Child Abduction Incidents: Victims, Offenders, and Left-Behind Parents

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JS 499 7501

Spring 2017
Abstract

A study was conducted to review the recovery process of former abductees and their parents, and to describe characteristics of child abductors. A questionnaire was administered via the Internet to individuals personally affected by child abduction. In-person interviews with criminal justice professionals and court records were reviewed to collect data on custodial interference.
Child Abduction Incidents: Victims, Offenders, and Left-Behind Parents

Child abduction is one of America’s greatest fears. Though there is no denying how horrific any abduction incident is, public concern has concentrated more on nonfamily abductions, though they are the least likely to occur. According to NCMEC (The National Center for Missing & Exploited Children), of the 20,500 missing children cases in 2016, only 1% were nonfamily abductions. The largest category of child abduction cases (86%) were endangered runaways, followed by 10% family abductions, 2% lost, injured, or otherwise missing children, and 1% missing young adults, ages 18 to 20” (NMEC by the Numbers, 2016).

Studies have illustrated that the print media contributes to this misperception because it tends to focus on abduction offenses perpetrated by strangers and nonfamily members, which are rare incidents, while virtually ignoring the most common type of abduction which are those perpetrated by family members. In addition, evidence demonstrates that the print media has a tendency to report more on certain demographics of victims, namely gender and age (Taylor, Boisvert, Sims, & Graver, 2013, p. 152).

Taylor, et al. (2013) hypothesized that the print media would over represent the number of female abduction incidents in comparison to the NISMART-2 (National Incidence Studies of Missing, Abducted, Runaway, and Thrownaway Children) data for all three abduction types (family, nonfamily, and stereotypical (a nonfamily abduction perpetrated by a slight acquaintance or stranger). The researchers found that the print media was more likely to report on female family abduction victims than male family victims, though this difference was not statistically significant (60% vs. 40%) (p. 159).
It was also hypothesized that newspaper articles would dedicate more words to female abduction incidents and less words to male abduction incidents. This hypothesis was supported as researchers found newspaper articles detailing female victims had an average of 541 words and males victims had an average of 357 words (Taylor, Boisvert, Sims, & Graver, 2013, p. 160).

Finally, it was hypothesized that the print media would report more on the abduction of younger children (aged 11 and younger) than on older children (aged 12 and older) in comparison to the NISMART-2 data. This was true, as the NISMART-2 data recorded 79% of family abduction victims were age 11 and under while 88% of the newspaper articles involved family abduction victims age 11 and under (Taylor, Boisvert, Sims, & Graver, 2013, p. 160).

While the vast majority of missing children reports are true, one issue confronting investigators in nearly all child abduction cases is whether the parent(s), or another responsible guardian of the child played a role in the victim’s disappearance. This is a concern because the United States has the fourth highest rate of child murder by parent (filicide), relative to population size, of 21 developed countries (Canning, Hiltz, & Muirhead, 2011, p. 794).

In cases of filicide, false allegations of child abduction can be extremely challenging for law enforcement. When the abduction is not witnessed and there is not an obvious crime scene, it is difficult to know for certain whether the child was in fact abducted or if they were a casualty of a filicide and a false abduction allegation. Another challenge for law enforcement involves inconclusive forensic evidence which is either absent, limited, or insufficient. Common evidence, such as fingerprints, hair, fibers, and blood is often “reasonably” explained by the parent offender as unrelated to the incident, and therefore, generally irrelevant to the investigation (Canning, Hiltz, & Muirhead, 2011, p. 794). It is also challenging for law
enforcement to confront a victim parent. Even though his or her behavior may seem suspicious, with no direct evidence or proof of foul play, investigators may be reluctant to confront a reporting person who may be exhibiting all the signs of a grieving and emotionally upset parent. Lastly, the victim’s bodies in these cases are typically well-hidden, which enhances the charade of a missing victim and delaying their recovery. Delays in body recovery may potentially allow what limited evidence may be present to decompose, deteriorate, or completely vanish (Canning, Hiltz, & Muirhead, 2011, pp. 794-795). The reason behind these false allegations is to explain the disappearance of the child while shifting the focus of an abduction investigation toward an unknown kidnapper and away from the parent offender (p. 794).

Factors found to contribute to filicide included a change in the family structure within 6 months prior to the offense; periods of prolonged separation between the offender and the victim, as well as the victim being described by the offender as difficult; which implies that the caregiver saw the child as a burden (Canning, Hiltz, & Muirhead, 2011, p. 796). In spite of what encouraged a false allegation report, there are other attributes to observe when determining these types of cases.

A study by Canning, Hiltz, & Muirhead (2011) reviewed files of 126 victims identified by the National Center for Missing and Exploited Children (NCMEC) to analyze characteristics specific to false allegation cases, based upon information that investigators would have readily available to them early in the investigation. The key findings in this study were that most of the victims were under the age of five, and the cause of death was preliminary blunt force trauma and asphyxiation (Canning, Hiltz, & Muirhead, 2011, p. 801). The majority of the offenders in false allegation reports of child abduction and filicide were biological parents of the victims, with the most common offenders being the mothers (39%), followed by fathers (23%) (Canning,
Hiltz, & Muirhead, 2011, p. 795). More than two-thirds of the victims were killed inside or around their residence.

