Missing Children

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In November 1997, an eight-year-old girl living in Puerto Rico was found to have been abducted by a stranger from her San Diego home nearly seven years earlier, when she was 14 months old. Her discovery received much attention in the media, highlighting the facts that abductions by strangers are rare and newsworthy events, and that finding a child who has been missing for so long a time is even more unusual. Over the years, other famous child-kidnapping cases, such as those of the Lindbergh baby in New Jersey in 1932, Adam Walsh in Florida in 1981, and Polly Klaas in California in 1993, each of which ended with the death of the child, have received enormous media attention and have heightened public awareness of the possibility of the abduction of children by strangers. In some instances, public policies have been made following particular, highly publicized cases. An example is the passage in 1984 of the Missing Children’s Assistance Act, after the kidnapping and death of Adam Walsh.

This article examines children who for various reasons may be considered missing. More than three-quarters of a million children are reported missing to the police in the United States each year, and many additional cases of missing children go unreported. Most cases of missing children are resolved without serious incident. These cases of missing children actually encompass many different social problems, including abductions by family members, nonfamily (or stranger) abductions, children who run away, children who are asked to leave home or who are abandoned (thrown away), and children who are lost or injured. The majority of abduction cases are family abductions, typically resulting from custody disputes. Many more children run away or are asked to leave their homes than are abducted, and very few children are abducted by strangers—only 200 to 300 stranger kidnappings are reported each year. Moreover, with the exception of kidnapping by strangers, it appears that the majority of children in each of these situations are not literally missing, because in a large proportion of cases, caretakers know where their children are most of the time during the episodes when the children are not at home.
Definitions and Data

The term “missing children” was coined in 1981, around the time that the U.S. Senate first held hearings on the subject in response to national publicity about a number of kidnapping cases. Shortly after that time, magazine and newspaper articles about missing children began to appear, and the NBC network presented a televised docudrama about Adam Walsh, which raised public consciousness even further. In 1984, the National Center for Missing and Exploited Children (NCMEC), a private, nonprofit organization funded in part through a cooperative agreement with the U.S. Department of Justice, was opened and began to distribute pictures of missing children on milk cartons, on shopping bags, and in bulk mailings.

As previously noted, the concept of missing children represents a conglomeration of a number of problems. A major study of the phenomenon of missing children (NISMART or the National Incidence Study of Missing, Abducted, Runaway and Throwaway Children) published in 1990 concluded that the problems frequently lumped together as “missing children” were “extremely dissimilar social problems” affecting different children and different families. Although each of these groups of children represents very different social problems, law enforcement officials may be called upon to search for the missing children in any of these situations, and it may not always be possible to distinguish the type of incident at the outset of an investigation.

In addition, many cases of missing children may not be reported to the police at all, and police involvement in the resolution of the different kinds of cases varies widely—nonfamily abductions involve the highest proportion of police work per case, while known family abductions are often referred directly to social workers or the family court.

Because missing children are so heterogeneous, there is no single source of data or consistently applied set of definitions to describe the group. This article reports on three sources of data on missing children: NISMART, the large-scale multisource study designed to estimate the number of children in each of several categories of missing children in a single year (1988); the National Study of Law Enforcement Policies and Practices Regarding Missing Children and Homeless Youth (NSLEPP), conducted by the U.S. Department of Justice separately from NISMART (1987 to 1989); and the ongoing data collection on missing persons from the Federal Bureau of Investigation’s (FBI’s) National Crime Information Center (NCIC).

The NISMART data will be used to describe the size and scope of the problem of missing children; NSLEPP will be used to describe the variety of police responses to reports of missing children; and the NCIC data will be used to examine the recent trends in the number of children reported missing.

