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OJJDP

JUVENILE JUSTICE BULLETIN

Verne L. Speirs, Administrator

January 1989

Preliminary estimates developed on

Stranger Abduction Homicides of Children

NCJRS

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ACQUISITIONS

Researchers conducting a series of studies to determine the number of children missing annually in the United States have estimated that the number of children kidnapped and murdered by strangers is between 52 and 158 a year. These first findings from the National Studies of the Incidence of Missing Children are based on a detailed study of 9 years of data from the FBI's Supplemental Homicide file.

These figures represent, at most, a yearly average of fewer than 2 stranger abduction homicides per 1 million children under the age of 18. Teenagers

between ages 14 and 17 have the highest rate of all age groups. These new estimates contrast sharply with earlier estimates that thousands of children are kidnapped and murdered each year by strangers. Until now there have been no official estimates of the number of children abducted and murdered by strangers.

**The National Studies
of the Incidence of
Missing Children**

This new analysis, conducted for the Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention (OJJDP), represents

a major contribution to ending the speculation and controversy over the number of these cases—the kind that spark fear in parents whenever their children cannot be found. Parents, educators, and others concerned about the issue of missing children can have confidence that the risk of a child being kidnapped and murdered by a stranger is much lower than earlier claimed.

While these estimates provide documentation about the number of children murdered and abducted annually, they represent only a small, albeit tragic, part of the missing children picture. For

From the Administrator:

The issue of missing and exploited children is a complex, tragic one that remains at the center of the public's attention. In our continuing efforts to learn more about this issue, the Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention (OJJDP) has just completed the first of six national scope studies to determine the number of children missing annually in this country.

Researchers conducting OJJDP's National Studies of the Incidence of Missing Children have developed estimates of the number of children abducted and murdered by strangers annually. Their initial

estimates, described in this *OJJDP Bulletin*, are based on a detailed study of 9 years of FBI data and existing State and national studies. This is the first time these data have been utilized for this purpose.

Because these findings focus solely on the rarest and most serious of missing children cases being studied, it is still too early to reach a final conclusion about the total number of missing children.

While we await results from the other components of the incidence studies, OJJDP will continue its efforts to help reduce the incidence of crimes against children, particularly abduction and sexual exploita-

tion, and to improve the responses of agencies responsible for dealing with these crimes.

These efforts include providing information, training, and technical assistance to juvenile justice and other decisionmakers about effective strategies to address the issue of missing and exploited children. We are also focusing our efforts on helping the juvenile justice system better respond to missing children and their families who have been victims of abduction and/or sexual exploitation.

Verne L. Speirs,
Administrator

example, we do not yet know how many children are abducted each year by strangers, parents, or other family members, or the number of teenage runaways who are at risk of physical abuse and sexual exploitation.

These questions will be answered by other components of the National Incidence Studies, a \$1.6 million project funded by OJJDP's Missing Children's Program. Such a study was mandated by Congress when it passed the Missing Children's Assistance Act in 1984. The studies are being conducted by the University of New Hampshire Family Research Lab under the direction of Drs. Gerald T. Hotaling and David Finkelhor, along with Dr. Andrea Sedlak and staff of Westat, Inc., Rockville, Maryland. The initial results presented in this report are the first from a series of six major parts of the National Incidence Studies.

The other five components, which will provide answers about the extent and nature of the phenomenon of missing children, include:

- A Police Records Study is currently underway in nearly 100 police depart-

ments nationwide. It is designed to determine the total number and types of kidnappings by strangers and other nonfamily members, including those incidents that do not result in homicide.

- A telephone survey of 30,000 randomly selected households will include indepth interviews with parents to develop estimates of the total numbers of all types of missing children, including those kidnapped by strangers, acquaintances, parents, and other family members, and of runaways, throwaways, and those children missing for unknown reasons.

- Followup interviews with returned runaways will provide a more detailed picture of their experiences.

- A followup survey of institutions for youth will provide an estimate of the number of youths who run away from residential facilities.

- Analyses of data on throwaways reported in the National Study of the Incidence of Child Abuse and Neglect will provide estimates and profiles of youth who do not leave home voluntarily but are abandoned or forced from their homes by parents or guardians.

ily but are abandoned or forced from their homes by parents or guardians.