Incidents of residential child abduction are rare, but highlight that children are not immune from abduction solely because they are within their home. Researchers from the FBI’s Behavioral Analysis Unit III-Crimes against Children reviewed 32 cases between the years of 1982 and 2012, examining characteristics which a child was abducted from inside a residence. The characteristics this research examined included the offender, victim, and offense characteristics, the offenders’ previous familiarity with the residences, and their behavior entering, while inside, and while exiting the homes. Victims who were killed by the offender and victims who were recovered alive were both included in this study.

The average age of the victims was approximately nine years old, with nearly 66% between ages six and fourteen. Most of the victims were Caucasian females who were previously known to the offender. Only 37% of the victims in this study were recovered alive.

The average age of the offenders was early thirties with a range between 17 and 52 years of age. A majority of these individuals were Caucasian males who were unmarried or not in any intimate relationship at the time of the offense. Their relationship status may be reflective of their lack of intimate attachments. An overwhelming majority (92%) of offenders also had a criminal arrest history, though the offenses did not entail child endangerment. Kidnapping made up 26% of previous offenses (Shelton, Hiltz, & MacKizer, 2016, pp. 26 - 27).

In more than half of the cases studied, the offenders had been to the general area of the residence prior to the abduction, making visits to the location on a consistent basis, and over half of the entries were conducted covertly via the front door. The vast majority of these incidents occurred between midnight and 8:00 a.m. while the child(ren) and other household members
were expected to be asleep. At the time of the abduction, it was found that 73.9% of the cases had individuals in the same room as the victim. Upon exit, most offenders walked away with the victim to a secondary location or to a vehicle that was nearby (Shelton, Hiltz, & MacKizer, 2016, pp. 27-28). Though this is not always the case, results of this study suggested that the primary reason that offenders commit residential child abduction is for sexual gratification. (Shelton, Hiltz, & MacKizer, 2016, p. 30).

In addition to knowing why abductors commit their crime, it is also important to know how they commit these crimes. “Previous research has shown that most criminal investigations do not rely on forensic evidence as a means to solve the case, but to bolster the detectives chance to use that evidence to obtain a confession from the suspect to clear a case” (Brown, Robert, & Keppel, 2012, p. 353). A 2012 study examined solvability factors in 733 murder investigations of abducted children occurring from 1968 to 2002 both in the U.S. and abroad (Brown, Robert, & Keppel, 2012, p. 354). Abduction was defined as the victim being kidnapped, the victim was detained and his/her freedom of movement was restricted, and the police were initially of the opinion that the victim was taken or held against their will, whether or not that turned out to be the case. Of the 733 cases analyzed for this research, 27.4% remained unsolved at the time of data collection. (Brown, Robert, & Keppel, 2012 p. 54).

Individual items of forensic evidence (e.g., hair samples, fingerprints, semen, etc.) linking the offender to the victim were recovered in 482 cases of the original 733. (Brown, Robert, Keppel, 2012, p. 355). Recovering any number of evidentiary items of this type only increased the odds of case solvability by 1.4 (Brown, Robert, Keppel, 2012, p. 360). Conversely, one of the strongest predictors of case solvability remained the victim-offender relationship. “The odds of solving murders of abducted children were nearly 306 times higher for cases in which the victim-
offender were strangers, about 286 times higher for friends or acquaintances, and about 3 times higher for intimate or family members as perpetrators compared to cases in which the victim-offender relationship was unknown” (Brown, Robert, Keppel, 2012, p. 358).

Existing research, policy information, and materials included to teach child safety assume that certain behaviors by children would protect them in the event that a stranger tries to abduct them. “When a child is targeted by a stranger abductor, it is not a foregone conclusion that they will in fact be abducted. Recent findings analyzing stranger child abduction in the UK have revealed up to 75% of stranger child abductions are attempted cases where the child is not abducted” (Collie & Greene, 2016, p. 278).

In order to properly address victim resistance, it is crucial to understand what victims are being faced with. This necessitates an examination of the perpetrators approach to the offense. Most instances are broadly categorized as “lures” or as “blitz” attacks. A lure-type offence uses a process of rapport building and trickery in order to put the victim into a vulnerable position, where the offender will then carry out their offense against them. “Blitz”, however, is when the abductor immediately applies threat and force to subdue the victim (Collie & Greene, 2016, p. 281).

This study evaluated which behaviors by the victims of stranger-child abduction correlate with how effectively victims are able to resist being abducted. This study defines a child as anyone under the age of 18 years. In this case, effectiveness refers to whether resistance by the child prevents or minimizes the abduction (Collie & Greene, 2016, p. 278).

Legal databases were used to gather stranger child abduction cases. Ultimately, 78 cases were identified where there was sufficient data for analysis. The offenders in this sample were exclusively men. Of the 78 offenses, 35% were attempted abductions and 65% were completed
abductions. In completed cases, 39.58 featured no resistance and 60% involved some level of resistance. Where modus operandi could be determined, 57% of the cases could be considered lures with the other 43% of cases being blitz attacks.

