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# OJJDP

## ACQUISITIONS JUVENILE JUSTICE BULLETIN

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# "Missing Children": Found Facts

The disappearance of Adam Walsh and similar tragedies captured the media's interest in the early 1980's, focusing public attention on the problem of missing children. Concerned citizens demanded action to address what they perceived to be a national crisis.

The first step in solving any problem is to understand its nature and dimensions. The absence of reliable data posed the first challenge to effective corrective action.

Congress addressed this deficiency in the 1984 Missing Children's Act (Pub. L. 98-473, title IV) when it mandated that the Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention (OJJDP) conduct national incidence studies to determine various statistics, including the number of juvenile "victims of abduction by strangers" and the number of "parental kidnappings."

While the act provided a statutory definition of "missing children," the expression became a catchall in the public mind. OJJDP's research therefore covered a wide range of problems affecting children the public might perceive as "missing." The National Incidence Studies of Missing, Abducted, Runaway, and Thrown-away Children (NISMAART) provides the first estimates derived from comprehensive scientific investigation regarding children (1) abducted by family members, (2) abducted by non-family members, (3) who ran away from home, (4) who were thrown out of home or abandoned, and (5) who were lost or missing because of an injury or for other reasons.

### First steps

In August 1985, OJJDP convened a working conference of knowledgeable professionals from the private and public

sectors to consider the most appropriate methods to employ in this significant research project. The conferees' recommendations led to several pilot studies, commencing in March 1986.

An expert design panel evaluated the pilot studies and confirmed the feasibility of such incidence studies, and in November 1987 work began.

The project consisted of six studies:

- A telephone survey of nearly 35,000 households to determine the incidence of abducted, runaway, throwaway, lost, or otherwise missing children.
- A survey of juvenile facilities to establish how many residents had run away.
- An interview study to compare the accounts of runaway children who returned home with those of their parents.
- A study of records in a national sample of 83 law enforcement agencies to find the number of non-family abductions.
- An analysis of 1976-1987 FBI homicide data to estimate how many children may have been murdered in the course of stranger abductions.
- An analysis of data derived from a 1986 study of child abuse and neglect to determine the incidence of abandoned or throwaway children known to professionals.

All NISMAART estimates were for 1988.

### Some definitions

In reviewing the following categories, you will encounter contrasts between *broad scope* and *policy focal* incidents. Keep in mind the basic distinction that "broad scope" delineates the problem the way persons directly involved (parents,

children, etc.) might define it. It includes the more restrictive "policy focal" subset that addresses episodes traditionally of greater concern to public agencies (police, policymakers, etc.).

Examples of each subcategory are provided, while detailed criteria may be found in figures 1, 2, and 3.

### Fractured families

Over the past three decades, the number of divorces affecting children has tripled to a million a year. The number of children involved in such divorces is higher still. Ten million children live with separated or divorced parents. Half of all children will experience the breakup of their parents' marriage, and 1 in 10 will suffer three such marital dissolutions.

More divorces produce more battles over custody and visitation rights. Such legal disputes occur in an estimated 15 percent of divorces involving children. While traditional presumptions favoring maternal custody have eroded, some fathers take matters into their own hands.

Family abductions run the gamut from instances in which noncustodial parents keep children overnight in violation of the terms of agreed visits (*broad scope*) to those in which they transport children out of State with the intent to keep them (*policy focal*). The estimated 354,100 broad scope family abductions include 163,400 more serious policy focal family abductions (figure 1).

Although even a temporary undesired separation may upset parent and child, most episodes (81 percent) did not exceed a week, with 90 percent lasting under a month. In 99 percent of all family abductions, the children had been returned home by the time of the NISMAART

survey. Seventeen percent of the parents did not know where their "missing" children were at all throughout the episode.

## Danger from without

If family abductions constitute a danger to children rising from within the family, non-family abductions endanger our children from without. While substantially fewer children are kidnapped by strangers than are abducted by family members, the consequences are often far graver. All non-family abductions are counted in the more critical policy focal category.