NISMART

NISMART is the most reliable source of information about all types of missing children. NISMART collected information about children who were abducted by family members and non–family members, runaways, children who were abandoned or thrown out of their homes (thrownaways), and children who were missing because they were lost or injured or for other reasons. Each of these problems was examined separately in the study, and definitions were established for each problem, as shown in Figure 1. Each of the categories (except nonfamily abductions) was broken into two definitions based on the different ways in which an affected family and relevant officials might view the situation. For example, having an adolescent run away might be a serious crisis in many families, but police experience is that most cases of this type resolve themselves quickly and without incident. For study purposes, this distinction was captured by using two sets of definitions. One, called broad-scope, defined the problem as an affected family might see it. The other, called policy-focal, was a subset of the broad-scope cases that attempted to reflect the points of view of government officials, community agencies, or the police, and was meant to include only the more serious events in which a child was very likely to be in danger. All definitions were for children under age 18, and are shown in Figure 1.
Because any occurrence of nonfamily abduction is taken seriously by the police as well as by families, nonfamily abductions were not divided into broad-scope and policy-focal categories. Yet, because the perception of what constitutes a stranger abduction in the public view may be different from the perception in the law enforcement community, NISMART divides nonfamily abductions into two categories: “legal-definition abductions” and “stereotypical kidnappings.” Legal-definition abductions may arise in many sexual assaults (such as rape) and other crimes that involve the coerced movement or detention of another person. The period of abduction in such instances may be relatively brief, and the abductee is usually not moved very far. On the other hand, stereotypical kidnappings include children taken for ransom or with the intention of keeping or killing them (see Figure 1 for the complete definition of these terms).

Because NISMART examined such disparate problems, it consisted of several separate studies. The primary data collection was done through a nationally representative random telephone survey, which included interviews of 10,544 caretakers of 20,505 children to find out how many of the children in these households had run away or had been abducted, thrown away, lost, or otherwise missing. The household survey was done because many cases of missing children, especially family abductions and runaways, never come to the attention of police; however, in many situations, caretakers have detailed recollections of the events surrounding an episode. A survey of juvenile facilities (such as boarding schools and group homes) was also conducted, because children who live in juvenile facilities are more likely, on average, to run away than children residing at home.

To examine nonfamily abductions, which are too rare to capture in a household survey, a national random sample of police records in 21 counties was conducted. Within each county, state police, the county sheriff, and municipal police departments that had jurisdiction over these cases and maintained files on criminal offenses were recruited to contribute data to the study database. In addition, an analysis of FBI data looked specifically at the number of children murdered in conjunction with abductions. Finally, to determine the number of children who were thrown away (for instance, being told to leave their households and not allowed back, something that caretakers may not readily admit to), a survey of agencies that come into contact with children was also conducted. A nationally representative sample of 29 counties was chosen, and within those counties, agencies were surveyed that might know of cases of child abuse and neglect, such as hospitals, county child protection agencies, and social service agencies.

Legal-definition abductions may arise in many sexual assaults (such as rape) and other crimes that involve the coerced movement or detention of another person.

NSLEPP
NSLEPP was conducted between 1987 and 1989 by the U.S. Justice Department to describe police response to and parent/caretaker satisfaction with police handling of cases of runaway, thrownaway, and abducted children. The survey documented police attitudes at the time NISMART was conducted. Data were collected in several ways. A mail survey was sent to 1,060 randomly selected police departments to discern how the departments treated missing child cases. Thirty police departments were visited for interviews to gather qualitative information about police responses to reports of missing children. In 1989, some 960 parents or caretakers who had reported missing children to the police were interviewed, as well as 378 children who had been reported missing.
### The Number of Missing Children in the United States in 1988: Definitions and Estimates from NISMART