Researchers counted the instances of six types of victim resistance: 1) Verbal resistance (spoken words to dissuade the offense), 2) Direct verbal resistance (clear and unequivocal statements to the offender that the victim does not wish to go with them), 3) Indirect verbal resistance (making excuses, giving false information, and any statements used to dissuade the offender), 4) Physical resistance, which is any physical effort to prevent the offense, 5) Running away (though similar to physical resistance, running away is actually putting distance between the victim and the offender), and 6) The run, yell, and tell resistance method is a combination of the prior methods of resistance where the victim ran away from the offender, called for help, and told an adult about the offense (Collie & Greene, 2016, p. 282). The majority of the victims (95%) were school age (5 - 16 years).

This study found that overall, resistance of some kind was present in 64% of cases, and succeeded in halting the abduction in 35% of the cases studied. Direct verbal resistance, such as saying “no” to the offender, was found to be a very effective way of resisting abduction. Of the 35% of child abduction cases that were successfully halted, “84.62% were resisted through direct verbal resistance by the child” (Collie & Greene, 2016, p. 286). A number of reasons suggest why verbal resistance was an effective deterrent. First, verbal resistance greatly increases the chances that the victim is going to be able to attract some kind of attention and, therefore, increase the chances that the offender will be detected. Second, overt verbal resistance communicates in no uncertain terms that the victim is not going to comply with the offender. Lastly, this type of clear resistance could well relate to an element of fantasy being broken for
the offender (Collie & Greene, 2016, p. 289). The least effective resistance technique was physical resistance. Abductions were completed 70% of the time when physical resistance was the child’s primary defense mechanism (Collie & Greene, 2016, p. 290).

Psychological and emotional effects of any criminal victimization can be severe, especially if the crime is a violation of a personal relationship or if it deprives the victims of their sense of personal control. There are a wide range of psychological consequences to the victim of abduction. A structured interview with 13 participants was conducted based on a series of questions about the experiences and consequences of being abducted (Gibbs, Jones, Smith, Staples, & Weeks, 2012, p. 314). The results are illustrated in the table below:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Yes</th>
<th>Somewhat</th>
<th>No</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Difficulty trusting opposite sex</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unrealistic/dream-like feelings</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Difficulty concentrating</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Difficulty sleeping</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Concern when reminded of abduction</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>10</td>
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<tr>
<td>Received counseling services</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Participated in a support group</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
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<tr>
<td>Prescribed antidepressants</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PTSD medication</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No medication</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

(Gibbs, Jones, Smith, Staples, & Weeks, 2012, p. 316).
Unlike stranger abductions, parental abduction is a correlation of divorce and trauma where little empirical evidence exists about the initial or long-term effects from the perspective of the child. “It is known that after a divorce the frequency of many forms of family violence decreases. This is most likely because the arguing parties are no longer in contact with each other on a daily basis” (Gibbs, Jones, Smith, Staples, & Weeks, 2012, p. 313). After a divorce or breakup, parents are at increased risk of losing a child through abduction by the parent (also known as family abduction) who lost, or fears losing custody of the child (Gibbs, Jones, Smith, Staples, & Weeks, 2012, p. 313). Explanations offered by abductors included: 1) fear for the child’s safety, 2) unhappy with the court custody and visitation order, and 3) response to abduction threats by the parent with custody (Gibbs, Jones, Smith, Staples, & Weeks, 2012, p. 313).

Another study on parental abduction notes, “Upon abduction, a child may be taught to avoid police, become an accomplice in crime, move frequently from one location to the next, and be abused or neglected. A child may be told a parent is dead, is a prostitute, or no longer loves them. These experiences at any time during a kidnapping can have a deleterious effect on the child who may already have been traumatized by the separation of the parent and the manner in which the abduction occurred. These experiences may also affect how subsequent reunification unfolds” (Greif, 2012, p. 306). For some children, the desire to return to the left-behind parent may be mixed even if life on the run was upsetting; this is because a significant disruption may occur due to the child growing attached to the abducting parent. It may also mean the loss of friends a child made while living with the abductor (Greif, 2012, p. 307). “With children who have been missing for extended periods of time and who have experienced trauma, a narrative therapy approach may be particularly appropriate for the reunification process. This approach
focuses on active listening and acknowledging what someone has experienced, allowing the speaker to build new meaning from those experiences, and allows a child who has been disempowered by the abducting parent to gain some control over their life events” (Greif, 2012, p. 310).

Parents who carry out organized, planned, abductions have thought out justifications for the abduction. As a result, the child experiences rapid, planned, movements marked by explanations for removal from the other parent (Hoff, 2009, p. 129). These explanations may consist of telling the child about the “harm” being done to him or her by the left-behind parent until the child is convinced these statements are true. “These communications to the child about the left-behind parent may vary from representing the abducting parent as simply the better parent, to labeling the left-behind parent as harmful or having abandoned the child” (Hoff, 2009, p. 130). The child’s initial perception, then, is one of being cared for and attended to, reducing stress or confusion over leaving the home of the left-behind parent. Unfortunately, the child may later learn the abducting parent’s behavior was not actually focused on the child’s best interest.

An 8–page questionnaire was sent to 371 left-behind parents in the U.S. and Canada, nearly half of whom had recovered their children (Hoff, 2009, p. 137). The results of the questionnaire showed a significant number describing their home life prior to the abduction as chaotic, placing the children at risk for psychological problems even before the abduction occurred. Domestic violence was present in 54% of the relationships. The abductors’ substance abuse and emotional issues were blamed for the breakup in a significant percentage of the relationships, and abduction was threatened in advance of the event happening in almost half of the situations. Twenty-three percent of recovered children were described by the recovering parent as having been physically abused, 7% sexually abused, and 5% being both physically and
sexually abused. In addition, children were exposed to other forms of abuse such as being screamed at, threatened, and witness to adult fighting. Further, “children were taken to other countries and exposed to a new culture while hiding in 21% of the abduction cases studied” (p. 137).

