An Examination of Media Accounts of Child Abductions in the United States

Justine Taylor[1], Danielle Boisvert[2], Barbara Sims[3] & Carl Garver[4]

Volume 8 – No. 2 – Fall 2011

[1] Administrative Office of Pennsylvania Courts, Office of Children and Families in the Courts, Pennsylvania Judicial Center, 601 Commonwealth Ave, Suite 1500, P.O. Box 61260, Harrisburg, PA 17106, 814-594-8168. Email: jmt5339@gmail.com

[2] Assistant Professor of Criminal Justice, School of Public Affairs, Penn State Harrisburg, 777 W. Harrisburg Pike, Middletown, PA 17057, 717-948-4319 (phone), 717-948-6320 (fax). Email: dlb65@psu.edu

[3] Professor of Criminal Justice, School of Public Affairs, Penn State Harrisburg, 777 W. Harrisburg Pike, Middletown, PA 17057. 717-948-6044 (phone), 717-948-6320 (fax). Email: bas4@psu.edu

[4] Instructor in Criminal Justice, School of Public Affairs, Penn State Harrisburg, 777 W. Harrisburg Pike, Middletown, PA 17057. 717-948-6055 (phone), 717-948-6320 (fax). Email: crg109@psu.edu

Abstract

The media tends to portray a distorted image of crime to the public, and child abduction incidents are no exception. Though abduction incidents perpetrated by nonfamily members (nonfamily abductions) and strangers (stereotypical kidnappings) are the rarest type of abduction offenses, they receive the most media attention. Consequently, a moral panic has resulted in which society believes that children are routinely abducted by individuals unrelated or unknown to them. Lawmakers have responded to this fear by enacting legislation that addresses these types of incidents, but they have largely ignored the most common type of abduction: the family abduction. The current study seeks to examine disparities between media depictions and actual incidences of child abductions by conducting a content analysis of newspaper articles drawn from LexisNexis Academic (N= 66). These accounts are then compared to data from the Second National Incidence Studies of Missing, Abducted, Runaway, and Thrownaway Children (NISMART-2). The results revealed that the media was more likely to report on incidents in which children were abducted by nonfamily members (nonfamily abductions) and strangers (stereotypical kidnappings) than would be expected given their actual frequency of occurrence. Policy implications of these findings are discussed.

About the authors

Justine Taylor is a data analyst for the Office of Children and Families in the Courts. She received her Master of Arts degree in Criminal Justice from Penn State Harrisburg. Her research interests include the media's effect on images of crime and child welfare/dependency court issues.

Dr. Danielle Boisvert is an assistant professor of Criminal Justice in the School of Public Affairs at Penn State Harrisburg. Her key research interests include life-course/developmental criminology, biosocial criminology, and behavioral genetics. Her research focuses mainly on the examination of genetic and environmental influences on a variety of delinquent and criminal behaviors throughout the life course.

Dr. Barbara Sims is a Professor of Criminal Justice in the School of Public Affairs at Penn State Harrisburg. She received her doctorate in criminal justice from Sam Houston State University. Her most recent research and/or scholarship is associated with domestic violence in India, predictors of self-control in juvenile probationers, and exploring the decision-making processes of local judges when it comes to the re-sentencing of probation or parole violators.

Dr. Carl Garver was admitted to the Penn State Harrisburg graduate faculty in 2007. He has nearly 30 years of law enforcement experience. Dr. Garver retired as a Detective Sergeant from the Dauphin County District Attorney's Office, Criminal Investigation Division in December, 2006 with 21 years of service. Prior to that, he was commissioned as a Texas State Trooper in 1978 and assigned to the Highway Patrol and Narcotics Units. Dr. Garver also serves as Criminal Justice Internship Coordinator and Advisor to the Criminal Justice Club.

An Examination of Media Accounts of Child Abductions in the United States

<u>**Introduction**</u>

Few crimes evoke as much terror and alarm as child abductions (Miller, Kurlycheck, Hansen, & Wilson, 2008). Little more is as heart-wrenching as knowing that a child is away from the protection and security of his or her caretaker(s). As a result, the moment the media catches wind of an abduction incident, detailed coverage and moment-by-moment developments in the case often dominate newspapers, magazines, television screens, and websites.

