

VARIETIES OF NONFAMILY ABDUCTION OF CHILDREN AND ADOLESCENTS

NANCY L. ASDIGIAN

DAVID FINKELHOR

University of New Hampshire

GERALD HOTALING

University of Massachusetts—Lowell

A sample of 396 cases of nonfamily abduction was extracted from police records in a national survey of law enforcement agencies. Incidents that fit the public stereotype of a kidnapping (children who were taken by strangers and kept for an extended period of time or moved a long distance) were much less prevalent than incidents that simply met legal definitions for abduction. The former—stereotypical abductions—also tended to involve more Caucasian preteen victims who were taken but not sexually assaulted. The majority of legal-definition abductions, in contrast, was characterized by the forcible sexual assault of teenage girls. Legal-definition abductions that did not involve sexual assault occurred in the context of a diverse range of other crimes, including robbery attempts, hijackings, acts of revenge, intimidation and terrorizing, and dating violence. The findings support the idea of distinguishing between stereotypical and legal-definition abductions and highlight the need to orient efforts aimed at the prevention of nonfamily abduction toward those at risk for sexual assault.

In the mid-1980s, America experienced a period of intense public and political concern and controversy about the problem of child

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kidnapping by strangers. There had been several prior such periods of concern over the last century (Alix, 1978), but the recent one was the first to prompt any significant social scientific research addressing the problem and its scope.

A prominent issue at controversy was the size of the problem (Gentry, 1988). Figures as high as 50,000 had been advanced, but there were also knowledgeable persons claiming the problem occurred to only a few hundred children each year (Best, 1990; Griego & Kitzer, 1985).

In part to resolve the controversy, the Department of Justice commissioned the National Incidence Study of Missing Abducted, Runaway and Throwaway Children (NISMAART; Finkelhor, Hotaling, & Sedlak, 1990). The report from that study pointed out, as had other commentators (Best, 1988), that some of the controversy was about definitions, not numbers. The public stereotype of a stranger abduction was a very serious crime involving the lengthy removal of a child from his or her home and parents for purposes such as ransom, sadistic and sexual assault, or murder. Such cases did not appear, in fact, to be that common. By contrast, abduction legally defined was a much broader crime. It could include the coercive movement of a person even a small distance or the unlawful confinement of a person for a short period of time (Diamond, 1985). Many violent crimes, particularly rapes, involve abductions, as legally defined (National Center for Missing and Exploited Children, 1986).

The NISMAART report argued that although the large estimates seemed implausible to people thinking of the stereotypical abduction type of crime, they were not implausible from the point of view of the legal definition. For example, tens of thousands of rapes occur to children and adolescents, many of which may entail some abduction component (Federal Bureau of Investigation, 1992).

NISMAART recommended that, to resolve the controversy, estimates should be developed for two separate crimes: one corresponding to the stereotypical abduction, and one corresponding to the legal-definition abduction. It also recommended that the legal-definition abduction be considered very much in the context of the crime of sexual assault.

The initial NISMAART findings seemed to confirm this approach (Finkelhor et al., 1990, 1992). The estimates for the stereotypical abductions and legal-definition abductions were of different orders of

magnitude. Moreover, legal-definition abductions were closely related to sexual assaults.

However, these conclusions were based on a rather superficial analysis of the data that were collected. There was no attempt in the report to statistically contrast stereotypical and legal-definition abductions. Nor was there any in-depth analysis of the case material available from the study to try to better understand the varieties of situations encompassed within those types.

In this article, we report on several additional analyses of the nonfamily abduction data gathered in the NISMAART study. In particular, we were interested in two specific issues:

1. Was there any additional evidence in the data to support the distinction between stereotypical abductions and legal-definition abduction?
2. Were there other important distinctions among abductions suggested by the case material? For example, was it useful to distinguish nonfamily abductions that had sexual assault as a primary motive and those involving other motives?