The findings indicate that the age of the children may affect how they experience abduction; “older children may suffer differently than younger children if, for example, they blame themselves for not contacting the left-behind parent when they had the capacity to do so. Younger children, on the other hand, may be abducted at a time when crucial developmental bonds are being formed with the left-behind parent; this may result in serious emotional problems at the time or in the future” (Hoff, 2009, p. 137).

By nature, when a child is missing, emotional shock is presented by the parent(s) of the child. Emotional shock provides a numbing effect; however, the effect is not consistent and may be characterized by constant interjection of intense feelings followed by periods of numbing. Having no reference for how to think, feel, or act, it is possible for the parent to withdraw and isolate himself/herself. Another common behavior in parents of missing children is repetition. “This may manifest itself in activities such as repeatedly picking up the telephones to see if it is working, repeatedly going to the door to see if the missing child is there constantly calling friends and family to see if they have heard from the child, or repeatedly hunting the street for the child. Not knowing what to do, the parent often creates activity” (Bowers, 2007, p. 1).

In addition to emotional shock, it is common for family members of missing children to experience physical shock. Family members may forget or become unmotivated when providing for their basic needs. With his or her ability to concentrate coming and going, the parent may not
be able to focus for extended periods of time. Daily routines may be neglected if they are too painful to maintain while a family member is missing (Bowers, 2007, p. 2).

Rest and sleep may be nearly impossible for a parent and other family members during this time. Many parents explain that nighttime is the worst part of the day because while lying in bed their mental activity takes over due to the lack of physical diversion. Because of this, a parent may find him- or herself getting out of bed and engaging in physical activity in attempt to gain peace of mind (Bowers, 2007, p. 4).

“As time passes and the child remains missing, the parent begins to cope by accepting the child’s temporary absence” (Bowers, 2007, p. 5). One indication of the acceptance of temporary absence is discussion about when the child will return the parent is now shifting from the hope of immediate return, to the hope of future return; once the parent accepts the temporary absence of the child, the emotional shock and numbing start diminishing. The numbness becomes less intense, shifting to a more constant but less volatile emotional pattern. This parent is now experiencing emotional stress. This condition may be characterized by random emotional outbursts, lack of patience, bouts of panic, and quickness to anger (Bowers, 2007, p. 6).

The next phase the parent(s) typically experience is the belief that the child is not and will not be present for some period of time. This is not acceptance of the belief that the child will not ever return, but an acceptance that the child’s return will no longer be in the short range future (Bowers, 2007, p. 14). “For parents, there is no end or resolution to the situation of a missing child. The resolution, as long as the child is missing, must stay open-ended; no matter how many years pass, the parent will nearly always have a “back door” for the possibility that the child will be found or returned” (Bowers, 2007, p. 10).
In correlation to how parents of abducted children feel, Spilman sought to examine how parents of family and nonfamily abducted children cope with these feelings. Spilman did this by testing the levels of psychological distress of a random sample of primary parents from 146 families who had a child victim of family and nonfamily abduction (Spilman, 2006, p. 153).

The parents who had younger children (5.7 years) abducted had higher levels of interpersonal sensitivity (feelings of inadequacy, self-consciousness, and negative expectations concerning communication with others) after the abduction. Parents who experienced nonfamily abductions reported a higher level of anxiety (Spilman, 2006, p. 156). The type of abduction did not have a statistically significant effect on either interpersonal sensitivity or depression, but it did on psychological distress and anxiety.

Social support affected psychological distress in both directions. Family support significantly increased the anxiety for parents of abducted children, but had an overall positive effect on their distress level. Friendship support decreased the levels of interpersonal sensitivity. Lastly, for both types of abduction, support from attorneys was helpful by the parent’s interpersonal sensitivity and anxiety (Spilman, 2006, p. 158).

When a child is abducted, there are steps a left-behind parent can take to help assist locating his or her child. Due to the first few hours of an investigation being critical, once you realize your child is missing, you must act quickly. Upon checking with close friends and family to help ensure the opposing parent is not just candidly late returning your child, immediately contact law enforcement to file a missing-person report (Hoff, 2009, p. 45). In addition, ask your local law enforcement officers to enter information about your child into NCIC; “Federal law requires every federal, state, and local law enforcement agency to report each case of a missing
child younger than the age of 21 to NCIC” (Hoff, 2009, p. 45). Furthermore, if an abduction is in progress, discuss with a law enforcement officer about publishing an AMBER Alert.

Some law enforcement agencies do not treat parental kidnapping as a serious crime and are hesitant to fully investigate; mainly because a number of them believe that family abduction cases are private matters between the family and the court (Hoff, 2009, p. 44). In the state of Idaho, § Code 18-4509 states “upon receiving a report of a missing child, a law enforcement agency shall immediately enter identifying and descriptive information about the child into the national crime information center computer. If the local law enforcement agency has reason to believe that a missing child is enrolled in an Idaho elementary or secondary school, it shall notify that school of the report. The Idaho State Police shall report the entries made by local law enforcement in the national crime information center to the state registrar. Lastly, immediately after a missing child is returned, the law enforcement agency having jurisdiction over the investigation shall clear the entry from the national crime information center computer.”