While intense media coverage of certain child abduction cases may be beneficial to that case, there is also an inadvertent dilemma that accompanies such publicity. Because the media tends to focus on the most unusual and frightening child abduction incidents (Miller et al., 2008), particularly incidents in which children are abducted by strangers or nonfamily perpetrators, the public is led to believe that the characteristics of such incidences typify the child abduction problem. Miller et al. (2008) state that "media hype and sensationalism have […] fueled both popular culture and sociological constructions of offender and victim stereotypes" (p. 523), such as the nonfamily-offender and, most especially, the stranger-offender. Consequently, the media has actually created a social problem in which Americans believe that children are routinely abducted by individuals unrelated or unknown to them or their families (Forst & Blomquist, 1991). In reality, cases that dominate the media are not at all representative of the empirical findings regarding the abduction of children in America.

To illustrate, the Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention (OJJDP) reported that in 1999, the last year a large-scale nationwide study was completed,

approximately 262,215 children (individuals under the age of 18) were victims of an abduction (Finkelhor, Hammer, & Sedlak, 2002; Hammer, Finkelhor, & Sedlak, 2002).[5] Of these 262,215 abducted children, however, only 58,200 children were the victims of *nonfamily abductions*, incidents in which nonfamily members, such as friends, acquaintances, and strangers, were the perpetrators. Furthermore, only 115 were identified as what has been coined a *stereotypical kidnapping*. Stereotypical kidnapping is a subcategory of nonfamily abduction and is defined as incidents in which the child was "abducted by a slight acquaintance[6] or complete stranger and subsequently detained overnight, transported at least 50 miles, held for ransom or abducted with the intent to be kept permanently, or killed" (Finkelhor et al., 2002, p. 2). This figure represents 0.04% of all estimated child abductions that occurred in 1999. The remaining 203,900 incidents were *family abductions*, offenses in which family members or individuals acting on behalf of family members committed the abduction.[7] Unfortunately, due to the social problem that has been created by the media's tendency to over-report the least common types of child abductions, a moral panic has ensued in which society fears that their children are going to be snatched off the streets by a stranger or nonfamily member at any moment if left unattended. As a result, there has been political pressure for legislators to solve

---

[5] The OJJDP admits that these numbers could be as high as 348, 500 or as low as 175,800. In addition, these figures reflect both reported and unreported cases of child abductions.

[6] Though the OJJDP does not define *acquaintance*, a *slight acquaintance* is operationalized as a "nonfamily perpetrator whose name is unknown to the child or family prior to the abduction and whom the child or family did not know well enough to speak to, or a recent acquaintance who the child or family have known for less than 6 months, or someone the family or child have known for longer than 6 months but seen less than once a month."

[7] These terms and the NISMART-2 are described in more detail in the Methods section of this manuscript.

this problem. However, the solutions that have been offered by policymakers are based on these distorted perceptions of the child abduction problem, particularly incidents involving stranger-offenders.

It is often stated that there is a lack of congruency between media depictions of child abduction incidents compared to the empirical data (e.g., Forst & Bloomquist; 1991; Miller et al., 2008). However, little research exists to quantify just how distorted this reality is (see for example Finkelhor, Hotaling, & Sedlak, 1990; Fu, Moellers, Moscotwitz, Duvall, & Tan, 2009; Muschert, Young-Spillers, & Carr, 2005). As such, the current study seeks to add to the scant literature by empirically examining media accounts of child abductions in the United States compared to reported data from the Second National Incidence Studies of Missing, Abducted, Runaway, and Thrownaway Children (NISMART-2).

Empirical Evidence on Child Abduction Incidents

It is difficult to get a precise figure on the number of abductions that actually occur annually (Boudreaux, Lord, & Etter, 2000; Miller et al., 2008). This may due to such factors as there being no single accepted definition of child abduction, child abduction cases not being classified as such even when incidents meet jurisdictions' legal definitions (e.g., if the abduction resulted in a murder, the case is categorized as a homicide), and incidents not being reported to law enforcement. Furthermore, up until the late-1980s, many of the statistics that were provided concerning the incidence of abductions combined what have now been identified as different *types* of child abductions (i.e., family abductions vs. nonfamily abductions). Realizing that clumping all forms of child incidents into one category clearly distorts the reality of the situation,

the federal government and the OJJDP undertook the first of two National Incidence Studies of Missing, Abducted, Runaway, and Thrownaway Children (NISMART) in 1988.

