"Smart" Policy Decisions to Combat a Social Problem: The Case of Child Abductions 2002–2003

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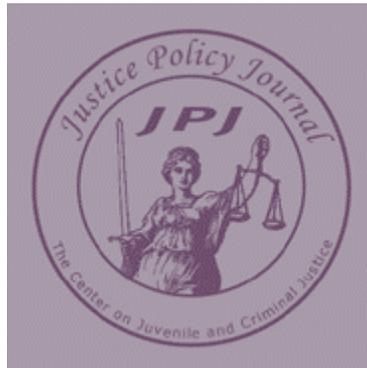
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Abstract

This article examines the child abduction problem during the year following the June 2002 Elizabeth Smart abduction by comparing three aspects of the problem: first, New York Times articles about child abductions; second, social scientific research findings reported in the NISMART-2 study; and third, the institution of AMBER Plans to deal with the problem. Analysis indicates that the Times and NISMART-2 offer markedly different pictures about the nature of the problem, and that AMBER Plans are more closely connected with the horror stories of stereotypical kidnappings offered by the news media. The use of AMBER Plans to combat the child abduction problem appears misguided, in that it fails to address the larger problem of more common, family abduction types. Discussion is offered regarding the relevance of the research findings with regards to the study of the abduction problem and suggestions are offered for future policy assessment.

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Introduction

During summer of 2002, the national news media focused on a number of child abductions, most notably the June 5th nighttime kidnapping of Elizabeth Smart from her bedroom in Utah. Approximately nine months later Elizabeth was recovered, and meanwhile the news media continued to publish articles about the child abduction incidents and policies, including the institution of numerous statewide AMBER Alert Plans. This article explores the history and development of the child abduction problem in the U.S., particularly focusing on the one-year period following the Smart abduction. To reveal the complex interplay between claims-makers and policy development, the paper examines three elements of the discourse about abductions: First, we look at the news media's characterization of child abductions during the year following the Elizabeth Smart abduction. Second, we examine social scientific research findings about the extent of the abduction problem. Finally, we examine the institution of AMBER Plans as a means of mitigating the abduction problem.

Social problems claims are implicitly connected with policy initiatives, in that they often serve as the underlying rationale for the policies. In this article, we employ a triangular approach to examine the connection between policy initiatives and two varieties claims for the abductions problem. The goal is to understand the social construction of this social problem by examining two varieties of claims-making and their role in influencing policy development. For the one year period following the Smart abduction, we examine the *New York Times* reporting on the child abduction problem. We find that the *Times* disproportionately focused on stereotypical

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kidnapping incidents, while social science data suggests that familial abductions are far more prevalent.

After identifying this discrepancy between the news media and social scientific claims about the abduction problem, we find that the rapid institution of numerous statewide AMBER Plans in 2002 and 2003 is more logically connected to the images of the abduction problem present in the *Times* than sociological research findings. In our case, the horror stories published by the news media prove more effective in influencing policy outcomes. Ultimately, we argue that the institution of AMBER Plans to combat the child abduction problem is misguided because they fail to address more common familial types of abduction incidents. Finally, discussion is offered regarding the relevance of the research findings with regards to the study of the social problem of child abductions and suggestions are offered for future policy assessment.

History of Child Abductions as a Social Problem

Within the social constructionist approach, social problems are typically defined as "the activities of individuals or groups making assertions of grievances and claims with respect to some putative conditions" (Spector and Kitsuse 1977:75). One focus of constructionist studies is to view the claims-making activities as primary to the emergence and orientation of "actual" problems from the field of "available" problems. Both mass media and social science researchers play significant roles in setting the agenda for social problems, and therefore have an influential role in the creation, maintenance, and orientation of social problems, as well as suggesting policies that might be instituted to mitigate the problems.

Estimating the Extent of the Abduction Problem

The child abduction problem is typical in the sense that early estimates tended to come from activists, while subsequent estimates came from social scientific research. Both types of

estimates have been heavily criticized as inaccurate. Early in the emergence of the problem, there was a vacuum of research on the incidence and prevalence of abductions, and activists were initially viewed as experts. Those in the public forum often provided data according to their definition of missing children, their group's agenda, and their limited knowledge of the incidence and prevalence of missing children (Best 1990, Gentry 1988). Consequently, misleading and often conflicting figures on the number and types of incidents were widely publicized. Activists provided the earliest estimates of the missing children problem, and these statistics appear to have been highly exaggerated. For example, there were estimates of 2 million children being missing each year, with 100,000 being abducted by non-custodial parents. Estimates of stranger-abductions ranged from 4,000 to 50,000 per year. Similarly, public opinion polls found that most people believed that stranger abductions accounted for the majority of missing children (Best 1987: 106-8). Subsequently, these estimates were criticized by social scientists (e.g., Best 1987 and 1988; Forst and Blomquist 1991) and journalists (notably, Griego and Kilzer [1985], from the *Denver Post* who won a Pulitzer Prize for coverage of this issue).

Prior to Gelles' (1984) preliminary study on "parental snatchings," statistics on missing children were best guesses and lacked methodological rigor. Gelles estimated that 459,000 to 751,000 incidences of abduction by a parent occurred annually. Acknowledging his work as preliminary and very limited, Gelles argued that more standardized and scientific methods for estimating the incidence and prevalence of missing children were needed. That year, Congress mandated through the 1984 Missing Children' Assistance Act that the Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention [OJJDP] periodically conduct studies to determine the national incidence rates for categories of missing children. As a result of that mandate, the OJJDP

developed the National Incidence Studies of Missing, Abducted, Runaway, and Thrownaway Children, known as "NISMART" (Sedlak et al. 2002).