Parents interfering with custody arrangements and taking their child(ren) without consent does more harm for the child(ren) than one may think; potentially leading to long term problems for the victim(s). There are different processes victims may go through in order to assist them in their recovery; some being more helpful than others.

Previous research has studied the after-effects of child abduction on the child and parents. This study will examine programs and services that help the victim and their family members recover.
Method

Purpose

The purpose of this study is to find out if there is anything that helped, or would have helped, the victim’s recovery process upon being abducted.

Participants & Sampling Procedures

Individuals who were once victims of child abduction, and left-behind parents participated by filling out a questionnaire containing multiple choice and open-ended questions given to them via different Facebook groups. Records from Idaho Supreme Court were reviewed to see how often custodial interference cases occur. In addition, a criminal justice professional that had experience dealing with abduction incidences participated in an in-person interview to discuss the recovery process.

Research Design

This research is descriptive and explanatory. The research will describe a population of victims of abduction and explain their recovery process.

Data Collections

Former abductees and left-behind parents will be accessed through Facebook. The questionnaire will be administered anonymously online. Depending on the depth of the victim’s answers, the questionnaire should take approximately 10 minutes.

A criminal justice professional will be interviewed to discuss the recovery process of former abduction victims. The interview should take approximately 30 minutes.
Finally, records were reviewed from the Idaho Supreme Court to review how many custodial interference cases occurred within the last five years.

**Ethical Consideration**

Please refer to attached IRB application.

**Bias**

For former abductees and left-behind parents, this will only include individuals who are willing to participate.

For the criminal justice professional, only specific incidences that they have knowledge of will be included, not the general population of abduction victims.

**Assumptions**

Honest responses from participants in addition to everyone invited to participate cooperating will lead to a more promising result when testing my hypothesis.

**Limitation**

Participants in this online survey will self-select. Therefore, the information they provide is applicable to their personal situation as opposed to a generalization of former abductees.
Results

Sample

Data for this research was gathered through record reviews from the Idaho Supreme Court regarding custodial interference cases from 2011-2016. According to Idaho Statute 18-4506, “A person commits child custody interference if the person, whether a parent or agent of that person, intentionally and without lawful authority: takes, entices away, keeps or withholds any minor child from a parent or other person or institution having custody, joint custody, visitation or other parental rights, whether such rights arise from temporary or permanent custody order, or from the equal custodial rights of each parent in the absence of a custody order”. Unless the child is taken as a result of an imminent safety concern, a violation of the provisions of subsection 1. Of this section shall be a felony, unless the defendant did not take the child outside of the state, in which it would then be a misdemeanor.”

Findings

Table 1. Number of Custodial Interference Cases in Region 1 (2011-2016)

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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>I18-4506(1) {M}</td>
<td>Kidnapping-Custodial Interference</td>
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<td>16</td>
<td>11</td>
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<td>7</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>3</td>
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<tr>
<td>I18-4506(1) {M}{SO}</td>
<td>Custodial Interference (Solicitation)</td>
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<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td>15</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>11</td>
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Table 2. Region 1 Custodial Interference Cases (2011-2016)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Crime Committed</th>
<th>Percent Felony</th>
<th>Percent Misdemeanor</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Custodial Interference 18-4506</td>
<td>26%</td>
<td>74%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 2 indicates that there are 82 defendants and 91 charges. The reasoning for that is because of an individual participating in custodial interference for more than one child, and was charged for each one. Table 2 also demonstrates that a majority of custodial interference cases result in a misdemeanor charge.

Table 3. Age and Charges of Individuals Who Interfered with Custody in Region 1
Table 3 shows that a majority of offenders were aged 30-39. As the offenders got older, the offense of custodial interference decreased. This may be a result of offenders maturing, and therefore recognizing the seriousness of the crime and/or their children are grown. The 18-29 age group had the lowest incidence of custodial interference incidences. This could be due to this age group being less likely to have children.

Table 4. Disposition Time

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Months to Disposition</th>
<th>Number of Cases</th>
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<tr>
<td>1 – 3</td>
<td>46</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4 – 6</td>
<td>25</td>
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<td>7 – 9</td>
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<td>13 - 15</td>
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<td>16 – 18</td>
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<td>1 ½ Years or more</td>
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<td>No disposition date</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

Table 4 shows that a majority of cases conclude in less than 3 months. Some of the cases take several months to resolve because there is either a warrant for the defendant’s arrest and they are unable to find them, leaving the case inactive until further notice, or there was a continuance in the trial. The 8 cases with no disposition date are cases that are either pending, inactive, or being closed. Inactive cases are a result of the defendant failing to appear in court on the scheduled court date. The pending cases are cases where the defendant may be in custody.
with another agency, or they have upcoming trial dates. Of the 91 cases, a total of 13 were found guilty with punishment of 1-2 years unsupervised probation.