NISMART distinguishes between the more inclusive *legal definition* abduction (3,200 to 4,600 children) and its more exclusive subset, *stereotypical* kidnaping (200 to 300). The former includes

coerced taking, forcible detaining, or luring of a child. The latter may involve ransom demands and even murder (figure 2).

As previously noted, there are differences between family and non-family abductions. Although less than 1 percent of children involved in family abductions were sexually abused, about two-thirds of the non-family abductions involved sexual assaults.

While most children subjected to family abduction "did not suffer serious harm as a result of the episode," according to NISMART, violence is an integral part of non-family abductions. Force was used against 87 percent of the victims, and a weapon was involved in 75 percent of the cases. Tragically, 2 percent of legal

definition abductions ended with the murder of the child.

## On the run

One of America's best loved literary characters, Huck Finn, was a runaway. Present-day flesh-and-blood runaways, however, face a harsher reality than Mark Twain could imagine. As the project's researchers observe:

Today, we know that when many children run, it is often to escape from a protracted and painful family conflict or from physical, sexual, or psychological abuse. We also know what may lie in wait for the long-term runaway: homelessness, drugs, crime, sexual exploitation, and suicide.

Figure 1.

NISMART Definitions—Criteria for Family Abduction

	Broad Scope	Policy Focal
Family Abduction	<p>An incident during which a family member in violation of a custody agreement or decree:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Takes a child; or</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Fails to return or give a child over at the end of a legal agreed-upon visit, and the child is away at least overnight.</li> </ul>	<p>An incident that <i>in addition to meeting the broad scope criteria</i> involves the following:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li><input type="checkbox"/> An attempt is made to conceal the taking or whereabouts of the child or to prevent contact with the child; or</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> The child is transported out of State; or</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> There is evidence that the abductor had the intent to keep the child indefinitely or permanently affect custodial privileges.</li> </ul>

Figure 2.

NISMART Definitions—Criteria for Non-Family Abduction

	Policy Focal	
	Legal Definition	Stereotypical
Non-Family Abduction	<p>An incident involving:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li><input type="checkbox"/> The coerced and unauthorized taking of a child into a building or vehicle, or a distance of more than 20 feet; or</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> The detention of a child for more than an hour; or</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> The luring of a child for the purposes of committing another crime.</li> </ul>	<p>An incident that <i>in addition to meeting the legal definition criteria</i> involves abduction by a stranger whereby:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li><input type="checkbox"/> The child is gone overnight; or</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> The child is killed; or</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> The child is transported a distance of 50 miles or more; or</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> The child is ransomed; or</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> The perpetrator evidences an intent to keep the child permanently.</li> </ul>

*Broad scope* runaways (450,700) left or stayed away from home at least overnight or ran away from juvenile facilities (e.g., group foster homes, residential treatment centers, mental health facilities, boarding schools, and juvenile detention centers). They include *policy focal* runaways (133,500) who lacked a secure and familiar place to stay. All juvenile facility runaways (12,800) are policy focal (figure 3).

Almost all runaways are teenagers. The majority (58 percent) are girls. Over a third of the children who ran away from home in 1988 had run away on previous occasions during the year.

Disproportionately, these teenagers are running from families with step-parents and live-in boyfriends or girlfriends. As in the case of family abductions, runaways reflect the disintegration of the American family.

Differences between family abductions and runaways, however, are readily apparent. While only 1 percent of children involved in family abductions had not

returned home when the NISMART survey was conducted, 10 percent of runaways were missing when their parents were interviewed.

### Ran away? or throwaway?

“Runaway” implies voluntary departure from home, but many children are homeless through no choice of their own. In the 1970’s, researchers labeled juveniles “throwaways” if they were made to leave home or were abandoned. NISMART researchers have revised this term; their rationale merits our consideration:

“(T)hrowaway” . . . connotes a quality of the child—uselessness or disposability. “*Throwaway*,” by contrast, unambiguously conveys what has been *done to the child*.

Nor is that the only nomenclature NISMART researchers call into question. They note:

A “missing” child . . . presumes that the parents want the child, are looking for the child, and “miss” the

child. In the case of throwaways, however, parents may not want the child back, or may have themselves left and abandoned the child. If such parents do not know where their child is, it is out of choice.