NISMART measured the missing children problem in 1988 (Finkelhor et al. 1990). While these estimates added methodological rigor to the incidence estimates of child abductions, they nonetheless received criticism (e.g., Best and Thibodeau 1997). Subsequently, there has been a second study, NISMART-2, comprised of four component studies measuring the missing children problem in the years 1997-1999 (Sedlak et al. 2002). To date these are the most comprehensive source of data available for the missing children problem in the U.S.

Exemplifying the Abduction Problem

Despite the fact that social scientists have completed numerous studies on child abductions, shocking examples remain most influential in typifying the problem. Examples frequently serve as the introductory part of claims-making behavior, despite the fact that many examples are atypical, shocking cases. Such horror stories often become referents for the discussion of the problem in general (Best 1987: 105-6). "Sociologists recognize the relevance and importance of emotionally provocative mass media accounts for creating new social problems" (Johnson 1995:17). Shocking examples evoke negative emotions in readers, often by concentrating on the injuries and gruesome details of cases. Cases involving serious injury are more "newsworthy" than more routine incidents (Johnson 1995: 20-3). The use of horror stories in news media reports has been present in the creation of the problem of "missing children," a term apparently coined in 1981 (Best 1987: 103).

The subject of this study, child abductions, is a subset of the missing children problem. A quarter century ago, a number of high profile cases sparked a national debate, including the disappearance of Etan Patz in 1979, the murder of Adam Walsh in 1981, and series of child

murders in southern states (Gentry 1988). Claims-makers for the missing child movement were quick to establish the new domain of child abductions, and their efforts to bring national attention to the problem successfully evoked widespread public concern and media attention (Best 1990). More recently, there have been other high profile cases influential in defining the child abduction problem, including the 1996 abduction and murder of Amber Hagerman and the 2002 abduction of Elizabeth Smart.

These horror stories have been influential in framing the missing children problem such that the subcategory of stranger abductions of children is perceived to be typical of the problem as a whole. Because they are perceived as typical, these *horror stories* are important in the public discourse about the problem and in influencing initiatives to mitigate the problem (Best 1988). Previous research has suggested that the mass media disproportionately focuses their attention on stranger abductions of children, while ignoring more common incidents such as familial abductions (Best 1988 and Harrison 1995). Defining the problem of missing children primarily in relation to pedophiles and murders has been misleading and inaccurate, as children are most often missing because their whereabouts unknown or because they have been abducted by a family member who does not have custodial rights.

Policy-Making and Child Abductions

Simmons et al. (1974) argue that public policies implemented by Western nations are inherently based on value choices, which determine the government's priorities and commitment of resources. During the early 1980's child abduction claims-makers, largely parents of child victims of stereotypical kidnappings, began a movement to alter how the nation addressed child abductions. Claims-makers depicted the horrible fate of numerous child victims who had been brutally assaulted or murdered.

Parents of victims, and other claims-makers appealed to legislators and government officials' sense of decency to stop predators from terrorizing the nation's families. For example, John Walsh, father of Adam Walsh who was abducted from a department store in 1981, successfully brought the problem into the homes of millions with his show "America's Most Wanted." Congress responded by holding hearing, legislating the creation of the National Center for Missing and Exploited Children, and mandating the periodic study of the problem. The federal policies that have been implemented throughout the last twenty years have primarily addressed the stereotypical abduction problem affecting a small proportion of abducted children.

When claims-makers are able to utilize media sources to gain exposure to their cause, the empirical evidence surrounding the problem can fall to the wayside leaving an inadequate policy and governmental response to the social problem. Essentially, the news media shape the reality, including perceptions about the extent of the problem and the identities of the victims and perpetrators (Glasgow University Media Group 1980; Fishman 1980). The complex issues surrounding the largest population of abduction victims, familial abductions, are latent with value choices regarding government interference into the family, respect for public and private spheres, domestic violence, custody disputes, and child support. The identity of the victim and victimizer, including their relationship to one another, is not always clear, which makes for a confusing news story and complicates the development of public policy.

Constructing the Child Abduction Problem, 2002-2003

This section examines the triangular connection among three issues related to the abduction problem during the time period of 2002 to 2003. Specifically, we first examine social scientific findings about child abductions published in the NISMART-2 findings. Second, we examine the news media coverage of abductions, in an analysis of *New York Times* articles.

These two claims are then examined in relation to AMBER Alert policies instituted by states, to determine the connection between two varieties of claims and policy solutions. In this section, we discuss the operationalization of our triangular approach to studying claims-making activities in the child abduction problem.