Additional research was conducted by interviewing a law enforcement officer who has dealt with custodial interference cases. If the couple is married and one of them takes the children without consent, it is not against the law. If two unmarried parents do not have a parenting plan in place, regardless of their current relationship status, and one of the parents takes the children without consent, an officer may have difficulty determining custodial interference. If a parenting plan is in place, the opposing parent has 24 hours to return the child before it becomes a criminal matter.

In incidents of custodial interference, the officer takes multiple steps in helping recover the child. The process varies according to circumstances; however, the general process consists of these steps:

1. Assure custody is established through the courts.
2. Once custody is established, the officer then tries contacting the offender.
3. If attempts to contact the offender fails, officers may ping the offender’s cell phone to determine their location. Urgent safety concerns for the child allow this to be done without a warrant.
4. Upon locating the offender, an arrest is typically made.
5. Commonly, advocates are the ones who help reunify the children with the legal guardian.

Additional data was collected by posting an invitation to fill out a survey in Facebook groups that brought awareness to missing children. Of the 11 Facebook groups that the survey was posted in, a total of 4 people participated in the surveys: 2 who were former abductees, one parent who had their children abducted by the opposing parent and was reunified with their
children, and one parent who had their children abducted by the other parent and has not been reunified with their children.

One of the former abductees who participated in the survey is currently between the age of 18 and 22, and was abducted when she was 5 years old. The victim was abducted from one of her parents while a parenting plan was in place. She claimed that support groups, a victim advocate, family support, individual counseling, and law enforcement interaction was very helpful in his/her recovery process. Things the abductee could have used, but did not have access to, that would have assisted in the recovery process were law enforcement interaction, and the conviction of the offender. She was reunified with her legal guardian after 12 years and explained that the most difficult part about that was getting to know the left-behind parent all over again. The other participant is currently between the age of 33 and 37. They did not respond to the other questions asked in the survey.

Both participants of the left-behind parent’s survey stated that their child was abducted by the opposing parent while a parenting plan was in place. When asked what steps they have taken to recover the child, they both answered that they filed a missing person’s report, tried reasoning with the abducting parent, and reached out to family and friends. The participant who has yet to reunify with their child stated that the child has been missing for four years, and the additional things they did in attempt to reunify with the child was call and write letters to authorities and lawyers.

The other participant’s children were missing for 1 year, 10 months, and 9 days. When asked if she thinks the abduction would have occurred whether or not a parenting plan was in place, she said: “If the judge would have listened to me when I flat out told him that the ex said he would take them to another country, it might not have occurred. I begged for supervised
visitation, but the judge would not allow it. The ex took them at his second scheduled visitation.” In addition to filing a missing person’s report, attempting to reason with the opposing parent, and reaching out to friends and family, to help recover her missing children she also stated that she “Networked with multiple agencies, none of which could help, because my local sheriff’s dept. insisted they were "only with their father" and would not declare them missing. I hired 2 private investigators, a cadre of lawyers, spent well over $50,000 and am still in debt. There is just not enough help out there.” The biggest factor in successfully reuniting with her children was lucking on to a private investigator who somehow landed in a group of attorney’s in the country that her children were in. The investigator had connections and was generous enough to work with her and pull strings. During the reunification process, she claimed that, “Nothing was useful; there was no support other than immediate family. Law enforcement did nothing, the only agencies who came through for me were my contacts at the Department of State and the Federal Authority. All others' hands were tied. Believe me, we reached out to EVERYONE, news agencies, governors, President, senators, everyone, and all were sympathetic, but no one would lift a finger or draw attention to my case.” She said that if law enforcement were more helpful, that would have helped with the recovery process. She also claimed that the conviction of the offender would have been helpful, as well as having access to a victim advocate, support groups, and individual counseling.

**Discussion and Implications**

Parental abductions occur while a parenting plan is in place because the parent does not like the legal restriction that was granted between them and their children. Previous research found that the average age of abduction offenders were early thirties, with a range between 17 and 52 years of age. However, the current study shows that the average age of offenders are 30-
39. Additionally, past research found that family support as well as support from friends and attorneys, had an overall positive impact on the left-behind parent’s distress level. The participants from this study stated that, for them, having access to a victim advocate, support groups, individual counseling, and conviction of the offender would have helped them with this process.

Lastly, it was found in previous research that law enforcement officers are skeptical when approaching custodial interference cases, mainly because these types of cases are thought to be more of a private matter between the family and the court. A current analysis with law enforcement revealed that the reason some officers are skeptical when approaching these cases are due to conflicted family dynamics, such as the parent’s relationship.

In attempt to limit the incidences of parental abduction, it would be crucial for authorities to realize the seriousness, and take into consideration what the parent is suggesting when determining custody and visitation. Enforcing custodial interference laws would be extremely beneficial so if/when a custodial interference incident happens, the child is more quickly located and reunified with the left-behind parent, as opposed to years down the road. Lastly, when a left-behind parent is a victim of custodial interference, once it is reported, authorities should make resources available to him or her to assist with the process, such as a victim advocate or counseling.
References


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and Violent Behavior, 30, 24.

Victims, 21(2), 149-165

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doi:10.1080/1478601X.2012.724683
Appendix A

Recovery Process of Former Abductees from Facebook

Consent Form
Huntre Yearout
Project #

My name is Huntre Yearout, and I am a senior at Lewis-Clark State College. I am currently working on a research project about child abduction. The purpose of my research is to discover what helps abduction victims through their recovery process.

