem. This series of Bulletins provides that clear picture by summarizing findings from the Second National Incidence Studies of Missing, Abducted, Runaway, and Thrownaway Children (NISMART–2). The series offers national estimates of missing children based on surveys of households, juvenile residential facilities, and law enforcement agencies. It also presents statistical profiles of these children, including their demographic characteristics and the circumstances of their disappearance.

This Bulletin presents results from the initial analysis of nonfamily abduction data collected by the Second National Incidence Studies of Missing, Abducted, Runaway, and Thrownaway Children (NISMART–2). The NISMART–2 studies spanned the years 1997 to 1999.[1] All data in the individual component studies were collected to reflect a 12-month period. Because the vast majority of cases were from the studies concentrated in 1999, the annual period referred to in this Bulletin is 1999.

Key Findings

- During the study year, there were an estimated 115 *stereotypical kidnappings,* defined as abductions perpetrated by a stranger or slight acquaintance and involving a child who was transported 50 or more miles, detained overnight, held for ransom or with the intent to keep the child permanently, or killed.
- In 40 percent of stereotypical kidnappings, the child was killed, and in another 4 percent, the child was not recovered.
- There were an estimated 58,200 child victims of *nonfamily abduction*, defined more broadly to include all nonfamily perpetrators (friends and acquaintances as well as strangers) and crimes involving lesser amounts of forced movement or detention in addition to the more serious crimes entailed in stereotypical kidnappings.
- Fifty-seven percent of children abducted by a nonfamily perpetrator were missing from caretakers for at least 1 hour, and police were contacted to help locate 21 percent of the abducted children.
- Teenagers were by far the most frequent victims of both stereotypical kidnappings and nonfamily abductions.
- Nearly half of all child victims of stereotypical kidnappings and nonfamily abductions were sexually assaulted by the perpetrator.

Conceptualizing the Problem

The controversy and confusion that have plagued efforts to estimate the number of children abducted by nonfamily perpetrators stem in part from ambiguities regarding the meaning of the term "abduction." Because the media focus on notorious crimes, such as the kidnappings of Samantha Runnion, Polly Klass, and Adam Walsh, child abduction is conventionally thought of as a life-threatening crime of substantial duration and distance involving strangers. However, as legally defined, an abduction can occur when a person is held against his or her will for a modest amount of time or moved even a short distance, which often occurs in the commission of other crimes. Estimates based solely on the legal definition of abduction would be unlikely to satisfy those wanting to know about the risk and nature of stereotypical kidnappings, nor would the stereotypical kidnapping estimates alone satisfy those concerned about the phenomenon of abductions in general.

To satisfy both needs, NISMART–2 provides information about nonfamily abductions using two definitions. The narrower concept of *stereotypical kidnapping* pertains to the more serious type of abduction perpetrated by a stranger or slight acquaintance in which a child is 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. The broader concept of nonfamily abduction includes stereotypical kidnappings but also includes less serious *nonfamily abductions* involving the movement of a child using physical force or threat, the detention of a child for a substantial period of time (at least 1 hour) in a place of isolation using threat or physical force, or the luring of a child

Defining Nonfamily Abduction and Related Terms

- **Nonfamily abduction:** (1) An episode in which a nonfamily perpetrator takes a child by the use of physical force or threat of bodily harm or detains the child for a substantial period of time (at least 1 hour) in an isolated place by the use of physical force or threat of bodily harm without lawful authority or parental permission, or (2) an episode in which a child 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 ransom, or expresses the intention to keep the child permanently.
- **Stereotypical kidnapping:** A nonfamily abduction perpetrated by a slight acquaintance or stranger in which a child is detained overnight, transported at least 50 miles, held for ransom or abducted with intent to keep the child permanently, or killed.
- **Stranger:** A perpetrator whom the child or family do not know, or a perpetrator of unknown identity.
- **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 who 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 seen less than once a month.

younger than 15 years old for purposes of ransom, concealment, or intent to keep permanently. (Nonfamily abduction and related terms are defined more fully in the sidebar on page 2.)

Despite confusion about the meaning of abduction and the impression conveyed by notorious cases, an abduction does not necessarily imply that a child is missing. For example, a child can be abducted on the way home from school, dragged into a remote area, sexually assaulted, and released without being missed by a caretaker or reported as missing to any law enforcement agency. Even in more serious or lengthier stereotypical kidnappings, the victim will not qualify as a missing child if no one notices the child's absence or if the discovery of the child's body is the first evidence of the episode. Thus, the current study counted the child victims of nonfamily abductions who were not missing as well as those who were. (See Examples of NISMART–2 Nonfamily Abductions, page 4.)

The term "missing" itself has somewhat different meanings in different contexts. NISMART–2 characterized two types of missing children: "caretaker missing" children, who were missing from their caretakers whether or not those caretakers alerted any authority about the situation, and "reported missing" children, who were reported to law enforcement for purposes of locating the child. (Caretaker missing means that the child's whereabouts were unknown to the child's primary caretaker, with the result that the caretaker was alarmed for at least 1 hour and tried to locate the child.)

Methodology

The NISMART–2 data on the two types of nonfamily abductions are the product of different methodologies. Victims of the less serious nonfamily abductions are numerous enough to be estimated through a household-sampling procedure and were thus identified by interviewing caretakers and youth through a national telephone survey of households. Victims of stereotypical kidnappings, however, are rare and therefore difficult to estimate through household sampling without conducting an enormous and prohibitively expensive survey. Thus, a different methodology, one that involved a survey of law enforcement agencies throughout the United States, was used to ensure an accurate estimate of the number of stereotypical kidnapping victims. The research team assumed that almost all stereotypical kidnappings were serious enough to be reported to and recorded by law enforcement. The sidebar on methodology (page 5) explains how the estimates were derived.

