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Missing Children: Kidnapped and Abducted Children and Resources Available to Parents and the Community[1]

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This is the second in a two-part series focusing on missing children. This final installment considers children who have been abducted. Both the number of incidences and the characteristics of these crimes will be addressed. This paper also provides information on some of the resources available for aid.

Introduction

For parents, there is nothing more frightening than a missing child. We fear that they are lost, hurt, hungry, or scared and alone. Worst of all is the fear that they have been kidnapped or abducted and may never come home. A child who is missing may be in serious danger, and it is always best to report a missing child immediately. However, most missing children do come home, and most are not victims of abduction or kidnapping.

Although you might not know it from what we see and hear in the media, very few children are ever abducted. In fact, missing children are rare. According to a national study conducted by the U.S. Department of Justice, between 1,131,000 and 1,500,000 children went missing during 1999 (a rate of about 18.8 children per 1,000). Half of these youths were runaways or were forced out of their homes by a parent or guardian. The second largest group was made up of children who were missing for benign reasons, such as a communication mix-up with a caregiver. Fewer than 200,000 children were actually abducted, lost, or injured.

Abduction is the least common reason for a child to become missing. In 1999, an estimated 150,000 children were abducted. The vast majority of these children were taken by family members, not strangers. This number can be further reduced through education and prevention. The purpose of this article is to inform the reader about the issue of child abduction and offer resources to help solve this problem.

Family Abduction

The term "family abduction" is often used interchangeably with the term "custodial interference." The two concepts are similar, but family abduction is the term we will use here. The Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention defines family abduction as when a member of the child's family, or someone acting on their behalf, takes or fails to return a child to the

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caretaker of custodial rights. The perpetrator may try to hide the child or take him or her out of state with the intent of keeping the child indefinitely.

In 1999 there were an estimated 117,200 cases of family abduction. This accounted for 9% of all missing children that year. Family abductions are usually carried out by parents who are involved in a dispute over custody of the child. They take or keep the child for themselves, ignoring the rights of the other parent. Noncustodial fathers are more likely to commit this type of crime, but in 43% of the cases from 1999, the perpetrator was female. Usually the child is taken by an adult, but in 2% of the 1999 cases the perpetrator was another juvenile, most likely an older sibling. Most of the children abducted were at or below the age of six.

Some people might ask how much harm family abduction can do. After all, the child is with family, not a stranger. It seems unlikely that he or she would come to harm. Family abductions do harm children. The children are forced to live their lives on the run. Being cut off from family and friends makes things worse. It is not surprising, then, that a national study from 1988 found that approximately 16% of children (56,000 cases) who were victims of family abduction experienced serious mental harm. Four percent (14,000 children) were seriously injured, another 4% percent of cases involved physical abuse, and in 3,500 cases, the child was sexually abused. While family abduction leads to fewer deaths than other forms of kidnapping, it is definitely not harmless.

Nonfamily Abduction

When a nonfamily member takes a child by force or threat of harm, or detains the child for at least one hour in an isolated place, this is called a nonfamily abduction. When a nonfamily member takes a child who is under fifteen or who is incompetent, intending to ransom that child or keep him or her permanently, this is also a nonfamily abduction. Some nonfamily abductions are stereotypical kidnappings, which are even more serious. A nonfamily abduction is called a kidnapping when the child is gone at least overnight and taken at least fifty miles away.

Nonfamily abductions are rare. The U.S. Department of Justice estimates that in 1999, 33,000 children (a rate of .47 per 1,000) were victims of nonfamily abduction. The perpetrator is often a stranger, is more likely to be male, and more often victimizes females. Teenagers are at higher risk for this form of abduction, mostly because these attacks take place when the child is alone and in some type of public area. Most victims of nonfamily abductions are between the ages of fifteen and seventeen, but twelve- to fourteen-year-olds are more likely to be victims of stereotypical kidnappings. Sometimes the perpetrator, or perpetrators, asks for a ransom, but more often the motive in these attacks is sexual. Just less than half of all victims of nonfamily abduction are sexually assaulted. In a very few cases the victims die. A 1997 study by the State of Washington's Office of the Attorney General calls the murder of an abducted child "a rare event." They concluded that about 100 such incidents occur each year in America. This is less than one-half of one percent of the total number of murders committed each year. However, they warn that 74% of abducted children who are murdered are dead within three hours of the abduction.

Resources for Families, Community Leaders, and Extension Agents

There are a variety of services available for victims of abduction, their families, and community leaders who want to help solve the problem. In fact, a Yahoo search on the topic yielded no fewer than eighty-eight results. Below are some, but by no means all, of the resources available.