The NISMART

The NISMART was the first nationally representative study undertaken to examine "missing children's episodes" (Finkelhor, Hotaling, & Sedlak, 1992, p. 227). Conducted in 1988 and 1989, NISMART fulfilled the obligations of the Missing Children's Assistance Act of 1984, which required the OJJDP to conduct periodic studies to determine the number of children reported missing and the number of children recovered in a given year.[8] The NISMART was a pioneering study because it was the first to collect national data from multiple sources, and it was the first to identify distinct categories of missing children's episodes. These newly identified categories included runaway/thrownaway episodes, missing child episodes that were result of the child being lost or injured, episodes in which the child was missing for benign reasons,[9] and most relevant to the current research, two separate classifications of child abductions incidents: *family abductions* and *nonfamily abductions* (Finkelhor et al., 1992).

The NISMART defined an incident as a family abduction if either of the following conditions were met: (1) a family member took a child in violation of a custody agreement or decree; or (2) a family member (in violation of a custody agreement of decree) failed to return a child at the end of a legal or agreed upon visitation

---

[8] For a detailed description of the NISMART, please refer to Finkelhor et al. (1992).
[9] The OJJDP uses the term *benign* to describe incidents in which caretakers believed their children were missing, but in reality they were not. For example, if a mother forgot her son was going to a friend's house after school, she may notify authorities because she thought he was missing when he did not get off the school bus.

or custody period, with the child being away at least one additional night in these cases (Carmody & Plass, 2000). The NISMART characterized a nonfamily abduction as the "coerced, unauthorized movement of a child, the detention of a child, or the luring of a child for the purposes of committing another crime" by a nonfamily perpetrator, such as a stranger, acquaintance, babysitter, or neighbor (Finkelhor et al., 1992, p. 228). This definition "includes cases where a child was simply taken forcibly into a vehicle or building or a distance of more than 20 feet" (Finkelhor et al., 1992, p. 228).

The NISMART further identified a subcategory of nonfamily abductions, which was named *stereotypical kidnappings*. In order for an incident to be categorized as a stereotypical kidnapping in the NISMART, a stranger had to be the perpetrator of the abduction and one of the following conditions had to be met: (1) the child was gone overnight; (2) the child was transported a distance of 50 miles or more from the point of abduction; (3) the child was killed; (4) the child was ransomed; or (5) the perpetrator evidenced an intent to keep the child permanently (Finkelhor et al., 1992).

In addition to identifying and defining these two distinct categories of child abductions, the NISMART also gathered both the frequency of incidences of family and nonfamily abductions in America as well as descriptive information about each of the incidences. This was accomplished using three sources of data: (1) a large-scale household survey, (2) a national study of police records, and (3) a re-analysis of FBI homicide statistics (Finkelhor et al., 1992). In the end, the NISMART proved to be a pioneering study because it was the first source of information about child abductions in America in which data were not drawn solely from official reports. This is significant

because the multiple sources of information protect the data from the potential biasing effects of official reporting.

Prior to the completion of the NISMART, but after a string of highly-publicized stranger-abductor incidents in the 1980s, estimates of such abductions were as high as 50,000 (Finkelhor et al., 1992). However, the NISMART reported that in 1988 there were only an estimated 3,200-4,600 nonfamily abductions, with 200-300 cases (.06%) fitting the criteria of a stereotypical kidnapping (Finkelhor et al., 1992). On the other hand, family abduction incidents ranged from 163,200 to 354,100 (Boudreaux et al., 2000). Why, then, had the public been led to believe that such large numbers of stranger abductions had occurred? The answer is most likely the media's tendency to have sensationalized such cases. Indeed, "the data indicate that there is a wide discrepancy between the mass media reportage about child abductions and the empirical evidence about the social problem" (Muschert et al., 2005, p. 15).