METHOD

NISMAART obtained national data on nonfamily abductions from a survey of police records in 83 law enforcement agencies. Those agencies were selected from a nationally representative sample of 21 counties across 16 states. The counties included in the sample were selected such that they guaranteed representation of all regions of the country and all levels of urbanization. The study counties, which included Los Angeles, Cook County (Chicago), and the borough of Manhattan, contained 13% of the total population and 10% of the child population of the United States.

Within each county, state police, county sheriff, and municipal police departments that had jurisdiction over, and maintained files on, criminal offenses were recruited for inclusion in the study. All state and county police agencies that were responsible for the types of cases targeted by this study were automatically selected to participate. In counties with fewer than five municipal police agencies, all such agencies were included in the study. When there were more than five

municipal agencies within a county, five were sampled. All agencies selected agreed to participate. (Details concerning county and agency sampling methods are given in NISMART's report on police study methodology by Sedlak, Mohadler, McFarland, & Hudock, 1990.) The major challenge of this study was to identify abduction cases in what frequently were voluminous police records. Many abductions occur in conjunction with other crimes, such as homicide or rape, and police agencies generally do not keep a separate file in which they store all cases involving abductions. Discussion with law enforcement officers, criminologists, and missing children's advocates, as well as the findings of a previous police records study of child abduction (National Center for Missing and Exploited Children, 1986) indicated that four general types of crime classifications would contain most of the reported cases involving nonfamily abductions: abduction, missing persons, homicides, and sexual offenses.

In preliminary contacts with the participating police departments, it became clear that, whereas a survey of homicide, abduction, and missing persons files would be relatively straightforward, sex offense records would pose a significant problem for the study's time and budget constraints. In many jurisdictions, sex offense cases were handled by more than one division, thereby requiring the search of multiple file systems. Moreover, the relevant files typically were very large and heterogeneous, including many types of records that were outside the scope of this study (e.g., voyeurism, indecent exposure, and offenses perpetrated by family members). For these reasons, the survey of sex offense records was limited to 4 of the 21 study counties: two large, one medium-size, and one small. Combined, these four counties contained almost 5% of the nation's child population (U.S. Bureau of the Census, 1989).¹

All records within the aforementioned police files were considered for study inclusion if they satisfied the following eligibility criteria: (a) the date of the incident report fell between August 1, 1987, and July 31, 1988; (b) the victim was under 18 years of age at the time of the incident; (c) the perpetrator was a nonfamily member (someone other than the victim's father, mother, stepparent, sibling, aunt, uncle, or grandparent); and (d) the victim resided within the county at the time of the incident (except for homicide records, where all cases

within the investigative jurisdiction of the selected agencies were considered eligible). Records in the sex offenses files that were unlikely to involve movement of the child (e.g., voyeurism, indecent exposure) or that involved child pornography were excluded from the study. The exclusion of the latter was due to the fact that police reports of child pornography cases typically contain detailed information on only the perpetrators of those incidents. Moreover, these cases frequently are administered by vice units rather than the divisions responsible for the other types of crimes surveyed in this study.

In all, 1,259 records from the 21-county abduction, missing persons, and homicide files and 1,556 records from the four-county sexual offenses files were reviewed. A total of 824 cases satisfied the eligibility criteria for study inclusion. Sixty-two percent of those were extracted from the abduction, missing persons, and homicide files and 38% were extracted from the sexual offense files.

The definitional criteria for legal-definition nonfamily abductions and stereotypical abductions are shown in the Appendix. Legal-definition abductions included all cases perpetrated by nonfamily members (e.g., acquaintances, neighbors, and babysitters, as well as strangers). As can be seen, legal-definition abduction requires only a small amount of coerced movement or short detention. Stereotypical abductions included all legal-definition abduction cases that met the additional criteria for more serious abductions.