Adult Caretaker and Youth Household Surveys. The Household Survey interviews were designed to screen for potentially countable NISMART–2 episodes, collect demographic data on the household and its members, conduct indepth followup interviews specific to each type of episode being researched, and collect data on any actual or attempted sexual assaults that may have occurred during the episode. The Household Surveys screened for potential family abductions, nonfamily abductions, runaway/thrownaway episodes, and other missing child episodes that resulted from children being lost or injured or from benign misunderstandings.

Respondents were administered a set of 17 episode screening questions to determine their eligibility for an indepth followup interview designed to collect detailed data on each type of episode. The adult episode screening questions that led to a nonfamily abduction followup interview are presented in the sidebar on page 6. The youth version, administered to youth between the ages of 10 and 18, was essentially the same.

Law Enforcement Study. This study collected information from a nationally representative sample of law enforcement agencies by interviewing the key investigating officer in each of the qualifying stereotypical kidnapping cases handled by that agency in 1997. The purposes of the Law Enforcement Study (LES) were to estimate the number of child victims of stereotypical kidnappings during the study year, to learn about the investigation burden of such cases for law enforcement agencies, to describe the circumstances of these stereotypical kidnappings and the characteristics of their perpetrators and victims, and to determine the outcomes.

Results

An estimated 58,200 children were abducted by a nonfamily perpetrator in the study year, including an estimated 115 victims of stereotypical kidnappings (table 1). As expected, the number of stereotypical kidnapping victims reported in the Household Surveys was not sufficient to

Examples of NISMART–2 Nonfamily Abductions

Nonfamily Abduction Examples That Are Not Stereotypical Kidnappings

A 17-year-old girl's ex-boyfriend forced her from her parked car, threw her into his car, and took her to a shopping mall parking lot where he detained her by force for 4 hours. The girl's mother became alarmed when her daughter's employer called to see why the girl had not shown up for work. Upon receiving the call from the employer, the mother drove to the girl's workplace, saw her abandoned car, then called the police to locate the missing child. (Caretaker and reported missing)

A 14-year-old boy was hunting in a park when a strange man appeared, claiming that the boy was trespassing on his property. This was not the case. Nonetheless, the "property owner" detained the boy at gunpoint and forced him to remove his outer garments to see if he had any weapons other than his shotgun. Then, the "property owner" forced the boy into the woods at gunpoint. When the boy did not return home on time, the caretaker became alarmed and tried to find him. When the boy returned home, the police and the park warden were contacted. (Caretaker missing)

A 4-year-old boy was taken on a 20-mile joyride by the schoolbus driver after the rest of the children had been dropped off at their homes. No force or threat was used to transport or detain the child; however, the bus driver concealed the child's whereabouts. When the child did not come home at the usual time, the alarmed caretaker called the school and bus company to locate the child. Then, upon finding out where the child was, the caretaker contacted the police to recover the child. This episode lasted 7 hours. (Caretaker missing)

A babysitter refused to let three children, ages 4, 7, and 10, go home until she was paid for prior babysitting. The babysitter detained the children against their will and did not allow the alarmed caretaker to contact the children because she did not answer the phone. When the babysitter finally answered the phone, she lied, telling the caretaker that the children were on their way home. The caretaker called the police to recover the children from a known location. (Not missing)

A 17-year-old girl was on a date with a long-term acquaintance (a 17-year-old boy) who took her in a car to a dark, secluded area on a mountain, where he tried to rape her. The girl was detained by force and sexually assaulted. In this case, the caretaker was not concerned nor did she call the police because she figured the girl would come home. (Not missing)

A 13-year-old girl was hanging out with "bad kids" (according to her caretaker) and grabbed by a 17-year-old male friend (not a romantic friend) who tried to sexually assault her. The perpetrator used threats and force to take her to his home, where he used force to detain her. The police were called for a reason other than to locate or recover the child. (Not missing)

A 9-year-old girl was lured into the perpetrator's camper trailer with an offer of candy. The perpetrator, a 35-year-old male, detained the child by force in the trailer for an hour while he sexually assaulted her. The police were called for a reason other than to locate or recover the child, and the perpetrator was arrested. (Not missing)

A 15-year-old girl was lured by a friend into the hallway at school, then pushed 25 feet into the boys' bathroom by some older boys who detained her by force and sexually assaulted her before she managed to escape screaming. The school contacted the police to report the crime and the boys were arrested. (Not missing)

A 10-year-old girl was lured with candy and money by an 85-year-old male neighbor and long-term acquaintance into his home, where he sexually assaulted the child. The caretaker did not contact police because she said she had no concrete evidence and the child was not injured. (Not missing)

A 17-year-old boy was with a very recent male acquaintance at the perpetrator's home. The perpetrator detained the boy for an hour by force and sexually assaulted him. The police were not called because the caretaker did not find out about the episode until more than a year later. (Not missing)

A 17-year-old girl was forcibly detained and sexually assaulted in a parking lot at a football game by a 25-year-old male who was an ordinary friend and long-term acquaintance. The police were not called because the girl did not tell her parents. The respondent in this interview was the victim's older sister. (Not missing)

Examples of Stereotypical Kidnappings

A 12-year-old girl left home for a short jog, telling her mother she would be back in 20 minutes. That was the last time she was seen alive. The police were called to report her disappearance. A few weeks later, the body of the victim was discovered accidentally by a man and his son, who were walking their dog. Police believed that the perpetrator used a blitz attack and grabbed the victim while she was jogging to sexually assault her. (Caretaker and reported missing)

Two 14-year-old girls were spending the night together. In the evening, they walked 12 blocks to a store. The girls were walking back to the house when a car pulled up and two men jumped out, grabbed them, and forced them into the car. One perpetrator had a knife, and told the victims he would kill them. The perpetrators drove to a closed State park. One of the victims was taken out of the car and sexually assaulted. When the girls did not return that night, the police were contacted to report the girls missing. The next morning, a county deputy on a routine patrol of the closed park noticed the car and investigated. He rescued the two girls and apprehended one of the perpetrators. (Caretaker and reported missing)

Methodology

The nonfamily abduction estimates are based on the combination of nonfamily abduction data collected in the NISMART–2 Household Surveys and the stereotypical kidnapping data collected in the Law Enforcement Study (LES).