Together, the information gathered in these six studies will fill in a picture made up of many hours spent by parents waiting for a child to return home; phone calls made to police and neighbors; family stress, conflict, or disintegration; teenagers asserting their independence or running from situations of physical abuse and sometimes into sexual exploitation; and parents' relief when their "missing child" is just lost.

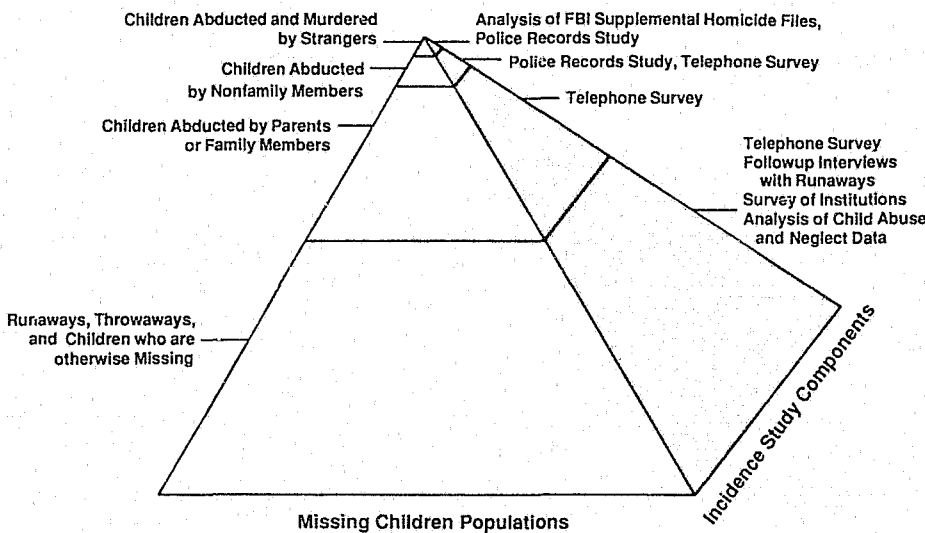
□ Stranger abduction homicide estimates based on FBI data

The Incidence Studies' estimates of the number of children kidnapped and murdered by strangers annually were developed using the Comparative Homicide File, which contains detailed information from the Supplemental Homicide Reports (SHR) submitted to the FBI by police departments across the country. Based on this data, researchers at UNH studied the victims and circumstances of more than 14,000 child homicide cases that occurred between 1976 and 1984.

Hotaling and Finkelhor found a total of 260 child homicide cases between 1980 and 1984—an average of 52 per year—that were committed by strangers and involved crimes such as rape or other sexual or felony offenses. Since these are the circumstances that are believed to have the highest probability of involving abduction or kidnapping, the estimate of 52 cases annually is considered one of the most conservative national estimates of the number of children abducted and murdered by strangers. (See the later discussion of limitations of the data.)

Researchers also found, during the same 5-year period, a total of 530—or 106 cases annually—of stranger homicides of children in which the surrounding circumstances were unknown, or listed as undetermined. The higher national estimate of 158 referred to in this report also includes

Figure 1. National Studies of the Incidence of Missing Children: Study Populations and Related Study Components



those 106 undetermined cases, representing what researchers believe to be the upper bounds of a national estimate.

During the 9 years for which data are currently available, the numbers of child homicides by strangers that may have involved kidnapping or abduction ranged from a low of 110 in 1980 to a high of 212 in 1982. (See Figure 2.) However, there is no evidence from these data, or other sources reviewed in this report, that the numbers of these cases are increasing. UNH researchers are planning to update this report with more current data as part of the National Incidence Studies.