RESULTS

From the survey of police records, 396 cases (216 from the abduction, missing persons, and homicide files and 180 from the sexual offense files) satisfied the criteria for legal-definition nonfamily abduction. Thirty-two cases met the criteria for stereotypical abduction (and all qualified as legal-definition abductions). After adjusting for sampling at the primary sampling unit, agency, and case levels, we estimate that between 3,200 and 4,600 legal-definition nonfamily abductions were known to law enforcement agencies nationally in 1988. Stereotypical abductions accounted for only between 200 and 300 cases in our national estimate.²

HOW ARE STEREOTYPICAL ABDUCTIONS DIFFERENT?

To test whether stereotypical abduction was a different type of crime than legal-definition abduction, we compared the stereotypical abduction cases ($n = 32$)³ with their nonstereotypical legal-definition counterparts ($n = 364$) on a series of victim,⁴ perpetrator, and incident characteristics that were not used in the definition of stereotypical abduction. As shown in Table 1, relative to legal-definition abductions, both the victims and the perpetrators of stereotypical abductions were more likely to be Caucasian. In addition, stereotypical abduction perpetrators were concentrated between the ages of 20 and 40 years old, and were more likely to act in conjunction with others than to act alone. Victims of stereotypical abductions were less likely than victims of legal-definition abductions to either be lured away or sexually assaulted by their attackers. Other episode characteristics, such as the use of force and weapons to complete the abduction, the location of the victim prior to being taken, and the time of year the abduction took place (e.g., summer vs. winter), did not differentiate between stereotypical and legal-definition abductions. Taken together, the bivariate results showed that stereotypical abductions were more likely than legal-definition abductions to involve multiple, young to middle-aged Caucasian perpetrators who victimized youth for purposes other than sexual assault.

We used discriminant function analysis to validate at the multivariate level the differences between stereotypical and nonstereotypical legal-definition abductions that emerged in our bivariate analyses.⁵ When all predictor variables were assessed simultaneously, stereotypical abductions tended to be distinguished by the involvement of Caucasian preteen children who were taken, but not sexually assaulted, by Caucasian perpetrators, canonical $R = .28$, Wilks's $\Lambda = .92$, $\chi^2(13) = 22.49$, $p < .05$ (see Table 2).⁶

SHOULD THE STEREOTYPICAL CATEGORY INCLUDE ABDUCTIONS PERPETRATED BY NONSTRANGERS?

An interesting question arose when we created the definition of stereotypical abduction: Should the abductions in this category be restricted to those perpetrated by strangers only? Strangers are the

TABLE 1: Bivariate Comparisons of Stereotypical and Nonstereotypical Nonfamily Abductions

Characteristic	Abduction Group		χ^2
	Stereotypical ($n = 32$)	Nonstereotypical ($n = 364$)	
Victim characteristics			
Female victim	71%	81%	2.11
Victim race			
Caucasian	42%	24%	8.84*
African American	17%	41%	
Hispanic	39%	32%	
Other	3%	4%	
Victim over 12 years	63%	72%	1.21
Perpetrator characteristics			
Multiple perpetrators	51%	29%	6.49*
Perpetrator race			
Caucasian	40%	20%	10.68*
African American	27%	52%	
Hispanic	32%	25%	
Other	0%	4%	
Perpetrator age			
15 or under	0%	3%	12.61*
16-20	18%	30%	
21-30	43%	25%	
31-40	27%	11%	
41 or over	13%	32%	
Episode characteristics			
Victim lured	15%	37%	5.33*
Victim sexually assaulted	32%	73%	23.35**

* $p < .05$; ** $p < .001$.

perpetrators linked in public perception to the crime. However, abductions also are carried out by nonstrangers. To address this question, we examined the size and nature of the category created when we removed the stranger perpetrator requirement. This added a total of 24 cases to our original group of 32 stereotypical abductions. Using this less stringent definition, our estimate of the yearly incidence of stereotypical abductions nationwide increased from a range of 200 to 300 to a range of 300 to 400.