The Household Surveys were conducted during 1999 using computer-assisted telephone interviewing methodology to collect information from a national sample of households. A total of 16,111 interviews were completed with an adult primary caretaker, resulting in an 80-percent cooperation rate among eligible households with children and a 61-percent response rate. The total number of children included in the Household Survey of Adult Caretakers was 31,787. Each primary caretaker who completed an interview was asked for permission to interview one randomly selected youth in the household ages 10–18. Permission was granted to interview 60 percent of the randomly selected youth, and 95 percent completed an interview, yielding 5,015 youth interviews.

Both the adult and youth survey data were weighted to reflect the Census-based U.S. population of children. (For details about the weighting procedure and variance estimation, see OJJDP's forthcoming *NISMART–2 Household Survey Methodology Technical Report.*)

The Household Surveys are limited because they may have undercounted children who experienced episodes but were living in households without telephones or were not living in households during the study period, including street children and homeless families. Although these are not large populations in comparison to the overall child population, they may be at risk for episodes.

The LES sample included all law enforcement agencies serving a nationally representative sample of 400 counties. Counties were selected with probabilities proportional to the size of their child populations. There were 400 county sheriff departments and 3,765 municipal police departments serving these counties, for a total sample of 4,165 law enforcement agencies.

Data were collected in two phases. In the first phase, a mail survey was sent to all law enforcement agencies in the sample. This questionnaire asked whether the agency had any stereotypical kidnappings open for investigation during the 1997 calendar year. The response rate for the mail survey was 91 percent. Agencies that reported any stereotypical kidnappings in the mail survey were contacted again in the second phase of data collection, and an extensive followup telephone interview was conducted with the key investigating officer for each case. Data collection was completed for 99 percent of the cases targeted for followup interviews.

Incorporating both phases of the LES, the combined response rate for the study was 91 percent. LES case weights were developed to reflect the probability of the agency and case having been included in the sample and to adjust for nonresponse and refusals.

Data from the Household Surveys and LES were integrated to construct unified estimates of the number of child victims of nonfamily abductions. Two key principles guided this integration:

> **Principle 1:** To combine episode data within a study, each sampled child could be counted only once in the unified estimate.
>
> **Principle 2:** To unify episode data across studies, a given subgroup of children could be represented by the data from one study only.

Beginning with the data from the Household Survey of Adult Caretakers, children who qualified as having been victims of nonfamily abduction on the basis of any countable episode other than a stereotypical kidnapping were entered into the unified estimate of nonfamily abducted children. In accordance with the first principle previously described, children who were reported as victims of nonfamily abduction in both the adult and youth interviews were counted only once in the unified estimate. In accordance with the second principle previously described, only the LES data were used as the source for the stereotypical kidnapping estimates because no reliable estimate could be developed from the Household Surveys for this rare subset of nonfamily abducted children.

As noted at the beginning of the Bulletin, the NISMART–2 Household Surveys and Law Enforcement Study spanned the years 1997–99, and all data in each of the individual component studies were collected to reflect a 12-month period. The study years are 1999 for the Household Surveys and 1997 for the Law Enforcement Study. Because the vast majority of nonfamily abducted children were from the studies concentrated in 1999, the annual period referred to in this Bulletin is 1999.

A detailed description of the unified estimate methodology is provided in OJJDP's forthcoming *Unified Estimate Methodology Technical Report,* and details on the findings of the LES are provided in OJJDP's forthcoming Research Report, *Stereotypical Kidnappings: National Estimates and Case Profiles.*

Household Survey of Adult Caretakers: Nonfamily Abduction Episode Screening Questions

The Household Survey of Adult Caretakers episode screening questions used to determine whether a nonfamily abduction followup interview would be conducted are presented below.

- Was there any time when anyone tried to take [this child/any of these children] away from you against your wishes?
- Was there any time when anyone tried to sexually molest, rape, attack, or beat up [this child/any of these children]?
- In the past 12 months, has anyone attacked or threatened [this child/any of these children] in any of these ways:
  - With any weapon, for instance, a gun or knife?
  - With anything like a baseball bat, frying pan, scissors, or stick?
  - By something thrown, such as a rock or bottle?
  - Including any grabbing, punching, or choking?
  - Any rape, attempted rape, or other type of sexual attack?
  - Any face-to-face threats?
  - Any attack or threat or use of force by anyone at all?

Something that happens to some children these days is that adults or other youth try to force or trick them into doing something sexual. This includes trying to touch the child's private parts or trying to make the child touch or look at the other person's private parts. Children report that these kinds of things happen with people they know well or trust, such as teachers or relatives.

- In the past 12 months, has there been a time when an older person, such as an adult, an older teenager, or a babysitter, deliberately touched or tried to touch your child's private parts or tried to make your child touch or look at their private parts when your child did not want it?
- [Has/have] [this child/any of these children] been forced or coerced to engage in unwanted sexual activity by someone [he/she/they] did not know before, a casual acquaintance, or someone [he knows/she knows/they know] well?
- Has anyone ever kidnapped or tried to kidnap [this child/any of these children]?