National Center for Missing and Exploited Children

The NCMEC is the leader in the fight against missing children. They give general information about the issue and can also aid in finding a specific child. The NCMEC is a nonprofit organization, but one with strong ties to the government. They manage a database for all of the reported missing children cases in the nation. They are also the ones responsible for putting pictures of missing children in stores and on postcards. They also have a 24-hour hotline for reporting missing children and for sightings (1-800-THE-LOST). More information is provided at their Web site: http://www.missingkids.com.

The Nation's Missing Children Organization

This nonprofit specializes in advocacy, search assistance, and distribution of information. They are also involved in a variety of programs, most notably the Kids I.D. program. The Nation's Missing Children Organization is an offshoot of the Nation's Center for Missing Adults. More information is available at their Web site: http://www.theyaremissed.org/ncma/nmco.php.

State-Operated Missing Children Clearinghouses

Almost every state operates a clearinghouse of information regarding missing children. They do not locate the youths themselves, but act as a third party in all affairs. The state of Florida's clearinghouse can be reached at (800) 342-0821. A directory for all participating states, including phone numbers and Web sites, can be found at http://www.klaaskids.org/pg-mc-stmisschildclearing.htm.

Advice for Parents

Communication is Key

Remember to tell your children that you love them, and that you always want to see them. Sometimes noncustodial parents will try to convince children that they are no longer wanted at home before staging a nonfamily abduction.

Teach younger children how to use the telephone. Help them memorize your home phone number and your cell phone number if you have one, as well as the city's area code. A good way to help young children memorize numbers is to quiz them on the information every few days.

For older children and teenagers, stress the importance of communication. Always know where they are going and what time they plan to be back. Explain to your children that you are not violating their privacy, but keeping them safe. Buy older children cell phones or pagers if you can.

Finally, make your home a place of trust and support. That way, your children will feel safe talking to you about any situation that made them afraid.

Keep Updated Pictures

Take color photographs of your child every six months. Head and shoulder portraits from different angles, such as those taken by school photographers, are best. Keep these pictures handy, but do not store them in a place where they will be folded, creased, or otherwise damaged.

Report Immediately

Even though kidnapping is rare, when it does happen, a quick response is very important. The first thing to do when a small child goes missing is to check the house thoroughly. Look under beds and in closets and check other places he or she might have crawled into. If the missing child is older or a teenager, try to contact the child first. There might have been an activity he forgot to mention. She may have lost track of the time, or simply be running late. If you still cannot find your child, then call the police right away.

If your child becomes missing at a store or shopping mall, let the store supervisor or security guard know right away. They should have an action plan to mobilize employees to look for the child and make sure that no one can leave the store with him or her.

Community Education

School-Based Educational Programs

If you are a community leader, you may be the one to decide on an educational program for local elementary schools. When choosing a program, make sure to find one that works well. Research has shown that many programs, including the popular "stranger danger" programs, are ineffective.

The National Center for Missing and Exploited Children suggests that a school-based educational program should:

- be based on accepted educational theories;
- be appropriate for the age, educational, and developmental levels of the child;

- offer concepts that will help children build self-confidence in order to better handle and protect themselves in all types of situations;
- have multiple program components that are repeated several years in a row; and
- utilize qualified presenters who use role-playing, behavioral rehearsal, feedback, and active participation.

More resources, including a checklist, are available from NCMEC for free at their Web site at http://www.missingkids.com/missingkids/servlet/ResourceServlet?LanguageCountry=en_US&PageId=763.

Community-Wide Activities

Design a daylong public event to increase awareness about abduction and other safety issues. Usually these events are called "fairs" or "festivals" to emphasize the fun parts of the events, such as face-painting or characters in costumes.

These events are often done with the help of the local fire and police departments, community businesses, and dozens of volunteers. You will have to work with many different people and groups. Even if your event is small, you will want to find other organizations that are willing to present a quick educational program. Planning such an event will take at least two to three months.

How do you decide whom to include in your event? It depends on what safety needs you want to address, the resources available to you (including budget size), and how much time you have. There are nonprofit organizations that specialize in planning these kinds of events. KLAAS Kids Foundation, based out of Sausalito, California, is one of them. They help arrange "print-a-thons," daylong festivals that offer digital finger printing, digital photos, and even DNA collection kits, along with free entertainment. KLAAS Kids Foundation can be contacted at klaaskids@pacbell.net or (415) 331-6867.

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