We examined the group of serious abductions perpetrated by nonstrangers (e.g., family friends, babysitters, acquaintances, employers) and found that they did not possess many of the salient and stereotypical features of serious abductions perpetrated by strangers.

TABLE 2: Discriminant Function Analysis Predicting Membership in the Stereotypical Abduction Function ($n = 21$)^a and Nonstereotypical Abduction Groups ($n = 253$)^b

Predictor Variable	Correlation With Discriminant Function	Univariate $F(1, 272)$
Victim race	.59	8.26***
Victim sexually assaulted	.41	4.12**
Victim age	.39	3.63*
Perpetrator race	.39	3.56*

a. Eleven stereotypical abduction cases were omitted from the analysis due to missing data on one or more of the predictor variables.

b. One hundred eleven nonstereotypical abduction cases were omitted from the analysis due to missing data on one or more of the predictor variables.

* $p < .05$; ** $p < .01$; *** $p < .001$.

Compared to stereotypical abductions perpetrated by strangers, the victims of nonstranger abductions were significantly more likely to be non-Caucasian (91% vs. 59%), $\chi^2(1) = 7.46, p < .01$, and to be taken from locations where they were supervised (76% vs. 26%), $\chi^2(1) = 11.60, p < .01$. In addition, unlike the stranger group, which was comprised almost exclusively of male perpetrators (95%), there were nearly as many female (47%) as male (53%) perpetrators in the nonstranger stereotypical abduction group, $\chi^2(1) = 13.33, p < .01$. These results did not encourage us to remove the stranger perpetrator criterion from the definition of stereotypical abductions.

HOW MUCH LEGAL-DEFINITION ABDUCTION IS CONNECTED TO SEXUAL ASSAULT?

If stereotypical abduction is a different crime than legal-definition abduction, what are the salient characteristics of the latter? We have proposed that it is heavily connected to sexual assault. Indeed, in our further analysis of the NISMART data, the prevalence of sexual assault among these cases (i.e., legal-definition abduction cases, exclusive of those that met the criteria for stereotypical abduction) was striking. In the four counties where sexual offense files were sampled in addition to the homicide, abduction, and missing persons files, 62% of the countable legal-definition abduction cases were extracted from those sexual offense files.

However, even some of those coming from other files involved sexual assault. We classified cases from all files as having a sexual assault component if the police records explicitly indicated the presence of either penetration, genital molestation, being photographed for pornographic purposes, or other sexual maltreatment ($n = 194$). Additional legal-definition abductions with a clear sexual assault component ($n = 30$) were identified by coders examining the narratives of all cases that did not satisfy these criteria. Interrater agreement, as indexed by the kappa coefficient (Cohen, 1960), was .93.

In all, 71% of the nonstereotypical legal-definition abduction cases extracted from all files in our four-county sample were classified as sexual assaults. This was in marked contrast to stereotypical abductions found in that sample, with only 24% of those cases involving sexual assault, $\chi^2(1) = 23.52, p < .001$.

HOW ARE SEXUAL ASSAULT ABDUCTIONS DIFFERENT FROM NONSEXUAL ABDUCTIONS?

To explore further the nature of legal-definition abductions in relation to sexual assault, we compared legal-definition abductions (from all files in all counties) with a sexual assault component ($n = 224$) to those without such a component ($n = 140$). The results of those comparisons revealed differences consistent with expectations regarding the nature of sexual assaults (see Table 3). For example, sexual assault abductions were more likely than nonsexual assault abductions to occur to females and to teenagers. The former also were more likely than the latter to be carried out by males, young adults, and lone perpetrators. Finally, it was more common for sexual assault abductions to have involved the use of physical force, weapons, and lures, but somewhat less common for sexual assault abductions to have occurred in counties with high rates of violent crime.