Table 1: Estimates of Nonfamily Abducted Children

Category	Estimate	95% Confidence Interval*	Percent
All nonfamily abduction victims	**58,200**	**(24,100–92,400)**	**100**
Caretaker missing†	33,000	(2,000–64,000)	57
Reported missing‡	12,100§	(<100–31,000)	21
Stereotypical kidnapping victims	**115**	**(60–170)**	**100**
Caretaker/reported missing¶	90	(35–140)	78

Note: Estimates for caretaker missing and reported missing should not be summed because the categories are not mutually exclusive.

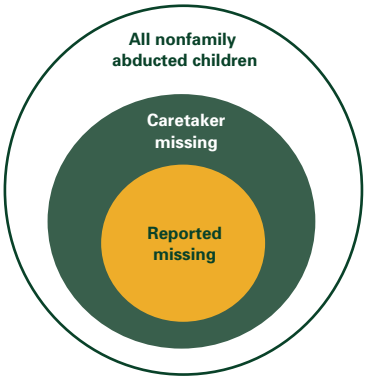
* The 95-percent confidence interval indicates that if the study were repeated 100 times, 95 of the replications would produce estimates within the ranges noted.

† Whereabouts unknown to caretaker, caretaker was alarmed and tried to locate child.

‡ Missing children whose parents or caretakers have reported them to authorities in order to help locate them.

§ Estimate is based on an extremely small sample of cases; therefore, its precision and confidence interval are unreliable.

¶ Stereotypically kidnapped children were classified as reported missing if the police were notified by someone who discovered the child was missing or someone who witnessed the abduction. Among the stereotypical kidnapping victims, caretaker missing children are the same children as those reported missing.



The diagram illustrates the proportional relationship between the total number of nonfamily abducted children and the number of these children who were caretaker missing and reported missing. It also shows that children who were reported missing are a subset of those who were caretaker missing.

produce a reliable estimate of their incidence from that source; therefore, all of the data on this subset of victims come from the LES. In the following discussion, which describes all nonfamily abducted children and the subset of child victims of stereotypical kidnappings, those who experienced stereotypical kidnappings are such a small part of the overall category that they barely influence the aggregate patterns.

Table 2: Characteristics of Nonfamily Abducted Children

Characteristic of Child	All Nonfamily Abduction Victims (*n* = 58,200) Percent	All Nonfamily Abduction Victims (*n* = 58,200) Estimate	Stereotypical Kidnapping Victims (*n* = 115) Percent	Stereotypical Kidnapping Victims (*n* = 115) Estimate	Percent of U.S. Child Population* (*N* = 70,172,700)
Age (years)					
0–5	7†	4,300†	19	20	33
6–11	12†	6,800†	24	25	34
12–14	22†	13,000†	38	45	17
15–17	59	34,100	20	20	17
Gender					
Male	35†	20,300†	31	35	51
Female	65	37,900	69	80	49
Race/ethnicity					
White, non-Hispanic	35	20,500	72	80	65
Black, non-Hispanic	42†	24,500†	19	20	15
Hispanic	23†	13,200†	8†	10†	16
Other	<1†	<100†	2†	<5†	5
Region					
Northeast	<1†	<100†	n/a‡	n/a	18
Midwest	33	19,300	n/a	n/a	23
South	38†	21,900†	n/a	n/a	35
West	29†	16,900†	n/a	n/a	24
No information	<1†	100†	100	115	—

Note: All estimates are rounded to the nearest 100. Percents may not sum to 100 because of rounding.

* Age, gender, and race for the U.S. population were based on the average monthly estimates of the population ages 0–17 years for 1999 (U.S. Census Bureau, 2000a). The regional distribution of the population was computed from State-by-State estimates of the population ages 0–17 as of July 1, 1999 (U.S. Census Bureau, 2000b).

† Estimate is based on too few sample cases to be reliable.

‡ n/a = not available.

According to the NISMART–2 definitions, an estimated 57 percent of all child victims of nonfamily abduction (approximately 33,000 children) were missing from their caretakers in the study year. (See table 1 and the accompanying diagram.) Moreover, an estimated 21 percent of all nonfamily abducted children (approximately 12,100) were also reported to law enforcement as missing. (Unfortunately, both of these numerical estimates are quite imprecise and could actually be quite a bit smaller or larger because they are based on very small numbers of cases.) Stereotypically kidnapped children in this study were considerably more likely to be caretaker missing and reported as missing compared with nonfamily abducted children overall, with 78 percent of victims of stereotypical kidnappings reported missing. Because the estimates are based entirely on cases reported to law enforcement, the estimate for the number of stereotypically kidnapped children who were missing from their caretakers does not include any children who were kidnapped and not reported to the police. Such children may exist; however, given the seriousness of stereotypical kidnapping episodes, they are presumed to be extremely rare.

Recent, notorious nonfamily abductions have often involved quite young children, such as 5-year-old Samantha Runnion of Orange County, CA. However, young children, despite the publicity accorded their abduction, are not the most frequent victims of nonfamily abduction. Eighty-one percent of nonfamily abducted children and 58 percent of stereotypical kidnapping victims were

Table 3: Characteristics of Nonfamily Abduction Perpetrators

Characteristic of Perpetrator	Percent of All Nonfamily Abduction Victims (*n* = 58,200)	Percent of Stereotypical Kidnapping Victims (*n* = 115)
Identity of main perpetrator		
Friend	17*	—
Long-term acquaintance	21*	—
Neighbor	5*	—
Authority person	6*	—
Caretaker or babysitter	4*	—
Stranger	37*	71†
Slight acquaintance	8*	29†
Someone else	3*	—
More than one perpetrator		
Yes	21*	48
No	79	41
No information	<1*	11*
Main perpetrator's gender		
Male	75	86
Female	25*	7*
No information	<1*	7*
Main perpetrator's age (years)		
13–19	25*	21
20–29	42*	36
30–39	12*	21
40–49	16*	7*
50–89	5*	4*
No information	<1*	10*

* Estimate based on too few sample cases to be reliable.