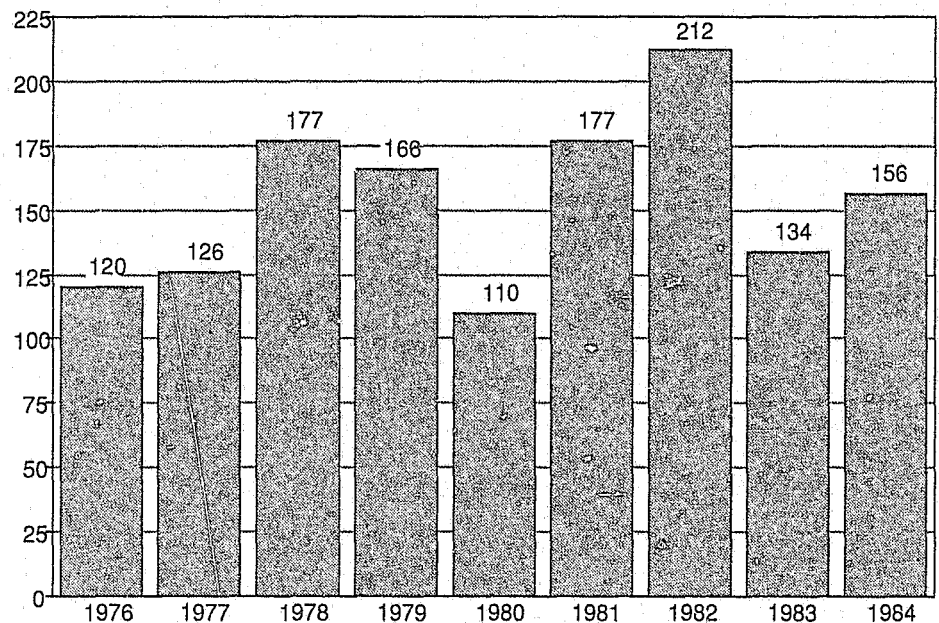
Five other studies examined

In addition to analyzing the Supplemental Homicide Reports, the researchers compared their estimates with similar data from five other State and national sources:

- Case summary data on all child abduction cases referred to OJJDP's National Center for Missing and Exploited Children (NCMEC).
- An analysis of the Supplemental Homicide Reports from the State of California.
- An analysis of homicide trends in Dade County (Miami), Florida.
- The Illinois Criminal Justice Information Authority study of Uniform Crime Reports for the Nation.
- A study of abductions in Houston, Texas, and Jacksonville, Florida, conducted by the National Center for Missing and Exploited Children (NCMEC).

Table 1 on the next page summarizes the six different studies. Because of varying data sources, each study reviewed yielded different national estimates of the number and rate of children abducted and killed by strangers in a given year. Estimates ranged from a low of 46 per year to a high of 318, with rates ranging between

Figure 2. National Incidence Studies' Estimates of the Number of Children Abducted and Murdered by Strangers: 1976-1984



Note: Data are from the Comparative Homicide File (CHF) and include all stranger homicides of victims under 18 years old in which the case also involved rape, sexual assault, other felony, or suspected felony; or in which circumstances of the case were undetermined.

1.1 and 4.2 per million children. The Incidence Studies' estimates, based on the CHF data, fell at the low end of the range with between 52 and 158 cases per year for an average rate of 1.7 victims per million children.

The results of these secondary analyses tended to confirm the soundness of the Incidence Studies' estimates. Therefore, despite the fact that the CHF is an indirect measure of the incidence of stranger abduction homicides of children, researchers are confident that their findings represent the most reliable national estimates available.

Adolescents at highest risk

Researchers found that 14- to 17-year-old adolescents account for nearly two out of three victims of suspected stranger abduction homicides, representing the highest rate of all the age groups studied (see Table 2 and Figure 3). Approximately 7 per 1 million

youth aged 14-17 years, compared with fewer than 1 per 1 million children aged 0 to 9, were abducted and murdered by strangers.

This finding conflicts with a commonly held belief that younger children are at greater risk of stranger abduction homicides than older children. It is not possible to determine from the information available whether the murdered adolescents had run away or had been thrown out of their homes. But it does suggest the need to assess the potential danger to teens, particularly those made more vulnerable to crime victimization because they have run away or been forced from their households. This topic will be explored further in the Police Records Study.