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Description of Category</th>
<th>Number of Episodes</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Family abductions:</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Broad-scope:</strong> Situations in which a family member (1) took a child in violation of a custody agreement or decree, or (2) in violation of a custody agreement or decree failed to return a child at the end of a legal or agreed-upon visit, with the child being away at least overnight.</td>
<td>354,100 total (broad-scope) family abductions</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Policy-focal:</strong> A subset of the broad-scope cases that are more serious, entailing one of three additional aggravating conditions: (1) an attempt was made to conceal the taking or the whereabouts of the child or to prevent contact with the child, (2) the child was transported out of state, or (3) there was evidence that the abductor had the intent to keep the child indefinitely or to permanently alter custodial privileges.</td>
<td>Policy-focal 163,200</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Nonfamily abductions:</strong></td>
<td>3,200 to 4,600 total (legal-definition) nonfamily abductions</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Legal-definition:</strong> The coerced and unauthorized taking of a child into a building, into a vehicle, or a distance of more than 20 feet; the detention of a child for a period of more than one hour; or the luring of a child for the purposes of committing another crime.</td>
<td>Stereotypical-kidnapping 200 to 300</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Stereotypical-kidnapping:</strong> A subset of legal-definition abductions that require that the child (1) be gone overnight, (2) be killed, (3) be transported a distance of 50 miles or more, or (4) be ransomed; or (5) that the perpetrator evidence an intent to keep the child permanently. The perpetrator also needs to be a stranger.</td>
<td></td>
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<td><strong>Runaways:</strong></td>
<td>450,700 total (broad-scope) runaways</td>
</tr>
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<td><strong>Broad-scope:</strong> Children who left home without permission and stayed away overnight. Children who were already away and refused to come home were counted depending on their age and the amount of time away: Two nights away if they were 15 or older, and one night away if 14 or younger.</td>
<td>Policy-focal 133,500</td>
</tr>
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<td><strong>Policy-focal:</strong> Broad-scope children who in the course of their episodes were without a secure and familiar place to stay.</td>
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Figure 1 (continued)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Description of Category</th>
<th>Number of Episodes</th>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Thrownaways:</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Broad-scope:</strong> A child qualified as a broad-scope thrownaway if any one of four situations occurred: (1) the child had been directly told to leave the household; (2) the child had been away from home and a caretaker refused to allow the child back; (3) the child had run away, but the caretaker made no effort to recover the child or did not care whether the child returned; or (4) the child had been abandoned or deserted.</td>
<td>127,100 total (broad-scope) thrownaways</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Policy-focal:</strong> The group of broad-scope thrownaways without a secure and familiar place to stay during some portion of the episode. All abandoned children were considered policy-focal.</td>
<td>Policy-focal 59,200</td>
</tr>
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| **Lost, injured, or otherwise missing:** | 438,200 total (broad-scope) lost, injured, or otherwise missing |
| **Broad-scope:** Children missing from their caretakers for a variety of reasons, who did not fit into the other categories. Broad-scope children were missing for varying periods of time (from a few minutes to overnight) depending on the child's age, disability, and whether the absence was due to an injury. | Policy-focal 139,100 |
| **Policy-focal:** Broad-scope episodes serious enough that the police were called. | |

Note: The size of each pie represents the relative number of broad-scope cases compared to the other categories. Policy-focal cases are a subset of the total number of broad-scope cases, and are therefore included in the total at the top of each pie chart.

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*a NISMART = The National Incidence Study of Missing, Abducted, Runaway and Thrownaway Children*

at some time. In this article, data from NISMART are supplemented with data from NSLEPP and other sources to describe police responses to reports of missing children.

A Statistical Description of the Problem of Missing Children

Because there is no one type of missing child, each of the categories of missing children identified by NISMART is discussed here separately.

Nonfamily Abductions

Nonfamily or stranger abductions are the most feared type of missing child occurrence. In 1990, a nationwide poll found that 32% of parents of children under age 10 reported worrying “a lot” and 47% reported worrying “a little” that their children would be kidnapped. This fear is echoed by police concern. In all jurisdictions in NSLEPP, police assigned a high priority to stranger abductions and reports of very young missing children. However, as shown in Figure 1, NISMART estimated that only a very small number (3,200 to 4,600) of nonfamily abductions occur annually. These cases include children abducted for crimes other than kidnapping, and an even smaller number (200 to 300) of stereotypical kidnappings, in which the child is gone overnight, killed, transported a distance of 50 miles or more, or ransommed, or in which the perpetrator evidences an intent to keep the child permanently. Specific definitions for each of the categories are shown in Figure 1. Broadly defined nonfamily abductions made up fewer than 1% of the total number of missing persons (adults as well as children) reported to the police in 1988.