Figure 1: Triangular Approach
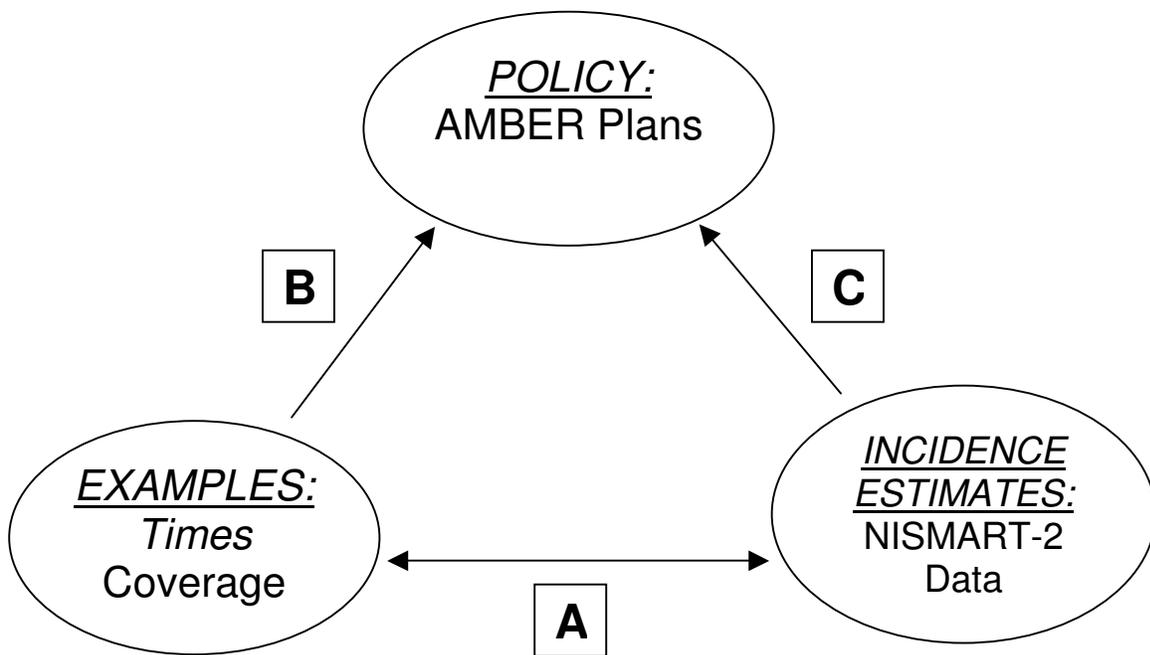
Incidence Estimates of Child Abduction

The NISMART studies are the most rigorous sources of data about the missing children problem (Hanson 2000). The first NISMART study (Finkelhor et al 1990) was important not only in measuring the problem, but the categories established within the study have been influential in defining the types of missing children incidents. The NISMART-2 defines three major categories of child abductions: *family abduction, non-family abduction*, and *stereotypical kidnapping*, a subset of non-family abduction, defined in Table 1.

Estimates came from two sources: a household telephone survey of caretakers and an analysis of police reports. While the two sources returned different estimates of the extent of the abduction problem, they were relatively consistent in their estimation of the proportion of incidents by type. Specifically, about four in five abductions were family-type, and about one in five was non-familial. Only a small proportion, 0.08% and 0.13% in the caretakers and police studies, respectively, were stereotypical kidnappings (Sedlak et al 2002).

Abductions Reported in the New York Times

To compare two examples of claims about the abduction problem (NISMART-2 data and *New York Times* articles) we applied the three categories of abductions utilized in the NISMART studies to the incidents reported in the *Times*. The news media are important claims-makers in the social problems arena, and the *New York Times* is cited as the most influential source, in terms of its ability to define social problems (Conklin 2003: 2-3; Gitlin 1980: 299). To examine the news media grounds claims for child abductions, we analyzed the corpus of the 98 *Times* articles discussing child kidnappings in the U.S. during a one-year study period between June 1, 2002 and May 31, 2003. This period includes the June 5, 2002 kidnapping of Elizabeth Smart and her subsequent return on March 12, 2003. Such a study period allowed for the examination

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of the immediate news media response to the Smart case, as well as a more extended discourse

about the child abduction problem.

Table 1: NISMART-2 Estimates of Abductions by Type

Incident Type	Description	NISMART-2 Caretaker Estimate	NISMART-2 Police Estimate
Family	When a family member or someone acting on behalf of the family member detains a child under the age of 15 in violation of a custody order to indefinitely or permanently prevent contact or deny custodial rights of a parent.	78% (117,200)	82.4% (56,500)
Non-Familial	When a non-family member detains a child under the age of 15 by force or threat for at least one hour.	22% (33,000)	17.6% (12,100)
Stereotypical	When a stranger or slight acquaintance detains a child overnight, transports them 50 miles or more, holds them for ransom, or has abducted them with the intent to kill them or keep them permanently.	0.08% (115)	0.13% (90)
Total		100% (150,200)	100% (68,600)

Source: Sedlak et al. 2002

The articles were identified using the *New York Times Index*, which catalogs the thematic content of *Times* articles by topic, providing a brief description of the content of each article. In addition, the articles were further identified through an examination of the article abstracts, including headlines and article lead sections, which reliably indicate the thematic content of newspaper articles (Bell 1991; van Dijk 1988a and 1988b; van Dijk and Kintsch 1983). Electronic copies of the included articles were downloaded from the Lexis-Nexis database, and the corpus of articles was managed using the qualitative data analysis software, QSR NUD*IST 4. Coding involved the application of the NISMART-2 categories for abduction to the stories reported in the *Times*, concentrating on the perpetrators, their actions, and victims for the 22 incidents identified in the 98 *Times* articles. We focused on the characteristics of the events that would allow us to determine the abduction type, including perpetrators relationships with their victims. We employed two units of analysis: articles and paragraphs.