To refine our bivariate analysis, we combined these variables in a discriminant function analysis that assessed differences in the overall profiles of abductions with and without a sexual assault component. The function to emerge from that analysis accounted for nearly 40% of the variance between the sexual assault and nonsexual assault groups, canonical $R = .61$, Wilks's lambda = .63, $\chi^2(12) = 91.76, p < .001$ (see

TABLE 3: Bivariate Comparisons of Legal-Definition Abductions With and Without a Sexual Assault Component

Characteristic	Abduction Group		χ^2
	Sexual Assault Component (n = 224)	No Sexual Assault Component (n = 140)	
Victim characteristics			
Female victim	89%	54%	56.64***
Victim race			2.23
Caucasian	24%	23%	
Native American	1%	1%	
Asian	4%	2%	
African American	41%	40%	
Hispanic	32%	33%	
Other	0%	2%	
Victim over 12	75%	57%	13.37***
Perpetrator characteristics			
Male perpetrator	100%	87%	30.15***
Perpetrator race			2.19
Caucasian	19%	25%	
Asian	4%	2%	
African American	53%	49%	
Hispanic	25%	24%	
Perpetrator age			15.16**
15 and under	3%	3%	
16-20	33%	18%	
21-30	21%	38%	
31-40	9%	17%	
41 and over	34%	24%	
Multiple perpetrators	26%	41%	8.72**
Stranger perpetrator	55%	56%	0.02
Episode characteristics			
Force against victim	95%	88%	5.03*
Weapon against victim	19%	12%	3.18
High violent crime	86%	93%	4.55*
Victim lured	43%	15%	24.16***
Spring/summer	47%	46%	0.02
Victim supervised	30%	39%	2.23

* $p < .05$; ** $p < .01$; *** $p < .001$.

Table 4). Sexual assault abductions were more likely to involve teenage girls living in counties with low rates of violent crime, who were lured away by single (male)⁷ non-Caucasian perpetrators who used force to accomplish the crime.

TABLE 4: Discriminant Function Analysis Predicting Membership in the Legal-Definition Sexual Assault (n = 133)^a and Nonsexual Assault (n = 80)^b Abduction Groups

Predictor Variable	Correlation With Discriminant Function	Univariate F(1, 204)
Victim gender	.71	60.76***
Victim lured away	.43	22.45***
Victim age	.38	17.00***
Force against victim	.29	10.19**
Perpetrator race	.23	6.33**
County violent crime	-.18	4.06*
Multiple perpetrators	-.16	2.91+

a. Ninety-one abduction cases with a sexual assault component were omitted from the analysis due to missing data on one or more of the predictor variables.
 b. Sixty abduction cases without a sexual assault component were omitted from the analysis due to missing data on one or more of the predictor variables.
⁺ $p < .10$; * $p < .05$; ** $p < .01$; *** $p < .001$.

ARE THERE DIFFERENT SUBGROUPS OF NONSEXUAL ASSAULT ABDUCTIONS?

Sexual assault abductions were a comparatively homogeneous group of crimes involving female victims in their teens and male perpetrators in their young adult years. Homogeneity of variance tests confirmed that the variability in victim and perpetrator age and gender was significantly larger in the nonsexual assault group compared to the sexual assault abduction group (all $ps < .001$). This suggested to us that the former might include several different subtypes of abduction incidents.

To further examine this possibility, two coders read through the narrative descriptions of all nonsexual assault legal-definition abduction cases to identify the motives involved in those cases. Unfortunately, for more than half of those cases ($n = 74$), the narratives did not contain enough information to make such a judgment. An examination of the remaining cases, however, revealed five different types of incidents (kappa = .62).

Those incident types included: robbery facilitation ($n = 7$), in which strangers abducted children, sometimes together with adults, to obtain money or other goods (kappa = .91); hijackings ($n = 12$), in which car theft was the main motive but children, sometimes together with

adults, were passengers in the car ($\kappa = .80$); acts of retribution ($n = 12$), in which children were taken, sometimes by gang members, in revenge for misdeeds committed by the victim or someone associated with the victim, often in connection with drug dealing or some other criminal activity ($\kappa = .90$); intimidation and terrorizing ($n = 8$), in which random acts of violence, including abduction, were carried out against children for no other apparent reason than to intimidate and terrorize ($\kappa = .54$); and dating violence ($n = 17$), in which males abducted ex-girlfriends to bully them or force them back into a relationship ($\kappa = .84$).