I was wondering if you would be willing to participate in an anonymous online survey. The survey will take about 10 minutes.

Questions in the survey ask about your recovery process upon being abducted. Potential risks may include some personal discomfort or stress.

Your input will help bring awareness to my community about the seriousness of abduction, and how it affects those involved.

Participating in this study is voluntary. If you are bothered by any questions, you may skip them. You may stop participating at any time.

No names or identifying information will be collected. All responses will be anonymous.

Your answers will be combined with the answers of all the other participants into a final paper. Any information identifying specific people will be left out of the study findings.

You can access the survey by clicking here.

If you have other questions, you can contact Professor McMillin at (208) 292-2680 or hemcmillin@lcsc.edu. If you have other questions about your rights in this study, you may contact the LCSC Institutional Review Board at (208) 792-2276.

If you complete the survey, that means you agree to participate in this study.

Thank you for your time in providing this important information.
Survey for Facebook Group – Former Abductees

1. Using the scale below, please rank the following items in terms of helpfulness in your recovery process (You can give the same ranking to several different items).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>0</th>
<th>1</th>
<th>2</th>
<th>3</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Does not apply</td>
<td>Not helpful</td>
<td>Helpful</td>
<td>Very helpful</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

_____ Support groups

_____ A victim advocate

_____ Family support

_____ Individual counseling

_____ Law enforcement interaction

_____ Conviction of the offender

_____ Other (Please explain) ________________________________________________

________________________________________________________________________

2. What are some things you could have used, but did not have, to help with your recovery process? (Please check all that apply).

_____ Support groups

_____ A victim advocate

_____ Family support

_____ Individual counseling
3. How old were you when you were first abducted?
_______________________________

4. How long were you missing?
____________________________________

5. What was your relationship with the offender prior to abduction?

_____ Parent ➔ If parent, was there a parenting plan in place at that time?
   _____ Yes      _____ No      _____ Unsure

_____ Family friend

_____ Acquaintance

_____ No relationship

_____ Other (Please explain) _________________________________

6. Your Gender:

_____ Male

_____ Female
_____ Other (please provide your preferred gender identity) ____________________

7. Your Current Age:

☐ 18 – 22
☐ 23 – 27
☐ 28 – 32
☐ 33 – 37
☐ 38 – 42
☐ 43 – 47
☐ 48 – 52
☐ 53 or older
My name is Huntre Yearout, and I am a senior at Lewis-Clark State College. I am currently working on a research project about child abduction. The purpose of my research is to discover what helps abduction victims and their families through the search or recovery process.

I was wondering if you would be willing to participate in a survey for parents of child abduction. The survey will take about 10 minutes.

Questions in the survey ask about your recovery process in reuniting with your abducted child. Potential risks may include some personal discomfort or stress.

Your input will help my community learn about the seriousness of abduction, and how it affects those involved.

Participating in this study is voluntary. If you are bothered by any questions, you may skip them. You may stop participating at any time.

No names or identifying information will be collected. All responses will be anonymous.

Your answers will be combined with the answers of all the other participants into a final paper. Any information identifying specific people will be left out of the study findings.

You can access the survey by clicking here.

If you have other questions, you can contact Professor McMillin at (208) 292-2680 or hemcmillin@lcsc.edu. If you have other questions about your rights in this study, you may contact the LCSC Institutional Review Board at (208) 792-2276.

If you complete the survey, that means you agree to participate in this study.

Thank you for your time in providing this important information.
Survey for Facebook Group – Left Behind Parents - Reunified

1. Was your child abducted by the other parent?
   A. Yes
   B. No – If no, please proceed to question #4

2. At the time your child(ren) were abducted, was a parenting plan in place?
   A. Yes
   B. No - If no, please proceed to question #4

3. Do you think the abduction would still have occurred if there was a parenting plan?
   Please explain.

4. How long were your children missing?

5. What steps did you take aside from bringing awareness through Facebook groups to recover your children? (Please check all that apply).

   _____ Filed a missing person's report
   _____ Filed a parenting plan
   _____ Tried reasoning with the abducting parent
6. What were the biggest factors in successfully reuniting you with your children?
________________________________________________________________________
________________________________________________________________________
________________________________________________________________________

7. What are some things you used, or found helpful during the reunification process? (Please check all that apply).
   _____ Support groups
   _____ A victim advocate
   _____ Individual counseling
   _____ Law enforcement interaction
   _____ Conviction of the offender
   _____ Other (Please explain)
________________________________________________________________________
________________________________________________________________________

8. What are some things you could have used, but did not have, to help with the process of reuniting your children? (Please check all that apply).
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Option</th>
<th>Description</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Support groups</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A victim advocate</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Individual counseling</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Law enforcement interaction</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conviction of the offender</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other (Please explain)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Left-Behind Parents from Facebook – Not Reunified

Consent Form
Huntre Yearout
Project #

My name is Huntre Yearout, and I am a senior at Lewis-Clark State College. I am currently working on a research project about child abduction. The purpose of my research is to discover what helps abduction victims and their families with the search process.

I was wondering if you would be willing to participate in a survey for parents of child abduction. The survey will take about 10 minutes.

Questions in the survey ask about your search process for your abducted child(ren). Potential risks may include some personal discomfort or stress.