The *Times* reported 22 specific child abduction incidents in 68 (69.4%) of the 98 articles analyzed in the study. Of these, the coverage of the Smart case received the lion's share of coverage, as it was the primary topic of 39 (57.4%) of the 68 articles about abductions, while the modal number of documents about all other incidents was one. When examining the volume of coverage, the similar comparison holds true. The Smart abduction was covered in 680 (65.1%) of the 1045 paragraphs of newsprint about abduction incidents. The Farber case received the next highest volume of coverage, with 57 paragraphs in three articles. Many of the abductions were discussed in a single article with two paragraphs of text.

When examining the types of incidents covered in the *Times,* our analysis indicates that reportage focuses heavily on nonfamily abductions, and primarily on its subcategory of stereotypical kidnappings. Approximately 83.6% to 89.6% of documents and 87.8% to 92.6% of

paragraphs in the reportage were about stereotypical incidents. Conversely, the *Times* did not

spill much ink on familial incidents, as only 3.0% of documents and 2.6% of paragraphs

discussed familial kidnappings.

Table 2: Child Abductions in the *New York Times*, June 2002 – May 2003

Incident	Victim	Type	Articles	Paragraphs *
1	Smart	Stereotypical	39	680
2	n/a	Stereotypical	1	6
3	Rivera	Familial	2	27
4	Pevia	Non-Familial	1	2
5	Cardelfe	Stereotypical	1	16
6	n/a	Stereotypical	1	33
7	n/a	Stereotypical	1	2
8	Propp	Stereotypical	4	53
9	Patterson	Unknown	1	29
10	n/a	Unknown (Stereotypical)	1	2
11	Pratt	Stereotypical	2	53
12	n/a	Stereotypical	1	2
13	Cortez	Unknown (Stereotypical)	2	23
14	Chavez	Stereotypical	1	1
15	Short	Stereotypical	1 **	7
16	n/a	Stereotypical	1 **	3
17	Timmons	Non-Familial	1	13
18	Farber	Stereotypical	3	57
19	n/a	Unknown	1	4
20	n/a	Stereotypical	1	4
21	LeBron	Unknown (Stereotypical)	1	26
22	Hayward	Non-Familial	1	2
Total			67	1045

Notes: * Paragraphs are determined using the equation $\{[TU-(ART*22)]/2\}+ART$, where TU= text units and where ART = article. This formula allows for the estimation of paragraphs, considering the structural elements latent in text downloaded from Lexis-Nexis and document identifiers utilized in the QSR NUD*IST 4 database.
**Incidents 15 and 16 were reported together in a single article.

Table 3: Child Abduction Types in *New York Times* Articles, June 2002 – May 2003

Incident Type	Incidents	Articles	Paragraphs
Family	1 (4.6%)	1 (3.0%)	27 (2.6%)
Non-Familial	16 (72.7%)	59 (88.1%)	934 (89.4%)
	19 (86.4%)	63 (94.0%)	985 (94.3%)
Stereotypical	13 (59.1%)	56 (83.6%)	917 (87.8%)
	16 (72.7%)	60 (89.6%)	968 (92.6%)
Unknown	5 (22.7%)	6 (9.0%)	84 (8.0%)
	2 (9.1%)	2 (3.0%)	33 (3.2%)
Total	22 (100%)	67 (100%)	1045 (100%)

Note: Upper statistic in each cell is a conservative estimate when unknown (stereotypical implied) cases are counted as unknown, while lower number is a more liberal estimate when unknown (stereotypical implied) cases are counted as stereotypical.

The timing of the coverage of abductions was also noteworthy, as it centered on two events relating to a single case: the June 5, 2002 abduction and March 12, 2003 recovery of Elizabeth Smart. While the *Times* did report sporadically about other incidents during the study period as abductions occurred, the Elizabeth Smart case stands out as the most noteworthy incident. In fact, it appears that reporting about other abductions increased during the summer and fall of 2002, in the wake of the Smart incident. Elizabeth Smart was the horror story that revived child abductions in the national news media agenda, and the news media subsequently reported other cases, as they occurred. In this sense, the news media coverage of the child abduction phenomenon occurred as a function of the coverage of the Smart case.

Two major themes emerged from the articles collected during the study period, those discussing actual child abductions that occurred, and those discussing the policy implications or changes during that time. The majority of the articles described aspects of the Elizabeth Smart

abduction. These articles described the incident itself, the family's reaction, and the events that led up to the recovery of Elizabeth Smart. The other child abductions that occurred during the study period were reported in a similar manner, though on a much smaller scale. They described the incident and the actions that were taken to attempt the recovery of the child. Many of the articles describing other child abductions were linked to the Elizabeth Smart incident, making reference to the similarities between the abductions. Additionally, many of the articles describing the Elizabeth Smart incident and other child abductions made reference to the exploration of a solution to the problem, specifically identifying AMBER Plans.

Although the *Times* coverage of child abductions often focuses on aspects of the incidents themselves, there are also a significant number of articles about the policy implications related to the problem. Notably, 26 (26.5%) of the 98 articles discussed AMBER Alert policies, and these 26 articles were primarily distributed in two periods, one in late summer 2002 and the other in spring 2003. We discuss the importance of the timing of these articles in a later section. The thematic content of the articles included coverage of the legislation and implementation of state and federal AMBER Alert Systems, as well as a discussion of the cost-benefits associated with AMBER Plans.