ARE SEXUAL ASSAULT ABDUCTIONS DISTINGUISHABLE FROM ORDINARY SEXUAL ASSAULTS?

In the earlier sections, we have stressed the fact that most abductions appear to involve a sexual assault. The converse, though, is not necessarily true. Sexual assaults do not necessarily involve an abduction. We could address this question to some extent with the data available in our study. In the counties where we sampled sexual assault files, we sampled a total of 326 sexual assaults. Of these, 62% entailed an abduction. This suggests that abduction is only one strategy that perpetrators use to help facilitate sexual assaults.

Thus one might ask whether abduction makes a difference in the nature of a sexual assault. On the one hand, it is possible that an abduction indicates a truly committed perpetrator; one who is willing to use much coercion or take a longer period of time to isolate the victim and complete the sexual assault. If this were true, then sexual assault with an abduction component should be quite different than sexual assault without such a component. On the other hand, the presence of an abduction may be a relatively arbitrary or minor factor in an assault, compared to other features, such as the presence of a weapon or the age difference between the perpetrator and victim. Moreover, the vagaries of the police records also need to be considered. Because they are focused on documenting the sexual assault, police may be rather haphazard in many instances about whether they note the elements that would constitute an abduction. If so, the

TABLE 5: Discriminant Function Analysis Predicting Membership in the Sexual Assault Abduction ($n = 184$)^a and Sexual Assault Nonabduction ($n = 86$)^b Groups

Predictor Variable	Correlation With Discriminant Function	Univariate $F(1, 281)$
Assault severity	.77	63.33***
Victim age	.60	39.08***
Victim gender	.51	28.16***
Perpetrator relationship	-.22	5.05*
Victim race	.20	4.27*

a. Forty sexual assault abduction cases were omitted from the analysis due to missing data on one or more of the predictor variables.

b. Forty sexual assault nonabduction cases were omitted from the analysis due to missing data on one or more of the predictor variables.

* $p < .05$; ** $p < .001$.

characteristics of sexual assault cases with and without an abduction noted in the record might not differ dramatically.

Using discriminant function analysis, we evaluated these alternative speculations by comparing the victim and perpetrator profiles⁸ of legal-definition abductions with a sexual assault component ($n = 224$) and sexual assault cases that were extracted from police files (in all counties) but did not meet the criteria for legal-definition abduction ($n = 126$). Our analysis produced a significant function that accounted for 28% of the variance between the cases in each sexual assault group, canonical $R = .53$, Wilks's lambda = .72, $\chi^2(6) = 90.17$, $p < .001$ (see Table 5).

The severity of the assault committed, as well as the gender and age of the assault victims, emerged as important discriminating characteristics, along with perpetrator relationship and victim race as additional, although weaker, predictors. Sexual assaults with an abduction component were more likely than other sexual assaults to involve penetration and to occur to non-Caucasian females in their teens at the hands of strangers. This finding does not support the suggestion that abduction is either a minor or an arbitrarily noted element of sexual assault. Rather, it suggests that abduction facilitates the commission of a more serious crime.

DISCUSSION

These additional analyses of NISMART data on nonfamily abduction lead to several important conclusions. First, the present findings underscore the importance of NISMART's initial strategy to subdivide the problem of nonfamily abduction. Stereotypical abductions—episodes that involve an extended period of time, long distances, and that occur in conjunction with ransom, murder, or an intent to keep the abductee permanently—need to be treated as a distinct group of nonfamily abductions. Although they accounted for only a small portion of all legal-definition nonfamily abductions, they formed a relatively cohesive group that differed from other abductions on a number of key victim, perpetrator, and episode variables. Compared to their nonstereotypical counterparts, stereotypical abductions involved more preteen/Caucasian children taken by Caucasian perpetrators for reasons other than sexual assault. Based on these differences, we continue to recommend that stereotypical abductions not be grouped together with all other legal-definition nonfamily abductions.