The Influence of the Media on Images of Crime

The media has been known to sensationalize stories, particularly ones involving crime (Irsay, 2002; Krajicek, 1998; Pritchard, 1985; Pritchard & Hughes, 1997; Surette, 1992). Indeed, "research on the content of crime news has consistently shown that the news media present a distorted image of crime" (Duwe, 2005, p. 60). For example, Graber (1980) found that homicide is the crime most likely to be reported on, though statistically, it is one of the least frequently occurring criminal offenses. Cherbonneau and Copes (2003) discovered that carjackings in which the victim was either injured or killed were more likely to be reported on, though most carjackings are not physically violent. Duwe (2005) concluded that, in general, television news is most likely to report

on incidents that involved the following: (1) large numbers of fatal and wounded victims; (2) strangers as victims; (3) incidents that occurred in public locations; (4) assault weapon use; (5) workplace violence; and (6) suicidal offenders.

The Media's Role in Constructing Social Problems and Moral Panics

By reporting on the most frightening and unusual events that occur in society, the media is ultimately appealing to their consumer so that that their product will "sell" (Duwe, 2005; Pritchard & Hughes, 1997). Unfortunately, as a result of this sensationalization, the media has been known to be responsible for constructing social problems (Duwe, 2005; Griffin & Miller, 2008). Once a social problem has been created, a moral panic is known to ensue in which society is struck by fear of real or imagined criminal attacks based on an exaggerated perception of the pervasiveness or intensity of the threat actually posed (Griffin & Miller, 2008).

A moral panic is described by Cohen (1972) as "a condition, episode, person, or groups of persons [that] emerges to become defined as a threat to societal values and interests" (p. 204). There are several examples of moral panics that emerge in criminal justice following sensationalization from the media. For example, in the 1990s the media created a hysteria surrounding juvenile crime which was based on the belief that there had been an increase in violent crimes committed by youths (Miller, Potter, & Kappeler, 2006). As a result of this hype, the notion of the "superpredator" evolved, and many were led to believe that there was going to be a catastrophic amount of violent crime committed by juveniles in the decades to come. The predicted amounts of violence committed by juveniles, however, were not realized.

Most specific to this research, a moral panic was created in the 1980s surrounding child abductions, particularly after the high-profile kidnapping and subsequent murder of Adam Walsh. Griffin and Miller (2008) state:

> Extensive media attention and heart-rending appeals by various child advocates like Adam Walsh's father, John, employed overly inclusive definitions and distorted counts of "missing children" and conflated them with lurid "typifying cases" such as the Adam Walsh murder that resulted in hysterical overestimations of the phenomenon and a socially constructed "epidemic" of child victims. (p. 161)

As previously discussed, the sensationalism and hype surrounding child abductions perpetrated by nonfamily members and, most especially, stranger-offenders has resulted in a socially constructed problem in which the public believes that children are routinely kidnapped by people unrelated and unknown to them and thus serves as a perfect example of the media's role in such formations. Shutt, Miller, Schrek, and Brown (2004) agree, stating "the threat of child abduction has […] been a socially constructed problem, resulting from mass media sensationalism and fabrication" (p. 128). In line with Spector and Kitsuse (2006), Shutt et al. (2004) support the claim that the public has responded to this socially constructed problem by trying to fix it through several policy initiatives such as Megan's Law and Carlie's Law. While these policy initiatives certainly address the problems of nonfamily abductions and stereotypical kidnappings, they fail to address the issue and root causes of family abductions, which comprise the largest portion of abduction incidents.

Other Identified Content Analyses on Child Abductions

To date, three content analyses have been conducted that examine the media's role in sensationalizing child abduction cases. Muschert et al. (2005) analyzed the *New York Times* and the *Columbus Dispatch* in order to examine both the national and local news media's characterization of child abductions in America in the year following the

Elizabeth Smart abduction (June 1, 2002 to May 31, 2003). The authors concluded that 83.3% of the *New York Times* articles (N= 67*)* and 87.7% of the *Columbus Dispatch* articles (N= 15) were about stereotypical kidnappings. Neither newspaper reported extensively on family abductions (Muchert et al., 2005).

Similarly, Finkelhor, Hotaling, and Sedlak (1990) reported in an executive summary of the NISMART that a content analysis of newspaper articles concluded that 92 percent of the crimes against children described with the words "abduction" or "kidnapping" were in fact stereotypical kidnappings. According to Finkelhor et al. (1990), this "confirmed that when reporters write and the public reads about abductions, they are thinking primarily of the [s]tereotypical [k]idnapping" (p. 8).