† By definition, stereotypical kidnappings are limited to cases involving strangers and slight acquaintances.

age 12 or older (table 2). Nonfamily abduction victims overall were particularly concentrated among the oldest groups, with 59 percent being 15–17 years old.

Girls were the predominant victims of nonfamily abductions overall and of stereotypical kidnappings as well (65 percent and 69 percent, respectively), reflecting the frequency of sexual assault as a motive for many nonfamily abductions.

Black children appear to be disproportionately represented among the victims of nonfamily abductions but not among stereotypical kidnapping victims. However, this disproportion is not large enough to exclude the possibility that it is a result of random factors in the sample selection. For similar reasons, the absence of any nonfamily abducted children from the Northeast cannot be considered conclusive evidence of lower rates in that region.

Because kidnapping prevention focuses on the danger of strangers, it may be surprising that the majority of nonfamily abduction victims (53 percent) are abducted by persons known to the child: 38 percent of nonfamily abducted children were abducted by a friend or long-term acquaintance, 5 percent by a neighbor, 6 percent by persons of authority, and 4 percent by a caretaker or babysitter (table 3). Strangers abducted 37 percent of the nonfamily abduction victims, and slight acquaintances (considered similar to strangers and including persons who were known but seen infrequently or who may have recently befriended a child or family in order to abduct the child) abducted 8 percent. Stereotypical kidnappings, consistent with the most publicized nonfamily abduction cases, are limited by definition to cases perpetrated by strangers and slight acquaintances.

About 1 in 5 victims of nonfamily abductions (21 percent) and almost half the victims of stereotypical kidnappings (48 percent) were abducted by multiple perpetrators (table 3). In instances of multiple perpetrators, episodes were classified according to the child's relationship with the most closely related perpetrator. Thus, an abduction by a babysitter and her boyfriend, who was a stranger to the child, was classified

Table 4: Characteristics of Nonfamily Abductions

Characteristic of Episode	Percent of All Nonfamily Abduction Victims (*n* = 58,200)	Percent of Stereotypical Kidnapping Victims (*n* = 115)
Child's location prior to episode		
Own home or yard	5*	16
Other home or yard	18*	3*
Street, car, or other vehicle	32*	40
Park or wooded area	25*	14*
Other public area	14*	n/a†
School or daycare	5*	2*
Store, restaurant, or mall	<1*	8*
Other location	<1*	9*
No information	<1*	8*
Other episode characteristics		
Child was taken or moved	70	95
Child was detained	35*	83

* Estimate is based on too few sample cases to be reliable.

† n/a = not available.

Table 5: Details Related to the Movement of Nonfamily Abducted Children

Characteristic of Episode	Percent of All Nonfamily Abduction Victims (*n* = 40,600)*	Percent of Stereotypical Kidnapping Victims (*n* = 105)*
How child was taken or moved		
Carried	37†	n/a‡
By vehicle	28†	n/a
Walked	35†	n/a
No information	<1†	100
Where perpetrator took child		
Vehicle	45†	n/a
Perpetrator's home	28†	n/a
Building	13†	n/a
Outside area	11†	n/a
Other	2†	n/a
No information	<1†	100
Child was moved more than 50 miles		
Yes	<1†	14†
No	100	86

* Percentages are computed from a baseline of the number of children who were moved.

† Estimate is based on too few sample cases to be reliable.

‡ n/a = not available.

as an abduction by a babysitter. Counting only the main perpetrators (and not the accomplices), 25 percent of the nonfamily abduction victims and 7 percent of the stereotypical kidnapping victims were abducted by females. Perpetrators in their twenties were the main abductors of 42 percent of all nonfamily abducted children and of 36 percent of children who were stereotypically kidnapped. Teenagers abducted 25 percent of all nonfamily abducted children.

Homes or yards were the origination point in only a minority of the abductions of all nonfamily abducted children (23 percent) and of those who were stereotypically kidnapped (19 percent) (table 4). Instead, streets, parks or wooded areas, and other public areas (i.e., generally accessible spaces) were the places from which children were typically abducted. While most of the nonfamily abducted children were moved or taken, 35 percent were detained in an isolated location for at least an hour. The majority of stereotypical kidnapping victims were detained in addition to being moved or taken.

When children were moved, the most common modes of conveyance were carrying the child, taking the child in a vehicle, and walking with the child (table 5). Most children were taken into vehicles (45 percent) or to the perpetrator's home (28 percent) (table 5). Fourteen percent of the stereotypically kidnapped children were moved more than 50 miles.

Table 6: Additional Crime Elements in Nonfamily Abductions

Characteristic of Episode	Percent of All Nonfamily Abduction Victims (*n* = 58,200)	Percent of Stereotypical Kidnapping Victims (*n* = 115)
Perpetrator sexually assaulted child	46	49
Perpetrator physically assaulted child	31*	33
Perpetrator robbed child	7*	20
Perpetrator used a weapon	40*	49
Perpetrator demanded ransom	4*	5*

* Estimate is based on too few sample cases to be reliable.

Criminal assaults were a motive in most of the nonfamily abductions (table 6). Close to half of all nonfamily abduction victims and stereotypical kidnapping victims were sexually assaulted, while about a third were otherwise physically assaulted. Seven percent of the nonfamily abduction victims and 20 percent of the stereotypical kidnapping victims were robbed.

Weapons were involved in abducting 40 percent of all nonfamily abduction victims and 49 percent of stereotypical kidnapping victims. Knives and guns were both frequently used. Ransom was demanded for 4 percent of all nonfamily abducted children and 5 percent of the subset who were stereotypically kidnapped.

