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Child Abuse & Neglect



Family abduction in a national sample of US children

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ABSTRACT

This study examined the prevalence and characteristics of family abduction episodes occurring in a nationally representative sample of US children ages 0–17. It drew on the experiences of 13,052 children and youth from the aggregation of three cross-sectional waves (2008, 2011, and 2014) of the National Surveys of Children Exposed to Violence. The overall prevalence rate was 4.1% for a lifetime and 1.2% for a past year episode. Rates were higher for younger than older children. Parents constituted 90% of the abductors with females outnumbering males 60% to 40%, although men outnumbered women as perpetrators for certain types of abductions. A bit less than half of the episodes (43%) were reported to police. The experience of a lifetime family abduction had an independent association with traumatic stress symptoms independent of exposure to other kinds of victimization including child maltreatment and witnessing family violence.

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1. Introduction

The topic of family abduction has been relatively neglected in the literature on child protection. It experienced a surge of academic and policy interest in the 1980 and 1990s in the context of concerns about the general problem of missing children (Forst & Blomquist, 1991; Greif & Hegar, 1993; Sagatun & Barrett, 1990), but since 2000 there have been very few scholarly additions to the literature about and epidemiology of family abduction.

Much of the social science information about family abduction derives from three sources: a) The National Incidence Studies of Missing, Abducted, Runaway, and Thrownaway Children (NISMA) (Hammer, Finkelhor, & Sedlak, 2002a,b; Plass, Finkelhor, & Hotaling, 1996; Plass, Hotaling, & Finkelhor, 1995; Plass, Finkelhor, & Hotaling, 1997); b) A national survey of cases known to law enforcement agencies completed in 1996 (Grasso et al., 2001); and c) a study with several samples of cases recruited from law enforcement sources in California in the late 1990s (Johnston, Sagatun-Edwards, Blomquist, & Girdner, 2000).

Prevalence estimates were calculated by the first two sources. NISMA estimated family abduction in three separate waves: at 2.6 cases per 1000 children in 1988, at 3.15 in 1999, and at 3.0 in 2013 (the latter an unstable estimate based on only 18 cases). NISMA used a fairly restrictive definition which required as part of the episode that (1) the abductor attempted to conceal the taking or whereabouts of the child or to prevent contact with the child, or (2) the abductor transported the child out of state, or (3) evidence existed that the abductor intended to keep the child indefinitely or to affect custodial privileges permanently. It also estimated a broader scope definition in the two earlier versions of NISMA that included

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taking or failing to return a child in violation of custody and keeping the child for a night. The estimate of this form was 5.6 per 1000 in 1988 and 4.18 per 1000 in 1999.

NISMART in 1999 also calculated that about 56,500 (CI 22,600–90,400) family abduction cases were reported to the law enforcement for purposes of locating the child. Grasso et al. (2001) also calculated an estimate for family abduction reported to police based on law enforcement records as 30,500 for the year 1992.

A review of the literature including most of the cited studies found some of the following features of family abduction episodes (Chiancone, 2001). Younger children were more likely to be targets of family abduction than older children (Finkelhor, Hotaling, & Sedlak, 1990). Males, mostly fathers, accounted for more of the offenses than females (Finkelhor et al., 1990). Abductions occurred most frequently in families that were separated and experiencing custody conflicts (Chiancone, 2001), although a high risk time was the period between separation and actual divorce. Other risk factors were the presence of domestic violence or child maltreatment (Greif & Hegar, 1993; Hatcher, Barton, & Brooks, 1993; Kiser, 1987), and other previous criminal or violent behavior (Sagatun-Edwards, 1996).

Given the absence of much recent research on family abduction, and the failure of the recent NISMART to generate enough cases for analysis, it seemed important to take advantage of additional sources of epidemiological information about family abduction to supplement epidemiologic analysis.

