

Basic Facts About Missing Children

[Data in this section are excerpted from National Incidence Studies of Missing, Abducted, Runaway, and Thrownaway Children in America (NISMA) prepared by Family Research Laboratories, University of New Hampshire, 1990, and Families of Missing Children: Psychological Consequences and Promising Interventions prepared by the Center for the Study of Trauma, University of California at San Francisco for the U.S. Department of Justice, 1992. To order a copy of these studies call the Juvenile Justice Clearinghouse at 1-800-638-8736.]

Nonfamily Abduction

An estimated 3,200 to 4,600 short-term, nonfamily abductions are reported to law enforcement annually. Of these, an estimated 200 to 300 are "stereotypical kidnappings" where a child is gone overnight, killed, or transported a distance of 50 miles or more or where the perpetrator intended to keep the child permanently.

Victims include children of all ages but the highest percentage of victims appear to be adolescent girls from 11 to 14 years of age and younger boys who are 6 to 9 years old. Two-thirds of short-term abductions involve a sexual assault. A majority of victims are abducted from the street. More than 85 percent of short-term nonfamily abductions involve force, and more than 75 percent involve a weapon. Most last fewer than 24 hours. The number of known short-term abductions is considered, by most researchers and practitioners, to be an underestimate due to police reporting methods and a lack of reporting on the part of victims.

Based on FBI and NCMEC data, it is established that 43 to 147 homicides of children abducted by nonfamily members occurred annually between 1976 and 1987.

It is estimated that annually there are 114,600 attempted abductions, all involving persons who are not known to the child's family. Most of these incidents involve attempts to lure a child into a car. Police were not contacted in a majority of these cases.

Family Abduction

There are an estimated 354,100 family abductions annually in the United States. Forty-six (46) percent of these (an estimated 163,200 abductions) involve concealment of the child, transportation of the child out of state, or an intent by the abductor to keep the child indefinitely or to permanently alter custody.

Of this more serious category of abductions, approximately half are perpetrated by men who were either noncustodial fathers or father figures. Most victims are children ranging in age from 2 to 11. Half involve unauthorized takings and half involve failures to return the child after an authorized visit or stay. Fifteen (15) percent of the abductions involve the use of force or violence. Seventy-five (75) to 85 percent involve interstate transportation of the child.

Many facts are known about the problems these families faced before the abduction and the circumstances of the abduction. The various problems and circumstances noted below are not mutually exclusive for each of the families studied. Thus, some families may have only experienced one of the situations or circumstances noted below while others have experienced two or more.

About half of family abductions occur before the marital relationship between the child's parents ends. Another half occur 2 or more years after a divorce or separation, usually after parents established new households, moved to other communities, developed new

relationships, or became disenchanted with the legal system. A significant number of abductions occur in the context of relationships characterized by a history of domestic violence. Almost half of these abductors have criminal records and many have a history of violent behavior, substance abuse, or emotional disturbance.

It is not uncommon for child victims of family abduction to have their names and appearances altered; experience medical or physical neglect; and be subjected to unstable schooling, homelessness, and frequent moves. They are often told lies about the abduction and left-behind parent. Sometimes they are even told that the left-behind parent is dead. Many child victims of family abduction experience substantial psychological consequences and emotional distress. Trauma symptoms may still be evident 4 or 5 years after recovery and reunification. Long-term effects, if any, are not yet known.

Runaways

There are an estimated 446,700 runaways from households annually in the United States. In addition an estimated 12,800 children annually run away from juvenile facilities. Many children who run from households also run from facilities. Of these runaways, an estimated 133,500 are without a secure and familiar place to stay during their episode. More than a third, of the estimated 446,700 runaways, run away more than once during the year. Runaways are mostly teenagers. They tend to come disproportionately from households with a stepparent. One (1) in 10 travel a distance of more than 100 miles while gone. Of the runaways from juvenile facilities, almost half leave the state.

The families of chronic runaway youth are characterized by long-term, unresolved problems with a high incidence of physical and emotional abuse. Other problems are often present including alcohol and drug abuse and difficulties with school staff, friends, and police. Long-term runaways and those without a secure place to stay are at high risk for exploitation and violence by those who wish to take advantage of them.

Throwaways

Annually in the United States there are an estimated 127,100 children who are directly told to leave the household, who had been away from home and were not allowed back by a caretaker, whose caretaker made no effort to recover the child once he or she ran away, or who had been abandoned or deserted.

An estimated 59,200 throwaway children are without a secure and familiar place to stay while away from home. Most throwaways are older teenagers. Abandoned children tend to be young; half are younger than 4 years of age. Throwaways are concentrated in low income families and families without both natural parents. Compared to runaways, throwaways experience more violence and conflict within their families and are less likely to return home.

Lost, Injured, or Otherwise Missing

Annually in the United States there are an estimated 438,200 children who are lost, injured, or otherwise missing. This category arises because many times when a child is reported missing there is not enough evidence to determine whether he or she is the victim of foul play or just inadvertently or unavoidably detained and may only be "categorized" after determining what has happened to the child. For instance a child who is found after wandering away from his or her parents in a shopping mall or wooded area would be considered a missing child. In cases where a child is injured and cannot immediately obtain help, that child is considered missing until parents and/or authorities can be notified of the child's whereabouts. In cases where a child makes an unscheduled stop at a video arcade or friend's house, once found the child is considered to have been missing under otherwise unknown circumstances.

From this category 139,100 cases are serious enough that the police are called. Of these 438,200 cases almost half involve children younger than 4 years of age, most episodes last fewer than 24 hours, one fifth of the children experience physical harm, and 14 percent of the children are abused or assaulted during the episode.