A considerable quantity of information on the exact duration of the episodes was missing (32 percent of all nonfamily abducted children and 18 percent of stereotypical kidnapping victims) (table 7). Among those children with data on episode duration, 29 percent experienced nonfamily abductions that lasted 2 hours or less, and 10 percent had abductions that lasted 24 hours or more (table 7).

Stereotypical kidnappings were defined as episodes lasting overnight (unless there was a homicide, a ransom, or an intent to keep or transport the child 50 miles or more), so it is noteworthy that only 10 percent of stereotypical kidnapping victims had episodes lasting 24 hours or more. Only a very small minority (4 percent) of victims of the most serious stereotypical kidnappings had abductions that were not resolved at the time of data collection.

Nonetheless, 40 percent of stereotypical kidnapping victims were killed, in addition to the 4 percent who were still missing. An additional 32 percent of children who were stereotypically kidnapped received injuries requiring medical attention.

For 53 percent of all nonfamily abduction victims, police were not contacted about the episode for any reason, not even to report the crime (table 8). The reasons for not reporting suggest that some portion of these nonfamily abductions were not thought to involve serious threats to the child.

Table 7: Duration and Outcome of Nonfamily Abductions

Characteristic of Episode	Percent of All Nonfamily Abduction Victims (*n* = 58,200)	Percent of Stereotypical Kidnapping Victims (*n* = 115)
Duration of episode (hours)*		
2 or less	29†	8†
3 to less than 24	62†	83
24 or more	10†	10
Episode outcomes		
Child returned alive	99	57
Returned child was injured	<1†	32
Child was killed	<1†	40
Child not returned and not located	<1†	4†

* Duration percentages are calculated using the number of children without missing data as the baseline. For nonfamily abductions, this number is 39,800. For stereotypical kidnappings, this number is 95.

† Estimate based on too few sample cases to be reliable.

The seasonal distribution of nonfamily abductions and stereotypical kidnappings indicates only that they occur less frequently in winter (table 9).

Implications

When, in the wake of notorious kidnappings, parents and reporters clamor for information about the risk children face for such heinous crimes, the best answer currently available based on the data from this study is that an estimated 115 children and youth were the victims of a stereotypical kidnapping in the study year, and that the true number was somewhere between 60 and 170 (this range represents the 95-percent confidence interval around the estimate). This estimate is consistent with the Federal Bureau of Investigation's (FBI's) estimates of the number of abductions by strangers in which, because of their seriousness or duration, Federal law enforcement becomes involved (M. Heimbach, personal communication, August 22, 2002).

The larger number identified in this study, the 58,200 nonfamily abduction victims, represents an estimate of the number of child victims of crimes that meet the legal definition of abduction by a nonfamily perpetrator. Most children's nonfamily abduction episodes do not involve elements of the extremely alarming kind of crime that parents and reporters have in mind (such as a child's being killed, abducted overnight, taken long distances, held for ransom or with the intent to keep the child) when they think about a kidnapping by a stranger.

There was some kind of police contact regarding 47 percent of the nonfamily

Table 8: Police Contact for Nonfamily Abductions

Characteristic of Episode	Percent of All Nonfamily Abduction Victims (*n* = 58,200)	Percent of Stereotypical Kidnapping Victims (*n* = 115)
Any police contact		
Yes	47*	100
No	53*	n/a[†]
Reason police were not contacted[‡]		
Expected child to return	12*	—
Lack of evidence	9*	—
Caretaker informed too long after abduction	3*	—
Child wanted to protect perpetrator	10*	—
Caretaker not told about abduction	10*	—
Episode was not serious enough	17*	—
No information	39*	—

* Estimate is based on too few sample cases to be reliable.

[†] n/a = not available.

[‡] Percentages are computed from a baseline of 30,800, the number of children with no police contact.

Table 9: Season of Nonfamily Abductions

Season of Episode	Percent of All Nonfamily Abduction Victims (*n* = 58,200)	Percent of Stereotypical Kidnapping Victims (*n* = 115)
Winter	15*	9*
Spring	36*	28
Summer	30*	29
Fall	19*	33
No information	<1*	1*

* Estimate is based on too few sample cases to be reliable.

abducted children, either to report the child as missing or for other reasons. However, in 53 percent of cases, there was no police contact. Most caretakers who did not contact the police expected the child to return or did not think the episode was particularly serious, and some caretakers were never told about the episode (as revealed by the youth who were interviewed).

In 1988, NISMART–1 estimated that stereotypical kidnappings numbered between 200 and 300 annually (Finkelhor, Hotaling, and Sedlak, 1990). Comparing the new NISMART–2 estimates with these older estimates, people may be inclined to conclude that there has been a substantial decline in stereotypical kidnappings during the past decade. Unfortunately, such a clear-cut conclusion is not scientifically justified by the current evidence because the imprecision of the estimates and differences in the methodologies do not allow it.

The higher estimate of NISMART–1 was obtained using a methodology that differs from the current methodology, and, unlike the current estimate, its precision could not be accurately determined. The actual number of stereotypical kidnappings in the NISMART–1 study year may, in fact, be within the NISMART–2 confidence interval, and thus not significantly different from the NISMART–2 estimate.

Nonetheless, stereotypical kidnappings do not appear to be any more frequent in 1999 than in 1988. Moreover, despite using different methodologies, NISMART–1 and NISMART–2 yield estimates of the same order of magnitude (in the hundreds rather than in thousands), reinforcing confidence that the estimates for both years are in the true range.

The possibility that stereotypical kidnappings have declined is supported by declining rates of juvenile-victim homicides and of sexual and aggravated assaults in the 1990s. Such crimes include instances of and provide the context for many kidnappings by strangers. However, the current data, given their limitations, cannot be used to confirm this possibility.