Girls at greater risk than boys

For stranger abduction homicides that also involve known or suspected felony crimes (e.g., rape, sexual assault,

**Table 1. National Estimates of the Number of Children Abducted and Murdered by Strangers:
A Comparison of the Incidence Studies' Estimates with Five other Sources of Information**

Study	Annual Estimates (Rate per Million)	Description of Data Base
National Incidence Studies: 1980-1984 (Hotelling and Finkelhor 1988)	52-158 (1.7)	Comparative Homicide File (1980-1984). Estimates developed by researchers at the University of New Hampshire (UNH) based on nationwide data from Supplemental Homicide Reports sent to the FBI. Includes those homicides of persons 0-17 years old that were committed by strangers in which the circumstances of the case were highly likely to have involved an abduction (52); plus those in which circumstances were undetermined (158).
National Center for Missing and Exploited Children data: 1984-1988	46-88 (1.1)	Case Records of the National Center for Missing and Exploited Children (NCMEC) June 1984-January 1988. This range of estimates includes all known stranger abduction homicides of children reported to the national clearinghouse (46 per year), plus those children kidnapped by strangers who were still missing and presumed murdered by their abductors (88 per year).
California Supplemental Homicide Reports: 1984 (Best 1987)	210 (3.3)	Supplemental Homicide Reports for the State of California (1984). Included all stranger-perpetrated homicides of children (under 18) which also involved rape, other sexual offenses, other felonies, or suspected felonies. Best developed this national estimate adjusting for California's slightly higher rate of child homicides compared to the rest of the country. His 1984 estimate is higher than the Incidence Studies' upper estimate of 156 for that year. ^a
Homicides in Miami, Florida: 1980 (Wilbanks 1984)	123 (1.9)	Published case summaries of all 1980 homicides in Miami (Dade County), FL. UNH researchers projected national estimates based on child homicide cases that were committed by strangers and met Model Penal Code definitions of kidnapping. After adjusting for Miami's high child homicide rate, the estimate of 123 was fairly close to the National Incidence Studies' estimate of 110 for 1980 using the CHF. ^a
Illinois Criminal Justice Information Authority: (1980-1982) (ICJIA 1987)	250 ^b (3.9)	Uniform Crime Report 1980-1982. Originally based on national totals of all homicide victims under age 20 who were murdered under any circumstances. UNH researchers revised those estimates by excluding 18- and 19-year-olds from the count, and applying more conservative estimates of the involvement of strangers. This revised estimate is still inflated since it assumes abductions were involved in all stranger homicides. Compared to the National Incidence Studies' figures for those years, it is 50% higher. ^a
Jacksonville and Houston Police Records Study: 1984 (NCMEC 1986)	318 ^b (4.2)	Police records in Jacksonville, FL, and Houston, TX: 1984. NCMEC staff reviewed all 1984 offense reports involving all crimes against children (0-17 years old) committed by nonfamily members. UNH researchers revised the NCMEC estimates adjusting for the high child homicide rates in these cities. Still, these estimates are considered high since these numbers include all perpetrators, who though they were nonfamily members, may have been acquaintances and not strangers. The Incidence Studies' estimate for 1984 was 156 cases. ^a

^aSee Figure 2, Incidence Studies' estimates, 1976-1984.

^bIndicates original published estimate was revised.

robbery, etc.), there are nearly two female victims for every male victim. This finding contrasts with general homicide rates in which boys are twice as likely as girls to be murder victims. While this contrast can be explained partially by the sexual nature of the circumstances surrounding these murders, the Jacksonville-Houston study found that females are four times more likely than males to be victims of abductions in general.