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Although nonfamily abductions are rare, their outcomes are often quite serious. In analyzing the outcomes of nonfamily abductions, NISMART largely focused on legal-definition abductions because of the small number of stereotypical kidnappings. Legal-definition abductions are usually carried out as part of other crimes, and consequently a high proportion of abducted children also experienced sexual assault (two-thirds), and about 20% were known to be injured (with lacerations, broken bones, or internal injuries). Nearly 90% of these cases involved the use of force, and weapons were present in 75% of the cases. Obviously, the most feared outcome of any abduction is the death of the child. NISMART’s analysis of FBI death data suggests that on average, between 47 and 147 stranger-abduction homicides occurred each year between 1976 and 1987. This estimate represents an upper limit. Another more recent study conducted by the Attorney General of the state of Washington estimated that each year there are about 100 murders of children who are abducted by strangers or family members, representing 4% of all murders of children within the United States (2,428 children were murdered in 1995).

The NISMART household survey also asked parents about attempted stranger abductions that occurred during the past year. Attempts were defined as situations that “if successful would have ended up qualifying as actual legal-definition abductions.” These data are necessarily speculative. Survey responses indicated that approximately 114,600 nonfamily abduction attempts occurred in 1988. The majority were attempts to lure a child into a car, in contrast to attempts to physically take a child. By definition, none of these attempts was successful, and in the majority of cases the police were not contacted.

Again, nonfamily abductions are rare, but when they do occur, the outcomes are often quite serious. Along with the seriousness of the outcomes, the relatively large number of attempted (but failed) abductions contributes to public fear of child abduction by strangers.

Family Abductions

NISMART found the number of broad-scope family abductions to be approximately 90 times larger than the number of nonfamily abductions (354,100 broad-scope family abductions as compared to 3,200 to 4,600 legal-definition...
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nonfamily abductions each year). The large number of family abductions primarily reflects the number of divorces involving children and state custody laws. Some state laws define this type of abduction as an abduction by a parent to take or keep a child for any length of time in violation of a custody decree. In 1990, more than one million children were involved in divorces. More than 95% of family abductions in NISMART occurred in families in which the child did not live with both parents. Changing social attitudes about who should have custody of children and growth in geographic mobility, which results in separated parents living a distance apart, may also affect the rate of family abduction, but the effects of these changes have not been studied.

Most family abductions are short-lived. In NISMART, 99% of the broad-scope family abductions had been resolved. In 81% of the cases, the children were abducted for a week or less. In half of the cases, caretakers knew where the children were most of the time. The “left-behind” parent contacted an attorney half of the time and contacted the police in 44% of the broad-scope cases. Family abductions are considered by police to be less of a concern than stranger abductions. As reported in NSLEPP, police in many departments routinely referred family abduction cases to prosecutors or social service agencies.

According to both NISMART and NSLEPP, few children were harmed in the course of family abductions. Five percent of the parents interviewed for NSLEPP reported that their children had been physically abused, and 19% believed that their children had been harmed mentally (as defined by the parents) as a result of family abductions. Given these relatively low estimates of harm to children resulting from family abductions, it is not surprising that, despite the large number of family abductions, public fear centers around abductions by strangers.

Runaways

As shown in Figure 1, runaways are the largest group in NISMART, with an estimated 450,700 per year. The majority of runaways are older teenagers—68% are age 16 or 17—and half of the runaways in the NSLEPP sample of major metropolitan areas had run away previously. Among runaways, children with a history of running away, older teenagers, and whites were found to have a higher risk of being away for longer periods of time, traveling farther, or staying in unsecured quarters.

In the great majority of runaway incidents, the children returned home within four weeks without suffering any adverse consequences. Two-thirds of broad-scope runaways run to friends’ or relatives’ houses and in almost 40% of cases their caretakers know of their whereabouts most of the time. The police were contacted in 40% of runaway cases in NISMART. More than 90% of runaways are not physically harmed, although some serious outcomes do occur, including violent victimization, sexual exploitation, and theft of personal possessions.

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Thrownaways

NISMART included a relatively new concept in the missing children paradigm—that of children who are thrown away. As detailed in Figure 1, thrownaway children include those who are literally asked to leave their households, those who leave and whose parents do not care if they come back or make no effort to recover them, and those who are abandoned. These children are victims of parental neglect and are not literally missing because their parents apparently do not care where they are. NISMART most likely underestimated the number of children thrown away because the study depended heavily on the knowledge of community professionals (who knew only about the subset of cases that came to their attention) and on caretaker reports (sometimes of their own actions).