Finally, Fu et al. (2009) examined 212 news articles from *USA Today*, *The Houston Chronicle*, *New York Times*, *The Washington Post*, and *The San Diego Chronicle* from January 1, 2000 to mid-November 2003. They concluded that these newspapers were most likely to report on nonfamily abductions, particularly stereotypical kidnappings in which there were strangers or unknown offenders.

The Current Study

The current research seeks to build on previous research by quantifying the lack of congruency between media depictions of child abduction incidents and empirical data of the same by conducting a content analysis of the former then making comparisons to the OJJDP's Second National Incidence Studies of Missing, Abducted, Runaway, and Thrownaway Children (NISMART-2). The central research question for this study is: "What types of child abductions are most reported on in the print media, and how does this compare to the NISMART-2's data on such incidences in the United States?" It is

hypothesized that the media will report most on stereotypical kidnappings, followed by nonfamily abductions, while dedicating very few articles to family abductions. Similarly, it is hypothesized that the media will dedicate a larger proportion of articles to stereotypical kidnappings and nonfamily abductions than would be expected compared to their frequency of occurrence in the NISMART-2 data while simultaneously dedicating a smaller proportion of articles to family abductions than would be expected compared to their frequency of occurrence in the NISMART-2 data.

Fu et al. (2009) comment that "how news media cover child abductions is a relatively new area of research [but one that] has important theoretical implications […] as well as professional applications" (p. 1). As such, the main contribution of the current research is to add to the very scant literature that currently exists on this topic. Only three content analyses could be identified that have examined similar research questions (i.e., Finkelhor et al., 1990; Fu et al., 2009; Muschert et al., 2005). The current research uniquely contributes to the existing literature by examining newspaper articles from the years in which the NISMART-2 study was conducted (1996-1999) in order to give the best representation of how distorted the media's portrayal of child abduction incidents really was at that time. This approach was unique because all other identified content analyses on this topic examined newspaper articles in years outside the NISMART-2's timeframe (i.e., Finkelhor et al., 1990; Fu et al., 2009; Muschert et al., 2005). Yet researchers still made comparisons from their findings to data derived from the NISMART-2. This could, however, be problematic. As such, the current study focuses on the media's depiction of child abductions in 1996-1999, the same years that NISMART-2 data reflect.

Methods

Data for the current study were obtained from the NISMART-2 in order to determine the profiles of the typical and/or most common child abduction incidents. Following this, a content analysis of the print media was performed on articles from the years in which the NISMART-2 was completed in order to establish what types of abduction incidents the media reported on. Then, both sets of profiles were compared to determine the extent to which the media sensationalizes child abduction incidents.

The NISMART-2

Information on incidences of child abductions was derived from the NISMART-2.[10] The NISMART-2 was conducted between 1997 and 1999, a decade after the first NISMART was completed (Finkelhor et al., 2002; Hammer et al., 2002). Respondents were asked to report on incidents that occurred within the last twelve months, so the data reflect abductions that occurred between 1996 and 1999. In addition to the NISMART, the NISMART-2 is the only other large-scale, nationwide study that utilized multiple methods for collecting data on child abduction incidences. Two different sources were used to gather the data that were examined in the current study. First, the Adult Caretaker and Youth Household Surveys were used to gather information on family and nonfamily abductions. Second, the Law Enforcement Study was used to gather information on stereotypical kidnappings. For a detailed description of the methodology employed in the NISMART-2, see Hammer et al. (2002).

---

[10] The NISMART-2 was used to gather empirical information on child abduction incidences in the United States instead of the NISMART because the former study was completed more recently. In addition, the NISMART-2 employed more rigorous data collection methods than the NISMART.