Your input will help my community learn about the seriousness of abduction, and how it affects those involved.

Participating in this study is voluntary. If you are bothered by any questions, you may skip them. You may stop participating at any time.

No names or identifying information will be collected. All responses will be anonymous.

Your answers will be combined with the answers of all the other participants into a final paper. Any information identifying specific people will be left out of the study findings.

You can access the survey by clicking [here](#).

If you have other questions, you can contact Professor McMillin at (208) 292-2680 or hemcmillin@lcsc.edu. If you have other questions about your rights in this study, you may contact the LCSC Institutional Review Board at (208) 792-2276.

If you complete the survey, that means you agree to participate in this study.

Thank you for your time in providing this important information.
Survey for Facebook Group – Left Behind Parents - Not Reunified

1. Was your child abducted by the other parent?
   A. Yes
   B. No – If no, please proceed to question #4

2. At the time your child(ren) were abducted, was a parenting plan in place?
   A. Yes
   B. No – If no, please proceed to question #4

3. Do you think the abduction would still have occurred if there was a parenting plan?
   Please explain.
   __________________________________________________________________________
   __________________________________________________________________________

4. How long have your children been missing for?
   __________________________________________________________________________

5. What steps have you taken aside from bringing awareness through Facebook groups to
   recover your child?  (Please check all that apply).
   _____ Filed a missing person's report
   _____ Filed a parenting plan
   _____ Tried reasoning with the abducting parent
   _____ Reached out to family and friends
   _____ Other (Please explain)
**Approach Script/Introductory Email**

**For Victim Advocate**

Hello,

My name is Huntre Yearout. I am a student at Lewis-Clark State College, currently working on a research project about abduction. My professor, Heidee McMillin, gave me your contact information. The purpose of my research is to find out a little more regarding the recovery process of former abduction victims.

I was wondering if you would be willing to meet with me to answer some of the questions on this subject.

I have attached the questions so that you could make an informed decision about helping me have a better understanding of the different recovery processes former victims of abduction experience, and what seems to be the most useful. The questions will be presented in an in-person interview.

Please do not provide any answers to me until I send you my Institutional Review Board (IRB) letter of approval from the college.

Thank you for your time and consideration, I look forward to hearing from you!

Huntre
Approach Script/Introductory Email

For Law Enforcement

Hello,

My name is Huntre Yearout. I am a student at Lewis-Clark State College, currently working on a research project about abduction. My professor, Heidee McMillin, gave me your contact information. The purpose of my research is to find out a little more regarding the recovery process of former abduction victims.

I was wondering if you would be willing to meet with me to answer some of the questions on this subject.

I have attached the questions so that you could make an informed decision about helping me have a better understanding of the different recovery processes former victims of abduction experience, and what seems to be the most useful. The questions will be presented in an in-person interview.

Please do not provide any answers to me until I send you my Institutional Review Board (IRB) letter of approval from the college.

Thank you for your time and consideration, I look forward to hearing from you!

Huntre
Interview questions for law enforcement

1. I understand you have some experience with custodial interference cases. Can you tell me about how those cases are handled?

2. If a parenting plan is not in place, and a parent takes the child without consent, is that still considered kidnapping from a law enforcement perspective?
   (If yes, proceed to question #3. If no, skip to question #4).

3. If a parenting plan is not in place, what role can law enforcement take to help recover the child?

4. If taking a child without consent and a parenting plan was not in place is not considered a kidnapping case, what do you advise the parent to do in order to recover their child?

5. What additional steps do you take in recovering a child from another state?
IRB Approval Letter

Thank you for your prompt response. You have met all the contingencies, and you are approved to go forward with your data collection. This project is approved for one year from the date of this letter.

If there are any **adverse events** during your project, please remember to complete and submit the appropriate form from the web site. If any changes are made to the study protocol, you must notify the IRB before implementation.

This approval does not relieve the investigator from the responsibility of providing continuing attention to ethical considerations involved in the use of human subjects participating in the study.

**COMPLETION FORM!** After completing data collection and removing any identifying information you may have connected with the data, please go to www.lcsc.edu/irb and complete the Completion Form. This is a new procedure to bring us into compliance with federal guidelines.

Happy data collection and analysis!

If you have any questions during your research, please feel free to contact me (mjedgehouse@lcsc.edu or 208-792-2055) or a member of the Board.

Thank you for taking the time and effort to protect the rights of your human participants.
Checklist for application submission:

☐ IRB application (include grant proposal if funded project)
☐ Informed consent/assent forms
☐ Outline or script to be provided prior to participants’ agreement to participate
☐ Instrument(s) [questionnaire, survey, testing]

Submit one complete hard copy with signatures to the
Social Sciences – SPH 101A

Email application as an attachment to IRB Chair

Any changes in the project after approval by the IRB must be resubmitted as a Modification for review by the IRB before changes can be made. Modifications do not change the period of initial approval.

APPROVAL IS GRANTED FOR ONE-YEAR MAXIMUM AND MAY BE SUBJECT TO REVIEW AT ANY TIME THROUGHOUT THIS PERIOD. ANNUAL REQUESTS MUST BE MADE TO THE IRB FOR CONTINUATION, AS LONG AS THE RESEARCH CONTINUES, OR IDENTIFIERS ARE MAINTAINED.