According to caretakers, many (59%) of the throwaway situations began with arguments over fairly common subjects—house rules, friends, staying out late, school, and...
dress/appearance. In 27% of the cases, the arguments included physical violence, more than double the prevalence of violence reported for runaways (11%). Moreover, the outcomes of thrownaway episodes appeared to be more serious than those for runaways. Although the majority (68%) of thrownaway children returned home within two weeks, 20% of thrownaways had not returned home at the time of the interview. In comparison, 10% of runaways had not returned home at the time of the interview. Very few thrownaway children were reported to have been harmed during their episodes (1% were abused or physically assaulted, and 11% incurred self-defined mental harm), but the lack of concern that many of the caretakers had for the children to begin with must be taken into consideration when interpreting these figures.28

The police were called in connection with just 23% of broad-scope thrownaways, and 15% of the children were picked up by the police and placed in juvenile detention centers. NSLEPP found, however, that law enforcement agencies rarely had formal procedures for dealing with children who were no longer welcome at home.28

The lost, injured, or otherwise missing category was the second largest in NISMART, with 438,200 cases, including 139,100 in which the police were called. The majority of cases involved children under age 4 or ages 16 to 17 (the most mobile group). The most common reason for being in this group was that the child was hurt or injured (19%). Nearly 40% of the children were missing for relatively harmless reasons (forgetting the time, misunderstandings between children and caretakers,31 and unforeseen circumstances). However, a substantial percentage of children experienced some harm—14% were assaulted or abused, 21% experienced other physical harm, and 6% experienced mental harm (as defined by their caretakers).31 Almost all children in this category returned home within 24 hours.

Recent Trends
There are no recent reliable estimates of the aggregate number of missing children. The best available trend data come from the FBI, which uses the NCIC, an investigative database that contains information on many types of crimes and criminals, to provide estimates of the number of persons (adults and children) reported missing each year. The missing persons file, added to NCIC in 1975, is used primarily to help law enforcement agencies locate individuals who are missing but not wanted on criminal charges.32 Local police enter data into the file each time a person is reported missing, and police officers nationwide have access to the information. Since 1990, police have been required to immediately report missing persons to NCIC.
In 1997, nearly one million individuals (including both children and adults) were reported missing to the police and entered into the NCIC database. The FBI estimates that about 85% of all missing persons reported to it are juveniles. The number of reported missing persons has increased almost every year since the Missing Children’s Assistance Act was passed in 1984. Much of the 44% increase in the number of reports of missing children between 1991 and 1994 is mostly likely due to the requirement, introduced in 1990, that police immediately enter all missing persons into the NCIC database. Since 1994, however, the number of persons reported missing seems to have remained roughly constant.

NCIC provides an estimate of the aggregate amount of police involvement in missing persons cases, but has several serious limitations as a source of information about missing children. First, many cases of missing persons—particularly of children who run away, are thrown away, or are abducted by family members—are not reported to the police. NISMART estimated that the police were contacted in only 44% of family abductions, 40% of runaways, 23% of thrownaways, and 32% of lost, injured, or otherwise missing cases in 1988. In addition, NCIC data entry relies on police officers to decide whether to enter missing children at all and under which categories the children are entered. And the NCIC data do not allow for distinctions among the types of missing children as delineated in NISMART.

Conclusion

More than 99% of all missing child cases reported to police in 1996 were successfully resolved, leaving about 2,000 cases pending at the end of the year. Most, but not all, of those cases were resolved in 1997. The few cases that were not resolved will continue to be a source of trauma for the families involved, and a portion of those that were resolved produced difficult times for the children, the parents, and even the communities involved. From a child’s perspective, any form of being missing is frequently distressing and places the child in some jeopardy. Even though most cases are resolved, the NISMART data suggest that each year about 150,000 children are seriously hurt either physically or mentally in the course of their “missing” episodes.

Preventing children from running away, being abducted or thrown away, or getting lost involves separate strategies for each problem. Strong and effective supports for troubled families might prevent some family abductions, runaways, and children from being thrown out of their homes or abandoned. Because the majority of missing children are adolescents, parent education about adolescent development could help ameliorate some of the problems that lead to runaway and thrownaway adolescents. However, the prevention of crimes against children, in the form of stranger abductions and kidnappings, must be addressed with more traditional crime-prevention, child safety approaches, such as more effective police procedures and laws to protect children, as well as dissemination of positive, nonfearful, effective child safety messages and training programs for use in homes, in schools, in child care facilities, and in the media.

