

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).

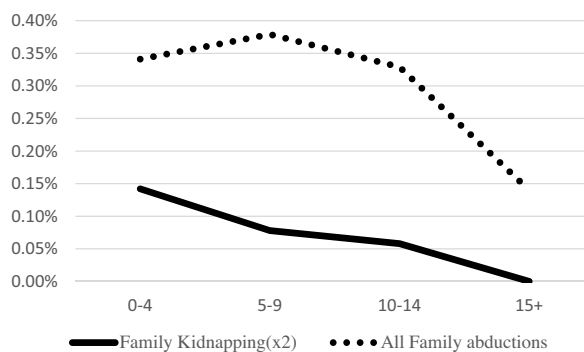


Fig. 1. Prevalence of all family abductions and family kidnappings in prior year by age of child.

Table 1

Lifetime family kidnapping and family abduction by relationship to perpetrator.

	Family Kidnapping	All Types of Family Abductions
Mother/female relative	35.6%	59.9%
Father/male relative	64.4%	40.1%
Total	100%	100%
Number of cases	47	414

3. Results

A total of 414 children or 4.0% (95% confidence interval: 3.4% to 4.6%) of the weighted sample had experienced family abduction over the course of their lifetime, and 116 or 1.2% in the past year (95% confidence interval: 0.8% to 1.5%). This translates to a point estimate of 875,000 U.S. children per year with a range of 618,000 to 1,132,000 (95% confidence interval).

Many more episodes got reported to the study in response to the question about a parent “taking, keeping or hiding the child to stop him from being with another parent” (lifetime rate: 3.5%, past year: 1.05%) than in response to the question that used the word “kidnapping” (lifetime rate 0.2%; past year rate: 0.05%). For some of the following analyses, we have highlighted this more restrictive “kidnapping” group classified as any episode with the kidnapping question endorsed.

Past year rates did vary by age (Fig. 1). They ranged from 0.35% for children under age 5 to 0.14% for youth 15 or older. The kidnapping episodes, much less numerous, were even more skewed, with 0.07% occurring to children under age 5 and zero cases reported for children 15 or older (note that Fig. 1 shows the kidnapping values multiplied by a factor of two so that the trends may be compared alongside all family abduction cases).

Parents comprised over 90% of the perpetrators, so we will not break out other relatives separately. Mothers and other female relatives were responsible for a majority of all episodes, 59.9% vs 40.1% for fathers and male relatives. Fathers and male relatives, on the other hand, were responsible for a majority of the episodes in the kidnapping group (64.4%) (See Table 1).

Female children outnumbered male children as victims 58% to 42% ($p < 0.05$). Two other demographic features characterized families with episodes. They were more likely to have a lower socio-economic status ($p < 0.001$) and were less likely to be a two-parent intact family. Rates were 83.6 per 1000 in single parent households, 90.7 per 1000 in stepfamilies, and just 9 per 1000 in two-parent families. Race and ethnicity, however, were not significantly associated with risk. Note that large proportions (43%) of episodes were reported to police including 86% of the lifetime family kidnappings.

In addition, family abduction had a clear independent association with children’s mental health symptomatology (Table 2). Using the trauma symptom checklist (a standardized combination of the TSCC and TSCYC) as the dependent variable in an ordinary least squares (OLS) regression and controlling for demographics and other forms of victimization, family abduction had a statistically significant coefficient of 0.47 ($p < 0.001$). This indicated substantial increases in trauma symptoms in children associated with family abduction, independent of other effects like child maltreatment or exposure to family violence.

Many types of family adversity were associated with a significantly increased odds of being a victim of family abduction, as shown in the logistic regression model presented in Table 3. The lifetime adversities with the largest impact on the odds of family abduction included experiencing homelessness, having a parent who had been unemployed, having been removed from the home at some point, or reporting that parents always argued. We also found that family abduction was closely associated with exposure to other kinds of victimization, violence and abuse, and particularly sexual abuse and child maltreatment.

Table 2

Coefficients for OLS models predicting child's trauma score associated with lifetime family abduction, controlling for other victimizations (also victim's age, SES, sex, and household structure).