The articles exploring the policy implications referenced the AMBER alert programs as *the* policy solution. The articles describing the progression of the AMBER alert program during this period often referenced Elizabeth Smart and Amber Hagerman (the girl for whom the policy was named). However, the articles describing the national AMBER alert program and those created in individual states did not indicate that the policies were created as a result of the Elizabeth Smart incident or the Amber Hagerman incident per se. They did, however, describe the implementation of AMBER plans at the state and national level during the study period and

after Elizabeth Smart was recovered. The Smart incident had a national presence in the media and therefore served as an example of the abductions problem.

The *Times* did not directly advocate the establishment of AMBER Plans, and examination of the material published on the topic reveals a multifaceted discussion. Shortly after Elizabeth Smart was recovered, Ed Smart, her father, urged Congress to establish a National AMBER Alert System. Numerous lawmakers moved quickly to demonstrate their support for this sort of legislation (Hulse 2003). Although the editors of the *Times* subsequently urged that lawmakers proceed slowly with AMBER Plans, they nonetheless published a letter they received arguing that "the Amber Alert system and other highway notification systems should be augmented to help find missing or abducted children like Elizabeth Smart" (*New York Times* 2003a: 28A). Having described the volume and timing of *Times* coverage of abduction incidents and AMBER policies, we now turn to a discussion of policy designed to mitigate this social problem.

Policy Development to Combat Child Abductions

In the past decade, we have observed a push for an extensive system of AMBER Alerts. AMBER is an acronym for America's Missing: Broadcast Emergency Response, and the first AMBER Plan was established in July of 1997 in the Dallas, TX area as a response to Amber Hagerman's 1996 abduction. Local broadcasters and law enforcement agencies voluntarily developed the system to protect children from typical stranger abductions. Many local governments and regional collaborative groups soon adopted their own AMBER Alert programs.

The rapid development of statewide AMBER Plans coincided with the public outcry generated by the Smart case. Prior to 2002, only four states had AMBER Alert plans. In 2002, twenty-eight states implemented plans. The following year, fourteen additional states developed

plans. On February 18, 2005, Hawaii became the 50th state to pass an AMBER Alert plan. The

Department of Justice [DOJ] credits the participation of all fifty states in the AMBER Alert

system with saving lives and increasing the success of the plans.

Making the Triangular Comparison

Having separately examined the media discourse, social science research, and policy

development of the abductions problem, we examine the connections among these elements

(refer to arrows in Figure 1). First, we compare the example-type grounds-claims from the

Times with the incidence-estimate grounds-claims in NISMART-2 (Relationship A). Second, we

examine the connection between the example grounds-claims in the *Times* coverage and

AMBER Plan policy initiatives (Relationship B). Third, we examine the connection between the

incidence-estimate grounds-claims in NISMART-2 and AMBER Plan policy initiatives

(Relationship C). Finally, we assess that there is a stronger association between the news media

coverage and policy initiatives (Relationship B) and between research findings and policy

initiatives (Relationship C).

Relationship A - Media Claims Compared to Empirical Evidence

Data analysis reveals there is a wide discrepancy between the mass media reportage about child

abductions and social scientific data available about the social problem. Our findings refer to a

comparison of the NISMART-2 data about the three types of abductions (Sedlak et al. 2002) and

the abductions typology applied to the *Times* articles during the study period.[†] Looking at these

two sources of information about child abductions it becomes clear that relying on one source

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[†] One limitation to the comparison is that the NISMART-2 data cited in this study were incidence estimates for
1999, while the *Times* discussion was of incidents during the study period from June 1, 2002 to May 31, 2003.
Therefore, a direct comparison is not possible, and we base the comparison on the lack of elasticity observed among
aggregate crime statistics for two sources of information about child abductions it becomes clear that relying on one
source over another would lead to a very different understanding of what is typical about the problem. Notably, the
Times reported more heavily on stereotypical kidnapping incidents (59.1% to 72.7%), while NISMART-2 reported
that family abductions are far more typical (78% to 82.4%).

over another would lead to a very different understanding of what is typical about the problem. Notably, the *Times* reported more heavily on stereotypical kidnapping incidents (59.1% to 72.7%), while NISMART-2 reported that family abductions are far more typical (78% to 82.4%).

The *Times* reported primarily about non-family incidents, while nearly ignoring familial abductions. Of the 22 incidents reported in the *Times* during the study period, 16 to 19 (72.7% to 86.4%) were non-family abductions, and 13 to 16 (59.1% to 72.7%) were stereotypical kidnappings, a subcategory of the non-family type. As noted previously, NISMART-2 estimates suggested that 17.6% to 22% of abduction incidents are of the non-family type, and only 0.08% to 0.13% of total abductions are stereotypical kidnappings. The *Times* did not report frequently about family abductions, only 1 (4.6%) of the 22 total incidents were of this type, even though the NISMART-2 data listed family abductions as the most common type, estimated at 78% to 82.4% of all incidents. In sum, a comparison of the *Times* reportage of child abductions indicates that it diverges greatly from the incidence estimates in the NISMART-2 studies, and therefore in this case there is a large discrepancy between the two types of grounds-claims.