Like the NISMART, the NISMART-2 identified three distinct categories of child abduction incidents: the family abduction, the non-family abduction, and the stereotypical kidnapping. *Family abductions* were defined similarly in the NISMART-2 as they had been in the NISMART. These incidents were operationalized in the following way: "The taking or keeping of a child by a family member in violation of a custody order, a decree, or other legitimate custodial rights, where the taking or keeping involved some element of concealment, flight, or intent to deprive a lawful custodian indefinitely of custodial privileges" (Hammer et al., 2002, p. 2). Nonfamily abductions were also defined similarly in the NISMART-2 as they had been in the NISMART. Nonfamily members included all nonfamily perpetrators, including friends, acquaintances, and strangers. These incidents were operationalized in the following way:

> (1) An episode in which a nonfamily perpetrator takes a child by the use of physical force or threat of bodily harm or detains the child for a substantial period of time (at least one hour) in an isolated place by the use of physical force or threat of bodily harm without lawful authority or parental permission; or (2) an episode in which a child younger than 15 or mentally incompetent, and without lawful authority or parental permission, is taken or detained or voluntarily accompanies a nonfamily perpetrator who conceals the child's whereabouts, demands ransom, or expresses the intention to keep the child permanently. (Finkelhor et al., 2002, p. 2)

In addition, a stereotypical kidnapping was defined as: "A nonfamily abduction perpetrated by a slight acquaintance or stranger in which a child is detained overnight, transported at least 50 miles, held for ransom or abducted with intent to keep the child permanently, or killed" (Finkelhor et al., 2002, p. 2).

Analytic Plan

After information on incidences of child abductions in the United States were compiled from the NISMART-2, articles from American newspapers published in 1996, 1997, 1998, and 1999 were collected from *LexisNexis Academic;* these newspaper

articles served as the sampling frame. Since the NISMART-2 was conducted between 1997 and 1999, and respondents were asked to report on incidents that occurred within the last twelve months, the 1996-1999 timeframe covered all years that the NISMART-2 data reflect. Similar to Fu et al. (2009), the search words "kidnap!" and "abduct!" were utilized to query for articles in *LexisNexis Academic*.

In order quantify the lack of congruency between media depictions of child abduction incidents and empirical data of the same, a content analysis was conducted.   A content analysis is "the systematic, objective, quantitative analysis of message characteristics" (Neuendorf, 2002, p. 1).   Specifically, using news reports and articles, researchers systematically examine the characteristics of a *message* that is being conveyed by the media.   As a result, a profile is determined based on the types and characteristics of crimes that are most likely to be reported on by the media. After the content analysis is completed, the resulting profile created is compared against empirical data (i.e., UCR reports, law enforcement data) in order to examine just how sensationalized the media reports truly are.

Each article identified in *LexisNexis Academic* was coded for specific information on the characteristics of the victim (e.g., age, location prior to the abduction), the offender (e.g., relationship of the offender to the child), and the incident (e.g., primary motivation for abduction, event outcome). These variables were selected in order to assist in the operationalization of the abduction incident.   After all of the articles were coded, the data were entered into SPSS for statistical analysis.

Results

The identification of incidences involving the abduction of children in 1996-1999 yielded sixty-six newspaper articles. Within these sixty-six newspaper articles were sixty-nine abduction incidents and seventy-eight classifiable episodes. One abduction incident may have involved multiple abduction episodes if there were more than one victim. For example, if one perpetrator abducted three children, this was counted as one child abduction incident, but three separate episodes. This approach was taken because one incident may have two separate abduction classifications depending on the relationship of the offender to the victim and the circumstances involved with the abduction. For example, if a father abducted his daughter and her friend, the daughter's abduction episode would be classified as a family abduction while the friend's abduction episode would be classified as either a nonfamily abduction or stereotypical kidnapping. Therefore, each victim is associated with an abduction episode. There were forty-nine unique incidents documented within the sample with a total of sixty-nine unique victims/episodes.[11]

The main research question for this study was: "What types of child abductions are most reported on in the print media and how does this compare to the NISMART-2's data on such incidences in the U.S.?" The results from the content analysis are presented in Table 1 and reveal that 41% of episodes covered (N= 32) were nonfamily abductions, 35% (N= 27) were stereotypical kidnappings, and 24% (N= 19) were family abductions.

---

[11] Though there were though only forty-nine unique incidents, some of the incidents were reported on multiple times, resulting in a total of sixty-nine classifiable incidents. Similarly, even though there were only sixty-nine unique episodes, some of these episodes were reported on multiple times, resulting in seventy-eight classifiable episodes. It is assumed that if one episode is reported on multiple times, the media is signifying to the public the "importance" of that episode.