	Model 1		Model 2	
	Coeff.	Std. Error	Coeff.	Std. Error
Family abduction/kidnapping	0.82	0.09***	0.47	0.09
Type of PY victimization				
Peer assault			0.31	0.04
Sibling assault			0.26	0.04
Sexual victimization			0.49	0.07
Maltreatment			0.67	0.07
Property Crime			0.33	0.03
Witness domestic violence			0.26	0.04

*** $p < 0.001$.

Table 3

Odds ratios predicting lifetime family abduction for given adversity and victimization (controlling for victim age, SES, and HH structure).

Type of LT adversity	Odds Ratio	Std. Error
Natural disaster (fire/flood/other)	1.75	0.44
Bad accident, hospitalized	1.70	0.44 [†]
Bad illness, hospitalized	1.73	0.33**
Close friend or family member in bad accident	2.11	0.39***
Close friend or family member serious illness	1.56	0.27**
Homelessness	3.34	0.90***
Repeated year of school	1.81	0.42 [†]
Parent unemployment	3.20	0.54***
Child removed from home	5.32	1.57***
Parent in prison	2.37	0.44***
Family member drug use	3.98	0.67***
Parents always argue/angry	4.01	0.66***
Close friend or family member attempted suicide	2.42	0.50***
Parent deployed for war	1.41	0.41
Close friend or family member death	0.90	0.15
Type of PY victimization		
Peer assault	2.20	0.41***
Sibling assault	1.84	0.35**
Sexual victimization	3.36	0.7136***
Maltreatment	3.42	0.574***
Property Crime	1.79	0.2904***
Witness domestic violence	2.10	0.369***

Note: Each line is a separate model, not all predictors are included at once.

[†] $p < 0.05$.

** $p < 0.01$.

*** $p < 0.001$.

4. Discussion

Family abduction is not a high frequency experience in the context of all childhood adversities. The past year rate of 1.2% might be compared to the 10.0% of children who reported other forms of prior year caretaker maltreatment for context. However, the prevalence in this study is higher than in previous reports. This study's rate (12 per 1000) compares to a rate of 3 per 1000 (CI 1.3–4.6) from the National Incidence Studies of Missing Abducted, Runaway, and Thrownaway Children for 2011. But this difference makes sense in that the NISMART estimate is based on a more restrictive definition of abduction that involves elements such as concealment.

In addition, the characteristics of family abduction found in this sample also differed somewhat from findings in previous surveys. Mothers and other female relatives were somewhat more numerous than male perpetrators, whereas the opposite was true in NISMART. This may relate to the broader definition of abduction being used in the current study. Note that in the case of the more serious kidnapping episodes in this survey males did predominate as perpetrators, more in line with the NISMART findings. Male perpetrators tend to predominate in episodes that involve elements of active kidnapping and taking of children, whereas, because women are more likely to have custody of children, women predominate when episodes, defined more broadly, include the keeping of children to prevent them from being with another parent with whom they may share custody.

In this survey female children outnumbered male children as victims to a small extent. The ratio was more equal in the NISMART, perhaps again reflecting the larger proportion of male perpetrators in the NISMART sample who may have some preference for keeping male children.

Where the current findings are quite consistent with previous studies is in the clear association between family abduction, family violence and other kinds of family adversity. Abductions occur in multi-problem families with a history of other difficulties and disruptions. It may be a reflection of a chaotic environment in which impulsivity and coercive behavior lead to a variety of problematic outcomes.

Even given its association with family violence, family abductions appear to have an independent association with child distress, as measured by trauma symptoms. It contributed to predicting children's symptomatology over and above what was explained by other victimizations including other forms of child maltreatment and family violence. This is an important new finding that has not been available in previous national studies of family abduction. It has been well documented that parental conflict is an important source of distress in the lives of children and makes large negative contributions to measures of child well-being (Mechanic & Hansell, 1989). To that conflict, however, family abduction introduces a considerable disruption to a child's life and routines. As children become more directly involved in parental conflict, not simply as witnesses, but as objects of contention, it can mobilize even stronger feelings of guilt, fear and powerlessness.

Family abduction is clearly an important element to the problem of child maltreatment. It accompanies family environments beset with violence, conflict and other forms of maltreatment. It leaves its own additional psychological trauma on children. More attention to this problem is warranted in the field of child maltreatment and family intervention. This might include more efforts to screen for these histories in childhood adversity measures. It might also include more attention to the problem in the development of family prevention programs, particularly in the efforts to mitigate conflict and custody disputes in the wake of parental separation and divorce.

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