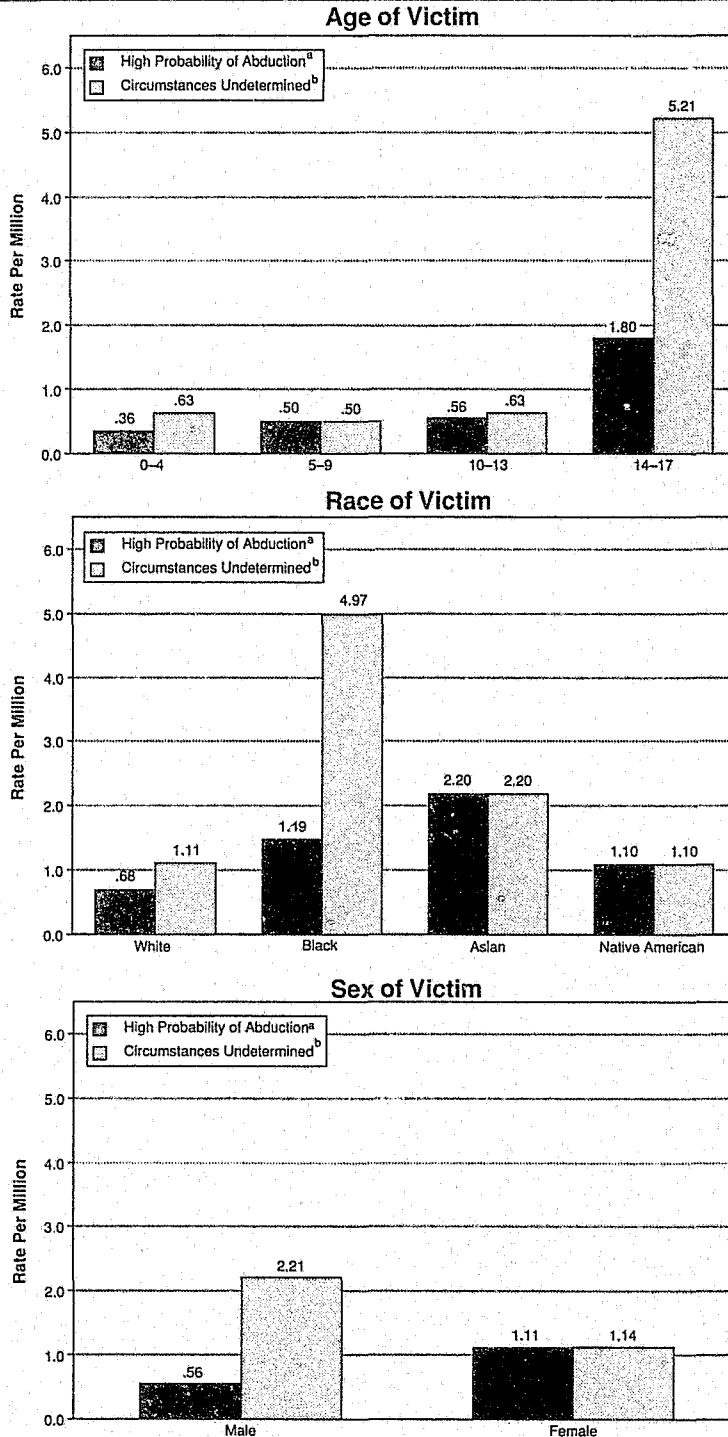
☐ **Racial minorities show higher rates**

Although a greater number of white children were abducted and murdered by strangers, whites have the lowest rate compared to all other racial groups. The total rate for blacks (6.46 per million black children) was found to be more than three times higher than the rate for whites (1.79 per million white children). Asian children (4.4 per million Asian children) were victims of such crimes at twice the rate as were white children. The rate of child abduction homicide is higher for blacks than whites in all abduction categories, and especially high when circumstances cannot be determined.

☐ **Regional differences**

In contrast to established geographic patterns of youth homicides, a different pattern emerged in the case of stranger abduction homicides of youths 14 to 17. General homicide rates for this age group typically have been highest in the South and lowest in the Northeast. The Incidence Studies' data for 1980-84 show the highest rate of stranger abduction homicides of children to have occurred in the Northeast (4.71 per 1 million children), followed by the West (2.94 per 1 million children), with the Midwestern and Southern States reporting significantly lower rates (1.67 and 1.64 per 1 million children, respectively). Given the large number of adolescent victims, the possibility exists that this may reflect teenage runaways to the big cities. However, other data sources such as the Police Records Study will explore this theory.