Comparison of NISMART–1 and NISMART–2 findings with regard to the more general category of nonfamily abduction may also cause confusion. NISMART–1 estimated that approximately 3,200–4,600 children qualified for a "legal definition" nonfamily abduction known to police, which seems markedly smaller than the estimate of 58,200 victims of nonfamily abduction from NISMART–2.

Although the definitions used in NISMART–1 and NISMART–2 were virtually the same, the NISMART–1 estimate included only nonfamily abductions known to police exclusively and was calculated from a review of police records in which researchers looked for elements of abduction in written case material about reported crimes. The estimate was believed at the time to be a serious undercount because police records so frequently failed to note elements of forced movement or detention in their accounts of crimes like sexual assault. In contrast, the NISMART–2 estimate is based on accounts by victims and their caretakers who were asked systematically in a national survey about possible elements of abduction in the course of crime victimizations. Slightly more than half of the estimated 58,200 nonfamily abducted children from NISMART–2 were not even reported to the police.

Nonetheless, in trying to interpret this new and considerably higher estimate of the number of nonfamily abducted children, several considerations should be kept in mind. First, because the new estimate is based on victim accounts rather than police records, it inherently involves a much lower threshold of seriousness. Moreover, the definition of nonfamily abduction used in NISMART involves modest amounts of coerced movement or detention that are present in many violent and sexual crimes. When children suffer more than 2 million violent crimes each year, including more than 100,000 cases of sexual assault and sexual abuse, it is quite reasonable that tens of thousands of these crimes involve coerced movement and detention (Crimes against Children Research Center, 1999). Finally, however, even phenomena that occur to tens of thousands of children are hard to estimate with surveys the size of those in NISMART–2. As a result, there is more imprecision and margin of error in the nonfamily abduction estimate than in any of the other NISMART–2 estimates.

The NISMART–2 findings reinforce the 1988 study's conclusion that teenage girls are the most frequent targets of nonfamily abductions and stereotypical

kidnappings. To some extent, this finding contrasts with the image drawn from media accounts of the abduction of very young children such as Adam Walsh and Samantha Runnion. Perhaps the innocence and vulnerability of younger children ensure more publicity and greater notoriety for these cases. Nonetheless, in planning strategies for preventing and responding to nonfamily abductions, it is important to keep efforts from being misdirected by the stereotype of the preteen victim. In fact, the vulnerability of teens needs to be a central principle guiding such planning.

Strategies for prevention and intervention also need to recognize that acquaintances play a greater role than strangers do in abductions that occur outside the family. In the current study, more than half of the nonfamily abduction victims were abducted by persons known to the child. If parents and law enforcement assume that abduction is an element only in crimes committed by strangers, they may fail to provide appropriate prevention information to young people. More attention needs to be given to the motives and dynamics of crimes involving abductions by perpetrators known to the child.

The NISMART–2 results reinforce the generally well known fact that sexual assault is the motive for a considerable percentage of nonfamily abductions. This suggests the importance and usefulness of combining sexual assault prevention strategies and abduction prevention strategies as a way to reduce the rates of both crimes. Recent declines in rates of sexual abuse during the 1990s (Jones and Finkelhor, 2001) point to the possible effectiveness of recent sexual assault prevention strategies, including public awareness, educational programs, and aggressive prosecution to increase general and specific deterrence.

The considerable interest in statistics on nonfamily abduction raises obvious questions about how statistics can be obtained more regularly and systematically. Part of the solution to this problem may come with the full implementation of the National Incident-Based Reporting System (NIBRS), which is being introduced by the FBI to supplant the Uniform Crime Reporting Program (UCR) as the source of national information about crimes known to police. NIBRS, unlike its predecessor, allows police to indicate when abduction occurs alone or in connection with other crimes.

When NIBRS is fully implemented nationally, it will be able to generate annual estimates of the number of children, known to the police, who are abducted not only by nonfamily perpetrators but also by family members. Unfortunately, only 20 States contributed to NIBRS as of 2000, and its national implementation is unlikely to be complete for another decade. The analysis of these NIBRS data has already yielded some useful conclusions (Finkelhor and Ormrod, 2000), such as the large number and distinctive features of acquaintance kidnapping. However, the NIBRS data are not yet of use in calculating national incidence or tracking national trends.

One question pertaining to NIBRS in connection with child abduction data is how quickly police, who have not had to record the abduction element of crimes systematically under UCR, are going to do so in NIBRS data collection. An additional limitation of NIBRS is that it does not collect the kind of data that would facilitate estimating the incidence of stereotypical kidnapping, as defined by NISMART. To do this, NIBRS would have to collect more data on specific crime episode characteristics, such as the duration of the episode and the distance victims were taken.

The National Crime Information Center (NCIC), to which local police report missing children for whom they are searching, may present an opportunity to track the incidence of stereotypical kidnappings more regularly. At the present time, the NCIC system is not used for statistical or data-gathering purposes.

Finally, conducting studies such as those reported in this Bulletin on a more regular basis would enhance the availability of timely statistics on abducted and missing children.

Endnote

1. The reference dates for some of the NISMART–2 component studies vary because of a delay caused by pending Federal legislation that, had it passed, would have made it impossible to conduct the National Household Survey of Youth, a key component of NISMART–2. In anticipation of a quick resolution, OJJDP decided to

proceed with the Law Enforcement Study and the Juvenile Facilities Study because neither involved interviewing youth. Had these 1997 studies been postponed until 1999, it is highly unlikely that those estimates would have been statistically different.

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For Further Information

NISMART Questions and Answers, a fact sheet, offers a straightforward introduction to NISMART–2. It answers anticipated questions—such as *What is NISMART? Have abductions by strangers declined or increased?* and *Why can't I compare NISMART–1 statistics with NISMART–2 statistics?*—to help explain NISMART's purpose, methodology, and findings.