Relationship B - Media Claims Compared to Policy Initiatives

A comparison of the *New York Times* data and the legislation of state-wide AMBER Plans indicate a temporal connection between the example-type grounds-claims in news reportage and the subsequent policy initiatives. Viewing the news media statements about the reality of child abduction as rhetorical claims about the nature of the problem helps to understand the importance of the timing of the claims about how to mitigate the problem itself. Figure 2 displays the timing of the *Times* coverage of AMBER Plans as shadowing the coverage of the Smart case. We have already argued that Elizabeth Smart has come to typify the entire abduction problem, and now we see in graphic form that AMBER Plans shadow these social

problems claims. In following the spikes in coverage of Elizabeth Smart with spikes in coverage

of AMBER Plans, the *Times* places this policy in a privileged position as a solution.

Figure 2: *Times* Articles about Elizabeth Smart and AMBER Plans, June 2002 – May 2003, by Week

In addition, the institution of AMBER Plans follows the coverage of Elizabeth Smart in

the *Times*. Following the Elizabeth Smart abduction there was an increase in the number of

states institution statewide AMBER Plans, with a marked spike following the Smart abduction,

as six states instituted plans in August 2002. Later, there was a second increase in April 2003,

following the March return of Elizabeth Smart, as four states instituted plans. In short, both

rhetorically and temporally, the institution of AMBER Plans coincides with the mass media's

claims about the nature of the child abduction problem, reflecting stereotypical child abductions

as the focal problem.

Relationship C – Empirical Evidence Compared to Policy Initiatives

While analysis suggests a connection between mass media claims and AMBER Plan development, research did not reveal a similar connection between social science research and policy development. In this section, we compare the incidence estimate-type of grounds-claims in the NISMART-2 with the subsequent institution of AMBER policies. Our analysis suggests that AMBER Plans have at best a tenuous connection to varieties of child abductions described in the NISMART-2 study.

We examine the justification offered for the institution of AMBER Plans, looking for the underlying rationale. This analysis has not revealed any references to the findings of the NISMART studies or any other social science research conducted on the abductions problem. Instead what appeared were anecdotal statements about the importance of AMBER Plans as solutions to the problem. Government sources of information on AMBER Plans, such as the DOJ run website, www.amberalert.gov, and the NCMEC website, www.ncmec.org, provide links and contact information for state and regional AMBER Plans and specifically indicate that the plans are a response to stranger abductions similar to the Amber Hagerman story.

In all cases we observed, the rationale for the institution of this AMBER Plan is in reference to the Amber Hagerman horror story, a noteworthy stereotypical kidnapping that occurred in 1996. Although few would argue that policymakers should ignore the victimization of the limited number of victims of stereotypical abductions, policies to combat horror story cases do appear to be overrepresented in the national and state policy initiatives addressing child abductions. Ultimately, the analysis of the present case suggests that social science research data has little effect on the typification and subsequent policy initiatives regarding the social problem of child abduction.

Addressing the Child Abduction Problem

It is through policy initiatives that social problems are often clarified. In this particular case, AMBER plans are viewed as the salient solution to the child abduction problem. In this section, we assess the relative strength of two types of grounds-claims to the policy initiative. Specifically, we assess the relationship between the development of AMBER Plans in addressing the social problem of child abductions as described by the news media and as described in social science data. As noted previously, the connection between the child abduction problem as exemplified by the media (*Times*) has been strongly connected to the development of AMBER plans, with social science research claims (NISMART-2) having little connection to this solution.

This variety of finding is not new, and without a doubt, political mobilization and discourse follows shocking cases. The congressional hearings in the 1980's came in the wake of highly publicized abductions. In October 2002, the Bush administration held the first White House Conference on Missing, Exploited and Runaway Children in response to the Smart case. Similarly, the most significant developments in policy related to child abductions came in the wake of highly publicized and shocking cases. A potential irony is that the effect of public outcry seems to have changed over the quarter-century of the evolution of the child abduction problem, in that the attention of politicians in the 1980's led to a different outcome than it did in 2002. The attention to the abduction problem generated in the 1980's by the high profile cases of the time motivated congressional hearings which resulted in significant legislative acts: the Missing Children's Act of 1982 and the Missing Children's Assistance Act of 1984 (MCAA). The MCAA created the National Center for Missing and Exploited Children (NCMEC) and required that periodic studies be conducted to estimate the rates of incidents. To date, the

NISMART and NISMART-2 have been the first of the periodic studies to estimate the extent of categories of the missing children problem.

The apparent outgrowth of the 2002 summit was the national push for the development of AMBER plans. This initiative is apparently more of a response to public outcry about high profile stranger abductions than it is a response to the social scientific evidence about the problem. Even in official publications, there is a clear logic that AMBER Plans are designed to mitigate the effects of stranger-type abductions, aligning with the picture of the abductions problem advanced by the grounds-claims found in the *Times*. For example, the suggested criteria for issuing AMBER Alerts described by the U.S. Department of Justice, Office of Justice Programs states that, "It is recommended that plans require a child be at risk for serious bodily harm or death before an alert can be issued. This element is clearly related to law enforcement's recognition that stranger abductions represent the greatest danger to children" (National AMBER Alert Coordinator 2004). Given the context that stranger-type stereotypical abductions are extremely rare, it is inaccurate for the National AMBER Alert Coordinator to assert that stranger abductions pose the "greatest danger to children" when many thousands of children are the victim each year of more typical family abductions.