Likewise, responding effectively to the problems of missing children requires separate consideration of children who are abducted, run away, are thrown away, or are lost. Children who are no longer welcome in their own homes require a different mix of services than children who are abducted by family members, become lost at airports, or are abducted by strangers.

The lack of recent data on the incidence of or response to the problems of missing and displaced children hampers the ability of decision makers to design service systems that can effectively deal with their disparate problems. NCIC is the only regular mechanism for tracking the problems of missing children, and population-based data are collected from it on a sporadic basis and in poorly defined categories. A new NISMART

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study is now under way, and the data that will become available in 1999 may assist in making decisions about how the police and social service systems can respond better to the plight of missing and displaced children. Nonetheless, the lack of a regular tracking mechanism (beyond NCIC) may hamper efforts to assist these children in the long term. Adding a regular series of questions on abduction to the National Crime Victimization Survey, an annual household survey about the experience of crime for individuals 12 years of age and older, might be a good way to start building a reliable, periodic source of information about all categories of missing children. If better tracking mechanisms were available, policy related to missing children might be driven less by individual highly publicized incidents, and more by serious consideration of the size of each category of missing children and the effects of being “missing” for the children in each of the categories.

The authors thank David Finkelhor of the University of New Hampshire, Paula Fass of the University of California at Berkeley, Nancy Hammer and Julia Cartwright of the National Center for Missing and Exploited Children, and Paul Bresson and Connie Weeks of the Federal Bureau of Investigation for their thoughtful comments and assistance with the data.

6. The survey response rate was 89%. See note no. 4, Finkelhor, Hotaling, and Sedlak, pp. 27, 43.
7. See note no. 4, Finkelhor, Hotaling, and Sedlak, p. 31.
8. The facilities surveyed were selected by asking respondents to the household survey if any child of the household was living in a boarding school, hospital, or juvenile facility for at least two consecutive weeks during the past year. If the answer was yes, the name of the facility was taken and the facility was contacted. See note no. 4, Finkelhor, Hotaling, and Sedlak, p. 49.
9. See note no. 4, Finkelhor, Hotaling, and Sedlak, p. 73.
10. Data were gathered on any case of child abuse or neglect that came to the attention of staff in each participating agency during a three-month period in 1986. See note no. 4, Finkelhor, Hotaling, and Sedlak, p. 75.
14. Because these estimates of nonfamily abductions were reached through the study of police records, they represent a lower bound. Families are very likely to report nonfamily abductions to the police, but some may not, and limiting the study to police records automatically excludes any cases that were unreported. More important, some abductions may have been missed because of the methods used in the NISMART police records study—the study examined records of specific types of crimes, excluding categories such as robbery. If an abduction accompanied a robbery, the study would have missed it. However, even if the number of nonfamily abductions is twice as high as the NISMART estimate, it is still very small in comparison to the other groups of missing children. See note no. 4, Finkelhor, Hotaling, and Sedlak, pp. 63–71.
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22. See note no. 4, Finkelhor, Hotaling, and Sedlak, p. 15.
24. See note no. 4, Finkelhor, Hotaling, and Sedlak, p. 100.
26. See note no. 4, Finkelhor, Hotaling, and Sedlak, p. 201.
27. See note no. 4, Finkelhor, Hotaling, and Sedlak, p. 243.
31. See note no. 4, Finkelhor, Hotaling, and Sedlak, p. 298.
33. See note no. 4, Finkelhor, Hotaling, and Sedlak, pp. 111, 200.
35. In NISMA, most children returned within a relatively short time frame. For the broadscope cases, 80% of children abducted by family members returned within one week, 72% of runaways and 63% of thrownaways were gone less than two weeks, and fewer than 1% of the lost, injured, or otherwise missing children were gone more than 24 hours. See note no. 4, Finkelhor, Hotaling, and Sedlak, pp. 109, 199, 263, 289.