Our results also support the decision to define stereotypical abduction as involving stranger perpetrators alone. Our comparisons of stranger and nonstranger abductions that met all other criteria for stereotypical abduction suggested that the nonstranger cases were different. These nonstranger cases were characterized by a higher percentage of female perpetrators and non-Caucasian victims who were abducted while under conditions of supervision (e.g., home, school). Because this profile is inconsistent with popular conceptions regarding the nature of child abductions, we recommend against expanding the category of stereotypical abduction to include abduction cases perpetrated by nonstrangers.

Our additional analyses also supported the connection between legal-definition abduction and the crime of sexual assault. The majority of cases from the four-county sample that qualified as legal-definition abductions was found in the sexual offense files, and close to three quarters of all nonstereotypical legal-definition abduction cases in that sample had a sexual assault component.

Given that sexual assault seems so integrally related to abduction, we believe that efforts aimed at the prevention of nonfamily abduction should occur in the context of the prevention of sexual assault. There

is already a widespread network of assault prevention programs targeted at school-aged children around the country. If these programs were to reduce the risk of sexual assault, they would almost certainly also reduce the problem of abduction.

Our findings contain two useful messages for such programs. One is the importance of targeting this education for teenagers. Nearly three quarters of the legal-definition abductions occurred to teenagers. The idea that abduction is a problem primarily for elementary school children is wrong. Teenagers also need to hear the message. Second, our findings suggest that when an abduction occurs in the course of a sexual assault, it can result in a more serious crime. This suggests that it is useful and important to include strategies for foiling abductions as part of sexual assault prevention education programs.

In addition to the connection between legal-definition abduction and sexual assault, this study also identified several other kinds of crime contexts in which such abductions occurred to children. Given small numbers of cases and low interrater reliability for some types, we are not confident that we have distinguished a definitive typology for such nonsexual assault abductions. However, the categories of robbery facilitation, hijackings, and acts of retribution did appear to be relatively clear-cut and easily identifiable by coders. However, one other category—abductions occurring as part of dating violence—seems to involve crimes that might better be considered as part of the phenomenon of family abduction, even when the perpetrators were not literally family members. The pursuit of a more definitive typology of nonfamily abductions should be an important priority in future research.

Our findings also have implications for behavioral scientists and criminologists concerned with child victimization issues. In the past, for the most part, criminologists have not paid much attention to substantive aspects of the problem of stranger abduction of children. The prevailing theoretical framework with regard to this problem has been social constructionism, which has focused primarily on the social forces that were responsible for the enhanced public and political concern about the problem in the 1980s (Best, 1990). This perspective has tended to discount the problem in substantive terms by emphasizing both its political functions and its low incidence. The present study provides some support for this perspective. The findings are consistent with earlier social constructionist contentions that (a) the incidence of

serious stranger abductions was low and (b) confusion about definitions were, in part, responsible for alarmist perceptions (Best, 1988).

However, the present study also implies that social constructionism is not a sufficient theoretical framework on its own for approaching this problem. There are substantive elements of this problem that need to be addressed like any other crime. For one thing, as this analysis has shown, there are different types of stranger abduction that need to be distinguished. Stranger abduction is not a unitary phenomenon but has a complexity that goes beyond the public stereotype and needs to be detailed and refined. It is a problem that needs to be understood in the context of other criminal behavior, such as sexual assaults, dating violence, gang activity, robbery, and carjacking. It is a problem whose perpetrators and victims need to be studied to understand more about motivations and risk factors. Interest in the abduction of children by strangers can be broadened and deepened, applying the various techniques of modern criminology and the behavioral sciences.