Figure 3. Selected Characteristics of Children Murdered by Strangers, by Circumstances of Cases and Age, Race and Sex of Victim: Rates per Million, 1980-1984



a. Total rate per million, 0.82. Includes cases involving one or more of the following offenses in addition to the murder: rape, other sexual offenses, other felony, or suspected felony—the circumstance most likely to have involved an abduction.

b. Total rate per million, 1.69. Includes child homicides committed by strangers, but for which more specific information on the circumstances was not known or not indicated in the Supplemental Homicide Report.

Note: 1982 (midyear 1980-1984) population data were used as denominators in the calculation of age-specific rates. Raw numbers were rounded off for convenience.

Table 2. Selected Characteristics of Children Murdered by Strangers, by Circumstances of Cases and Age, Race and Sex of Victims: 1980-1984

	Circumstances of Cases		Total
	High Probability of Abduction ^a	Circumstances Undetermined ^b	
Average Yearly Total	52	106	158
Age Group of Victims			
0-4	6	11	17
5-9	10	8	18
10-13	8	9	17
14-17	28	78	106
Race of Victim			
White	35	57	92
Black	14	47	61
Asian	2	2	4
Native	>1	>1	>1
Sex of Victim			
Male	18	71	89
Female	34	35	69

^a Includes child homicides committed by strangers involving one or more of the following offenses in addition to the murder: rape, other sexual offenses, other felony, or suspected felony—the circumstances most likely to involve an abduction.

^b Includes child homicides committed by strangers but for which more information on the circumstances was not known or not indicated on the Supplemental Homicide Report.

Note: Raw numbers were rounded off for convenience.

□ Summary and conclusions

While more definitive results will soon be available from the Police Records Study, the results of this first part of the National Incidence Studies represent the first attempt to estimate the number of stranger abduction homicides of children using national data. These estimates, which range from 52 to 158, and those from other studies reviewed in this report, differ significantly from earlier beliefs that thousands of children are kidnapped and murdered by strangers each year. The available

data also suggest that there has been no recent upsurge in the number of stranger abduction murders, and that the prime targets of such murders are teenagers, not small children.

The implications of these findings are both numerous and challenging. While they differ from the public's perceptions about the size of the problem, it does not mean that the public's concern about stranger abduction and/or murder of children is unwarranted. Even though there is now evidence these crimes don't occur as often as earlier believed, when they do occur, they are

horrendous, leaving terrible scars on families and communities.

The findings related to the geographic locations of these murders and the ages of the victims suggest that the risk for teenagers is much higher than previously thought. In the course of the Police Records Study we hope to find out more information about the circumstances of these cases to better understand the risk factors associated with these crimes against children.

Such information, combined with solid data such as that from OJJDP's National Incidence Studies, can help us understand and better deal with America's missing and exploited children.

□ Limitations of the data

Five of the six estimates presented in Table 1 come from police records or police statistics. Three points need to be made about these data.

First, although abduction is defined differently in different States, in general the legal definition represented in the statistics is somewhat broader than people's common sense definition of the crime. For example, a victim (in this case, a child) does not necessarily have to be missing for an extended period of time to have been abducted. A child who was taken forcibly into a vehicle, driven somewhere, raped, and murdered, would usually be counted as an abduction murder even if that child's absence was never noted.

Secondly, the researchers were working with data which were not specifically collected for the purpose at hand. And third, there may be some instances of undercounting in which a child abduction homicide would not be found in the police records. Conversely, there may be instances of overcounting in which a case was classified as an abduction because of the circumstances surrounding the murder, such as rape, but which did not actually involve abduction.

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This OJJDP Bulletin was produced under the direction of Kay McKinney, writer-editor and Special Assistant to the Administrator. It was written by Barbara Allen-Hagen, OJJDP. The summary is based on the report entitled "Estimating the Number of Stranger Abduction Homicides of Children: A Review of the Evidence," written by Gerald T. Hotaling, Ph.D., and David Finkelhor, Ph.D., Family Research Laboratory, University of New Hampshire, September 1988, under cooperative agreement number 87-MC-CX-K069, The National Studies of the Incidence of Missing Children.

The Assistant Attorney General, Office of Justice Programs, coordinates the activities of the following program Offices and Bureaus: the Bureau of Justice Statistics, National Institute of Justice, Bureau of Justice Assistance, Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention, and the Office for Victims of Crime.

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