The National Surveys of Children Exposed to Violence have asked questions about family abduction in their 3 cross-sectional waves. Although the numbers of exposed children were small, aggregating the waves across administrations can accumulate enough cases to conduct some useful analyses. Using a conceptual framework from developmental victimology (Finkelhor, 2008), the goal is to add to the literature on the epidemiology of the problem, the characteristics of offenders and victims, the risk factors for exposure, and the possible impact on mental health and child functioning. This paper presents some of the results.

2. Methods

The data for this analysis come from the aggregation of three representative samples of U.S. children: the National Surveys of Children's Exposure to Violence (NatSCEV), carried out in 2008, 2011, and 2014. All three were telephone surveys conducted about the abuse, crime, and victimization experiences of children and youth aged 1 month to 17 years. Youth aged 10–17 were interviewed directly about their experiences, while information about the experiences of children aged 0–9 was obtained through interviews with a caregiver. Details of the methodology are provided elsewhere (Finkelhor, Turner, Shattuck, & Hamby, 2015; Finkelhor, Turner, Ormrod, & Hamby, 2009; Finkelhor, Turner, Shattuck, & Hamby, 2013). The three cross-sectional samples were combined into a single sample totaling 13,052 children and youth.

In each survey, information on children's exposure to violence was collected using the Juvenile Victimization Questionnaire (JVQ) (Finkelhor, Hamby, Ormrod, & Turner, 2005a,b; Finkelhor, Ormrod, Turner, & Hamby, 2005b; Hamby, Finkelhor, Ormrod, & Turner, 2004), which contains questions on more than 40 forms of offenses against youth covering six general areas: conventional crime, child maltreatment, peer and sibling victimization, sexual assault, witnessing and indirect victimization, and internet victimization. For each type of victimization that a respondent reported experiencing in his or her lifetime, a series of follow-up questions gathered additional information about the most recent exposure, including whether it occurred in the past year, who the perpetrator was, and where the victimization occurred.

For this analysis, the focus was on responses to two of the questions asked in all the waves of NatSCEV. One question was formulated: "Sometimes a family fights over where a child should live. At any time in (your child's/your) life did a parent take, keep, or hide (your child/you) to stop (him/her/you) from being with another parent?" All the endorsements from this question are counted as family abductions in this analysis.

The other question was phrased: "When a person is kidnapped, it means they were made to go somewhere, like into a car, by someone who they thought might hurt them. At any time in (your child's/your) life, has anyone ever tried to kidnap (your child/you)?" Subsequent questions asked about the identity of the perpetrator, and those who cited a father, mother, brother, sister, or other male or female relative were classified as experiencing a family abduction. Because this question used it as an explicit term, we will in some analyses refer to episodes in response to this question as "family kidnapping." In this analysis, we examine odds of experiencing any type of abduction by using logistic regression analysis, while controlling for victim's age, family socio-economic status, and household structure (single parent, two-parent, or step-parent families).

Other measures used in this analysis include a list of lifetime adverse events, and two related measures of distress symptoms, the Trauma Symptom Checklist for Children (TSCC; administered to the 10–17 year olds) and the Trauma Symptom Checklist for Young Children (TSCYC; administered to the parents of 0–9 year olds) (Briere, 1996; Briere et al., 2001). These two measures were converted to standardized scores and then merged. The TSCC and the TSCYC were designed to evaluate children's responses to unspecified traumatic events in different symptom domains. In the TSCC, children are presented with a list of thoughts, feelings and behaviors and asked to indicate how often each of these things happened to him or her in the last month (e.g., feeling afraid, crying, feeling mean). In the case of the TSCYC, the caregiver indicates the frequency of symptoms displayed by their young child (e.g., been afraid to be alone, looked sad, hit adults). In both versions, each item was rated on a four-point scale ranging from 0 (not at all) to 3 (very often). All components of the TSCC have shown very good reliability and validity in both population-based and clinical samples (Briere, 1996).

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