Appendix

Definitional Criteria for Legal-Definition Nonfamily Abductions and Stereotypical Abductions

Legal-definition nonfamily abduction: Child was taken into a vehicle or building or moved a distance of more than 20 feet by the use of force or threat or detained by the use of force or threat for a period of at least one hour in a place of isolation by a nonfamily member without either lawful authority or the permission of a parent/guardian; or child who was 14 or younger or who was under 18 and mentally incompetent was taken by or voluntarily went with or was detained by a nonfamily member without either lawful authority or the permission of a parent/guardian, and the perpetrator (a) concealed the child's whereabouts, or (b) requested ransom, goods, or services in exchange for the child's return, or (c) expressed an intention to keep the child permanently; or child was taken by or voluntarily went with a nonfamily member who, at the time he or she took or went away with the child, had the apparent purpose of physically or sexually assaulting the child.

Stereotypical abduction: An episode meeting criteria for abduction under legal definition that has these additional components: The perpetrator of the abduction was a stranger (someone child had not met or known before the day of the abduction), and the child was detained overnight, was killed, or was transported 50 miles from the scene of the abduction; or the perpetrator requested ransom, goods, or services in

exchange for the child's return; or the perpetrator expressed an intention to keep the child permanently.

NOTES

1. This was a large enough database to provide some empirical grounds for suggesting the extent to which abductions that get classified solely as sexual offenses might augment the overall estimates. Because the records came from only four counties, however, it was not possible to develop an unbiased national estimate, with known reliability, of the number of nonfamily abductions that get classified only as sexual offenses. This meant, strictly speaking, that the only police records estimates of known reliability were those based strictly on the files of abductions, homicides, and missing persons.

2. These estimate ranges are based on a national estimate from abduction, homicide, and missing person files multiplied by a "correction factor" to reflect cases that might be found in sexual assault files (based on a purposive-sample four-county study). The range reflects a correction factor for the highest and lowest counties.

3. Although the *ns* reported throughout this article are unweighted, they have been adjusted for agency and case sampling.

4. Problems with missing data were particularly pronounced for the victim age variable. Data on the victim's age were available for only 259 (65.4%) of the 396 legal-definition abductions. To deal with this problem, we computed values of victim age for all cases by converting the victim's birth date (year, month, and day) and the date of the incident precipitating the report into whole numbers and then subtracting the former from the latter. For cases that also had missing data on the incident date variable, we used the date of the police report, rather than the incident date, in our computation of victim age. When data on both incident and report date were missing, the original values of victim age were used in place of our computed values. Finally, for the three cases that had data available for only incident year and victim birth year, we computed victim age by subtracting the victim's birth year from the incident year. Our efforts resulted in victim age data being available for 391 (98.7%) of the 396 legal-definition abduction cases.

5. Due to the large amount of missing data on the perpetrator age variable, we were unable to use it in this and all other multivariate analyses reported in this article. The victim and perpetrator race variables were dichotomized into Caucasian and non-Caucasian categories, and a continuous version of the victim age variable was used in all of the multivariate analyses.

6. Canonical *R* is a measure of the degree of association between group membership and the set of discriminating variables. When squared, it represents the portion of between-group variance accounted for by the discriminant function. Wilks's lambda values represent the portion of between-group variance that is not accounted for by the discriminant function. Wilks's lambda is transformed to a chi-square value that is used to test the null hypothesis of no mean difference between groups on the discriminant function.

7. Perpetrator gender was not used as a predictor variable in any of the discriminant function analyses involving sexual assault cases because all or nearly all of the perpetrators in both groups were male.

8. Because problems of missing data were more extreme for cases in the nonabduction groups, we were forced to rely on a reduced set of discriminating variables in our analyses involving nonabduction sexual assaults. The use of our full set of predictor variables reduced the *ns* in the nonabduction groups to sizes that were inappropriate for analysis.

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