The first Bulletin in the NISMART series, *National Estimates of Missing Children: An Overview,* describes the NISMART–2 component studies and estimating methodology, defines the types of episodes studied—nonfamily abduction (including stereotypical kidnapping); family abduction; runaway/thrownaway; missing involuntary, lost, or injured; and missing benign explanation—and summarizes NISMART–2 estimates of missing children.

All NISMART-related publications are available at OJJDP's Web site, ojjdp.ncjrs.org.

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NISMART

National Incidence Studies of Missing, Abducted, Runaway, and Thrownaway Children

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NISMART Questions and Answers

The Second National Incidence Studies of Missing, Abducted, Runaway, and Thrownaway Children (NISMART–2) is an important resource. The following questions and answers provide a quick overview of NISMART's purpose, methodology, and findings. For a more detailed discussion of NISMART–2, refer to the corresponding series of Bulletins.

Q What is NISMART?

A NISMART stands for the National Incidence Studies of Missing, Abducted, Runaway, and Thrownaway Children. These studies were undertaken in response to the Missing Children's Assistance Act (Pub. L. 98–473), which requires that the Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention (OJJDP) conduct periodic studies to determine the number of U.S. children reported missing and the number of children recovered during a given year. NISMART consists of several complementary studies designed to estimate the size and nature of the Nation's missing children problem. NISMART–2, the second such set of studies (the first, NISMART–1, was conducted in 1988), includes a large national survey (more than 16,000 households) of parents and other primary caretakers who were interviewed about their children's experiences. The household survey also interviewed a sample of 5,000 youth ages 10–18, an important methodological improvement over the NISMART–1 design. To record the experiences of youth who had run away from residential placements such as group homes, a survey of juvenile facilities was also conducted. And because law enforcement agencies are particularly knowledgeable about the most serious and rarest cases of abduction—stereotypical kidnappings by strangers—a large-scale survey of police departments was conducted to gather detailed information about the characteristics of these crimes.

Q Have abductions by strangers declined or increased?

A Although the number of stereotypical kidnappings by strangers reported by NISMART–1 (200–300) and NISMART–2 (115) appears to reflect a decline in such abductions, these figures are derived from studies that used very different methodologies. For example, NISMART–1 researchers studied police records from a sample of 83 law enforcement agencies. For NISMART–2, the sample was expanded to more than 4,000 agencies, and data were collected from police personnel who investigated the cases. Because of the different methods used and the rarity of such cases, no scientific basis exists to conclude that there has been a true decline—although it is possible. On the other hand, NISMART–2 results do not indicate an increase in abductions by strangers.

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Q Why can't I compare NISMART–1 statistics with NISMART–2 statistics?

A In planning NISMART–2, OJJDP convened a panel of experts to review NISMART–1 and to suggest design improvements to the studies. As a result, substantial refinements were made to the episode definitions and data collection methods. For example, many of the 354,100 NISMART–1 "broad scope family abductions" were viewed as fairly minor custodial and visitation interference episodes that did not warrant the designation of "abduction." The NISMART–2 definition of "family abduction" was clarified to make the category more meaningful; as a result, the 203,900 family abductions recorded by NISMART–2 do not correspond to the family abductions captured by NISMART–1. In addition, because distinguishing "runaway" and "thrownaway" categories of children in NISMART–1 was difficult, the two types of episodes were combined into one category in NISMART–2 and, more importantly, youth were interviewed in NISMART–2 but not in NISMART–1. By interviewing youth directly, researchers identified many episodes that were either unknown to, or known but unreported by their caretakers.

Because the NISMART–2 design differs substantially from that of NISMART–1, initial NISMART–2 reports will focus exclusively on findings resulting from improved definitions, methods, and terminology. However, it should be noted that NISMART–2 was also designed to look at historical trends by comparing the two study periods using the most equivalent definitions and methods with the NISMART–2 samples. Those results will be available in a separate publication later this year.

Q When were the data for NISMART–2 collected?

A NISMART–2 studies spanned 1997–99, and all the data for each component study were collected to reflect a 12-month period. Because most of the cases studied were concentrated in 1999, the annual period being referenced in NISMART–2 is 1999.

The reference dates for some of the NISMART–2 component studies vary because of a delay caused by pending Federal legislation that, had it passed, would have made it impossible to conduct the National Household Survey of Youth, a key component of NISMART–2. In anticipation of a quick resolution, OJJDP decided to proceed with the Law Enforcement Study and the Juvenile Facilities Study because neither involved interviewing youth. Had these 1997 studies been postponed until 1999, it is highly unlikely that those estimates would have been statistically different.[1] For the sake of simplicity, all NISMART–2 results refer to the annual period of 1999.

Q When will the study results from NISMART–2 be released?

A OJJDP has published the initial findings in four NISMART Bulletins covering the following topics: unified estimates of missing children, family abductions, nonfamily abductions, and runaway/thrownaway children. Additional findings on the remaining NISMART–2 episode types and on topics such as sexual assault and changes between NISMART–1 and NISMART–2 will be released through early 2003. All NISMART–related documents (e.g., Bulletins, Fact Sheets) will be available on OJJDP's Web site, ojjdp.ncjrs.org.

[1] To illustrate this point, the 95-percent confidence interval for the estimated 115 kidnappings reported in NISMART–2 indicates that if the Law Enforcement Study were to be repeated with the same methodology 100 times, 95 of the replications would produce an estimated 60–170 stereotypical kidnappings. This means that, using a similar methodology to detect a real increase in the number of such cases occurring between 1997 and 1999 or later, the estimated number of stereotypical kidnappings would have to be greater than 210. Such an increase is very unlikely, even in light of the number of high-profile cases that have recently received national attention.