The logic of our argument has been that demonstrating the connection between the media discourse and AMBER policies reveals the extent to which shocking cases such as Elizabeth Smart typify the child abduction problem as a whole. Given that AMBER Policies appear more closely associated with the Smart horror story than with the social science data about abductions, we suggest that current policy to combat child abductions is perhaps misguided. In the next section, we discuss the further complexities of our case.

The Interplay between Research, the Media, and Policy Solutions

AMBER Alert Plans are more closely linked to the nature of the child abduction problem suggested by the *Times* reportage of the problem than to the nature of the problem outlined in the NISMART-2 study. Media coverage and policies are known to be preoccupied with stereotypical abductions in spite of the fact that research like the NISMART-2 suggests these kinds of abductions are relatively uncommon. However, this study is the first to scientifically demonstrate the extent of this relationship, for this problem making the direct connection between one particular stereotypical kidnapping and the creation of a policy that was developed largely in response to this event. Our triangular approach to studying the child abduction problem allowed the comparison of multiple types of claims-making activities, while grounding them to key behavioral or policy outcomes associated with these claims. We discovered that the typifying grounds-claims about the extent of the child abduction problem presented in the NISMART-2 study differed widely from the picture of the social problem painted by the *New York Times*. This finding offers additional evidence of the tendency for the news media to focus on the horrible and extreme cases, as demonstrated in previous studies in social problems (e.g., Diamond 1985, Gentry 1988, and Johnson 1995).

Although the *Times* sometimes cited statistics about child abduction derived from the NISMART studies, the repetition of atypical stranger abductions carried a stronger rhetorical punch in creating and maintaining the public discourse about the child abduction problem. Other scholars of social problems have noted a similar phenomenon in earlier studies of child victimization (e.g., Best, 1987, Diamond 1985, and Gentry 1988). The further implication of this is that, through the publication of newsworthy but atypical cases, the news media can influence public opinion and policy.

Although many articles concerning abductions published in the *Times* typically fall into the category of "horror stories," the *Times* also published varied opinions. The most noteworthy discussion ensued when the cost-benefit of AMBER Plans was brought into question. Criminal justice scholar James Alan Fox published an opinion piece (*New York Times* 2002), in which he urged caution on the institution of AMBER Plans, pointing to the relatively rare rate of stranger abductions.

Approximately seven months later, after Elizabeth Smart was returned to her parents, the *Times* published an editorial that echoed Fox's sentiments:

> The Senate passed legislation earlier this year to establish a nationwide AMBER Alert network and to provide federal grants for, among other things, highway notifications. On a pure cost-benefit basis, the attention and financing do not really seem warranted. There are only about 100 abductions by strangers a year, making it a lesser threat to children than choking or bicycle accidents (*New York Times* 2003b: 16A).

The irony of this editorial stance is that, as we argue in this article, the institution of AMBER Policies is more of a response to the news media's coverage of the child abduction problem than the research findings.

The editorial generated a number of noteworthy responses about the cost-benefits of AMBER Plans. Michael Linder, creator of "America's Most Wanted" evoked the moral position that children are priceless, arguing that the, "cost and effort are well worth the investment if only one other case like that of Elizabeth Smart results from a nationwide Amber Alert system" (*New York Times* 2003c: 16A). Ironically, Elizabeth Smart's whereabouts had been determined with the help of clues received after her story aired on "America's Most Wanted" (Whitaker 2003). On the same day, Martin Frost, U.S. Representative from Texas and proponent of a national AMBER Alert Plan, and Ed Smart, father of Elizabeth Smart, responded that the *Times* editors misstated the extent of the problem. They cited data apparently derived from the NISMART

studies: "According to the Justice Department, approximately 12,000 children each year are reported to the authorities as abducted by nonfamily members. This figure might make a more accurate 'cost-benefit' analysis of the national Amber Alert bill passed by the Senate" (*New York Times* 2003c: 16A).

Another interesting response to the *Times* editorial came from Paula Skuratowicz, Executive Director of the Polly Klaas Foundation, named after the 1993 victim and of a stereotypical kidnapping and murder. Skuratowicz advocated the use of AMBER Alerts for familial abductions (*New York Times* 2003d: 12A). The problem with this position is that AMBER Plans may be more effective when used less frequently, and that the AMBER Plans have been apparently created to combat stereotypical kidnappings. Fox wrote (*New York Times* 2002) that the over-use of AMBER Alerts might dilute the public's sensitivity to them. At the time, there was evidence that the public was already confusing AMBER Alerts with the Department of Homeland Security's color-coded system for indicating terrorist threat levels (*New York Times* 2003b). In our assessment, while the relationship between the news media discourse about abductions was at times multifaceted, we nonetheless note that in this cases the NISMART-2 data appear to have had little effect on the creation of AMBER Plans. When NISMART-2 statistics were sometimes invoked, they were often decontextualized and anecdotal to the larger discussion.