According to the NISMART-2 data, however, 78% (N= 203, 900) of all abductions were classified as family abductions, while only 22% (N= 58, 200) were classified as nonfamily abductions and .04% (N=115) were classified as stereotypical kidnappings.

Table 1: Frequencies and Percentages of Episode by Abduction Type

	Number	Percentage
Family Abductions		
NISMART-2	203, 900	78%
Newspapers	19	24%
Nonfamily Abductions		
NISMART-2	58, 200	22%
Newspapers	32	41%
Stereotypical Kidnappings		
NISMART-2	115	.04%
Newspapers	27	35%
Total		
NISMART-2	262, 215	100%*
Newspapers	78	100%

*This figure is rounded

The z-test for two proportions was utilized to test for significance for each abduction type. This test is used to compare proportions from two independent groups to determine if they are significantly different from one another. First, in regards to family abductions, the results revealed that the media was significantly more likely to under-report this type of abduction in comparison to what would be expected considering its frequency of occurrence in the NISMART-2 (z= 11.37, p<.001). Second, regarding nonfamily abductions, the results revealed that the media was significantly more likely to report on this type of abduction in comparison to what would be expected considering its

frequency of occurrence in the NISMART-2 ($z= 3.91$, $p<.001$). Finally, the results demonstrated that the media was significantly more likely to report on stereotypical kidnappings in comparison to what would be expected considering its frequency of occurrence in the NISMART-2 ($z= 29.46$, $p<.001$).

Discussion

The current content analysis sought to add to the literature by quantifying the lack of congruency between media depictions of child abduction incidents and empirical data of the same. This was done by examining the portrayal of child abduction incidents in the print media from the years in which the NISMART-2 was completed (1996-1999). It was hypothesized that the media would report most on stereotypical kidnappings, followed by nonfamily abductions, while dedicating very few articles to family abductions. Similarly, it was hypothesized that the media would dedicate a larger proportion of articles to stereotypical kidnappings and nonfamily abductions than would be expected compared to their frequency of occurrence in the NISMART-2 data while simultaneously dedicating a smaller proportion of articles to family abductions than would be expected compared to their frequency of occurrence in the NISMART-2 data.

The results revealed that while the media was most likely to report on abduction incidents involving non-family offenders (i.e., nonfamily abductions and stereotypical kidnappings), it was more likely to report on the second most dramatic offense type, the nonfamily abduction, over the most dramatic offense type, the stereotypical kidnapping. This finding is contradictory to the previous literature which suggests that the media is most likely to report on stereotypical kidnappings (Finkelhor et al., 1990; Ford & Blomquist, 1991; Fu et al., 2009; Miller et al., 2008; Muschert et al., 2005). In all three

content analyses that were previously completed (i.e., Finkelhor et al., 1990; Fu et al., 2009; Muschert et al., 2005), stereotypical kidnappings were the type of abduction most reported on in the media.

These incongruous results from the current research may have occurred for several reasons. First, the operationalization of key variables used in the current study, such as the abduction type or episode breakdown, may have differed from those used in previous studies. Similarly, the previous studies may have chosen to define attempted abductions/actual abductions differently than they were defined in the current study. Second, perhaps in reality very few stereotypical kidnappings actually occurred between 1996 and 1999. With so few incidents to report on, the media chose to detail the second most horrific and unusual incident- the nonfamily abduction. Third, all of the incidents in the current sample were of abductions that occurred on the east coast. Fu et al. (2009), however, included newspapers that covered all geographic regions in the United States. It is plausible that the types of incidents that occur on the west coast differ significantly from the type of abduction incidents that occur on the east coast. If this is the case, this disparity could account for contradictory results since the findings from the current study would be skewed. Unfortunately, the NISMART-2 does not provide data on the geographic region of abductions for family abductions or stereotypical kidnappings. Finally, many of the incidents that had been categorized as a nonfamily abduction could have very well turned into a stereotypical kidnapping had the victim not escaped or the abduction thwarted by a third party. For example, in one nonfamily abduction, a teenage girl was grabbed by a stranger and thrown into the trunk of his car while she was jogging. Had she not been able to escape from the trunk, she may have experienced one of the

conditions necessary to make the incident a stereotypical kidnapping (e.g., detained overnight, transported 50 miles or more, held for ransom, kept permanently, or killed).