Children thrown or locked out of their homes constitute 22 percent of the combined total of runaways and throwaways.

Illustrating the imprecisions of terms like “missing children” does not minimize the predicament of throwaways. Rather, it highlights the NISMART report’s conclusion that we face not a single problem—“missing children”—but “a set of several very different and separate problems that were aggregated primarily for reasons that were political or operational, not philosophical or scientific.”

*Broad scope* throwaways (127,100) encompass *policy focal* throwaways (59,200) consisting of throwaways lacking a familiar and secure place to stay and all children who were abandoned (figure 3).

Figure 3.

### NISMART Definitions—Criteria for Runaways and Throwaways

	<b>Broad Scope</b>	<b>Policy Focal</b>
<b>Runaways</b>	Incidents during which children who leave: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Are away from home at least 1 night; or</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Are under the age of 15 and stay away from home without permission for at least 1 night; or</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Are 15 or older and stay away at least 2 nights.</li> </ul>	Incidents that <i>in addition to meeting the broad scope criteria</i> involve children who: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Are without a familiar and secure place to stay; or</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Have run away from juvenile facilities.</li> </ul>
<b>Throwaways</b>	Incidents involving children who were away from home at least overnight, and: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Were directly told to leave the household; or</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Were abandoned or deserted; or</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Wanted to come home but were denied permission; or</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Ran away, but whose parent(s) or caretaker(s) made no effort to recover them or did not care whether they returned.</li> </ul>	Incidents that <i>in addition to meeting the broad scope criteria</i> involve children who: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Were without a familiar and secure place to stay; or</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Were abandoned.</li> </ul>

Figure 4.

**NISMART Definitions—  
Criteria for Lost, Injured, or Otherwise Missing Children**

Broad Scope		Policy Focal
Age	Time Missing	
0 – 2	Any	Incidents that <i>in addition to meeting broad scope criteria</i> involved calling the police.
3 – 4	2 hours	
5 – 6	3 hours	
7 – 10	4 hours	
11 – 13	8 hours	
14 – 17	Overnight	
Disabled child	Any	
Child injured during episode	1 hour	

Family division is a significant factor in the plight of throwaways. Although 67 percent of all children live with both parents, only 19 percent of throwaways were driven from such homes. While only 23 percent of all children live with just one parent, 44 percent of throwaways lived in one-parent homes before they were forced out. A total of 39 percent of abandoned throwaways were from such single-parent families.

Children who were “thrown away” were more than twice as likely to have suffered domestic violence prior to their departure than those who ran away (27 percent vs. 11 percent).

**Lost and found**

A lost child is the quintessential “missing” child. Injured children can also be missing. Finally, children can be deemed “missing” for a variety of reasons not

discussed heretofore. For instance, they might have forgotten what time it was or misunderstood when they were to return home.

The main criteria used to define the 438,200 *broad scope* lost, injured, or otherwise missing children were their ages and the number of hours they were missing (figure 4). This group includes 139,100 *policy focal* children whose parents contacted the police.

It is interesting to note that even here an intact two-parent family can provide additional safeguards for children. While two out of three children live in such households, only one out of three lost or injured children do.

Nearly half (47 percent) of lost, injured, or otherwise missing children are below the age of 5. Since the youngest children are subject to the closest parental supervision and the greatest concern,

unexplained absences are quickly noted and are the source of much alarm.

Fortunately, less than 2 percent of lost, injured, or otherwise missing children were gone more than 24 hours, and only 1 percent had not returned home at the time of the NISMART interview.

**Next steps**

NISMART has advanced us significantly toward understanding “a set of several very different and separate problems” affecting American children. First steps, however, must not be last ones. OJJDP will be looking more closely at these and other categories with an eye toward preventing as well as solving problems of children in crisis. Strengthening the family is essential to both these worthy goals.

OJJDP intends to make the data compiled in NISMART available to researchers through the University of Michigan Inter-University Consortium for Political and Social Research. It will also support further data analysis.

*This article was written by Robert W. Sweet, Jr., Administrator, Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention.*

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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