Concluding Reflections of the Child Abduction Problem and Policy Development

As sociologists, we are alarmed that the dominant policy to mitigate the abduction problem seems to have little or no logical connection to the most rigorous empirical studies of the problem to date. We evoke a "contextual constructionist" (Best 1989) point of view in our concluding comments about the abduction problem. That is, having studied some aspects of the

problem, we feel that we ultimately are obligated to comment on the very claims about the abduction problem that we have studied. Aware that our commentary might open us up to accusations of "ontological gerrymandering" (Woolgar and Pawluch 1985), we nonetheless offer the following remarks about the social scientific study of child abductions:

First, we encourage the injection of social science research findings into the discourse about the child abduction problem. Policy decisions to institute AMBER Alert Systems appear guided by the mass media and their tendency to highlight horror story examples. While the NISMART studies were commissioned by the U.S. Congress and are published through the OJJDP, they nonetheless do not seem to inform policy. Another governmental agency, the NCMEC, has been among the strongest proponents of AMBER Plans. While we acknowledge the discussion among sociologists of the accuracy of statistics estimating the abduction problem, the basic finding of the NISMART-2 has not been questioned: that about four-fifths of abductions are familial, about one-fifth are nonfamilial, and that stereotypical abductions are extremely rare. We believe that adequate policies to deal with the abduction problem needs to be informed by social science research on the topic.

Second, we call for assessment of AMBER policies and practices. The NCMEC reported after 20 years of increasing reports, that missing children reports declined in 2001 (Cooper 2005: 13) the year prior to the "boom" in AMBER Plans. In 2001, there were four active statewide AMBER Plans, 28 were implemented in 2002, and 14 were added in 2003 (United States Department of Justice 2005: 4). Despite the NCMEC's claim of decreasing reports of missing children, we observed the rapid institution of statewide AMBER Plans, and in 2005 Hawaii became the 50th state to legislate such a plan. The efficacy of AMBER Plans is unclear, and critics of the policies have relied on anecdotal evidence of the ineffectiveness of AMBER Alerts

(e.g., Cooper 2005: 15-6). Despite the seeming irrationality of the plans, they are nonetheless in effect. Therefore, we call for assessments of the effectiveness and appropriateness of AMBER Plans in combating the social problem of child abductions. There will always be those who rely on the rhetoric that all children are precious, arguing that if one child is helped it would be a justification for the use of the policies as a whole. While we do not intend to minimize the suffering of the approximately 100 children per year victimized in stereotypical kidnappings, we question the appropriateness of AMBER Plans for dealing with the entire problem. What is needed is a sober cost-benefits analysis of policies designed to deal with abductions.

We are not arguing that AMBER Alert programs are not important; however, the majority of attention and resources for abductions are focused on the smallest proportion of victims to the exclusion of victims of familial abductions. Given that the perpetrators in the most serious familial abductions are male partners (Finkelhor et al 1991), critical questions are raised as to the seriousness of these crimes, the potential psychological harm to the child, as well as the connection of the familial abduction problem to other social problems involving families. These questions are not only grave in nature, but require serious attention from both researchers and policy makers. We recognize that familial abduction as a social problem does not exist in isolation, but rather interacts with other problems that carry different consequences and outcomes such as domestic violence, hostile divorce and custody battles, and power differentials. Consequently, identifying concrete solutions and vilifying the perpetrator are not straightforward; whereas in stranger abductions, the villain and the solutions are more obvious.

Third, we point to the need for further study of the child abduction problem, and in particular we call for more extensive research on familial and more common non-familial abduction types. Social science research on more common types of abduction incidents is poorly

developed, and there is a need to conduct more research into other types of child abductions (besides stereotypical), and to develop policies to alleviate them. Familial abductions are extremely complex. Simply defining them in a meaningful way creates questions and debate as to what actually constitutes the abduction of one's own child. Laws governing child custody and rights to a child vary greatly between states. In addition, custody disputes and family dynamics are also complex and vary by case. Domestic familial abductions have received modest attention in the media, among policy makers, and in academia   Limited research (e.g., Finkelhor et al. 1991) has been conducted and little policy development has been undertaken to address the problem. Most of the focus on familial abductions, both legally and academically, has centered on international parental child abduction. By the time that the AMBER Alert Plans examined in this study were instituted, only one sociological study of familial abductions had been conducted: Finkelhor et al. (1991), using NISMART data and a broad definition of abduction, estimated that 354,100 children were abducted by family members in 1988. These episodes may have been short in length such as returning a child home late from a visit. Tightening the definition to include only cases that include "a situation where there is concealment, transportation to another state, or intent to keep the child or to permanently alter custodial privileges" the number of estimated incidence fell to 163,200 cases of familial abduction.

Finkelhor et al. (1991) argue that in a large number of familial abductions, the whereabouts of the child is known relatively quickly, which suggests that law enforcement policies are in need of development to assist in the return of the child. Secondly, they note that familial abductions still occur in large number several years following a divorce or separation. However, in the most serious cases, the abduction occurs shortly after a separation preceding a divorce and is most often perpetrated by the current husband or boyfriend. Finally, research

suggested (Finkelhor et al. 1991) that further research could lead to tools for evaluating high-risk situations to prevent familial abductions. Further research and analysis is needed on the dynamics that lead to familial abductions within dissolving relationships and the motivations behind the abductions, as well as, the lack of appropriate policy to aid in the prevention and resolution of familial abductions.

Finally, we call for trend studies of abductions, drawing upon data that will allow researchers to understand the process through which this social problem emerged, and how it has developed over the last quarter century. For example, the present study could be extended to encompass a longer time period of media coverage, research, and policy discussion surrounding the child abduction problem. Going back to the late 1970's and early 1980's would allow the researchers to capture a "wide-angle" view of the child abduction problem. Similarly, we suggest the possible usefulness of examining other sources of claims about this social problem, including government reports, policy briefs, activist statements, foundation publications, and political speeches. In short, researchers have merely begun to study the abduction problem, and to suggest the development of policy.

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