In addition, the results of the current research revealed that the media was significantly more likely to report on nonfamily abductions and stereotypical kidnappings in comparison to what would be expected considering their frequency of occurrence in the NISMART-2 data while also under-reporting family abductions in comparison to what would be expected considering their frequency of occurrence. This is consistent with Muschert et al.'s (2005) study which showed that the newspapers in their sample did not report extensively on family abductions. It is also consistent with the literature that suggests that the media is more likely to over-report on dramatic and unusual abduction incidents (Forst & Blomquist, 1991; Griffin & Miller, 2008; Shutt et al., 2004).

Limitations

There are at least three limitations to the current research. First, there are inherent limitations to the NISMART-2, though it is "currently the most comprehensive and methodologically sound data available for the missing children problem in the U.S." (Muschert et al., 2005, p. 6). For example, the Household Surveys may have undercounted children who were victims of child abductions that were living in households without telephones or were not living in households during the study period, such as street children or homeless children (Finkelhor et al., 2002). It may have also undercounted those households in which respondents failed to participate in the survey. Additionally, there were very few cases of stereotypical kidnappings identified. From these identified kidnappings, national estimates were statistically derived. Given the extremely small sample size of cases, however, any data derived from the estimates must

be used with caution, especially when considering precision and confidence intervals.

Furthermore, the Household Surveys used a research design that depended heavily on

non-verifiable interviews, so the estimates resulting from the data may be biased.

Finally, the Law Enforcement Study only includes stereotypical kidnappings that were

reported to authorities and occurred in 1997. Nonetheless, even considering these

limitations, this national study has been utilized by several other researchers when

examining the issue of child abductions in the United States (e.g., Muchert et al., 2005;

Muschert, Young-Spillers, & Carr, 2006; Shutt et al., 2004).

Second, the sample was not drawn randomly. Instead, it was a convenience

sample drawn from newspaper articles readily available from the *LexisNexis Academic*

database. Similarly, the articles retrieved from *LexisNexis Academic* detailed child

abduction incidents that occurred on the east coast only. Not one article was retrieved

that detailed an incident that occurred on the west coast.[12]   Therefore, the results may be

most reflective of incidents that occurred in the east, not the west.   As such, the findings

from this research can only be applied to this particular sample; no generalizations can be

inferred. Nevertheless, this study still contributes to what little is known about the

depiction of child abduction incidents in America.

Policy Implications

In spite of these limitations, the findings from the current study have several

potential policy implications, particularly the results that illustrate that abductions by

nonfamily members are more likely to be reported on by the media than abductions by

---

[12] Though one article in the sample came from the *USA Today*, a newspaper known to
report on nationally-representative stories, this particular article detailed an incident that
occurred in New York. All of the articles in the sample, therefore, detail incidents that
occurred on the east coast.

family members. Since "intense interest in disturbing child abductions by the mass media […] has helped sustain a socially constructed mythology and sporadic 'moral panic' about the pervasiveness of this threat to children" (Griffin & Miller, 2008, p. 159), politicians have responded by creating reactionary legislation that does little more than memorialize the victim. Griffin and Miller (2008) state that these types of policies that have been enacted represent *crime control theatre*, policies defined as "socially constructed 'solution[s]' to […] socially constructed problem[s]" (p. 159). Such policies symbolically address tragic events. These events, however, are extremely rare, and thus the policies address only a small portion of a much larger problem.

To illustrate, Griffin and Miller (2008) provided several instances in which crime control theatre policies were enacted. For example, the "Jacob Wetterling Crimes against Children and Sexually Violent Offender Registration" was enacted after the disappearance of Jacob Wetterling. This law requires that sex offender registries are kept by states. Following the abduction and death of Megan Kanka by a convicted sex offender who lived in her neighborhood, "Megan's Law" was passed which requires states to develop procedures for notifying citizens of sex offenders who may be residing in their community. "Carlie's Law" was enacted after Carlie Brucia was raped and murdered by a non-compliant federal probationer. This law pushed for stricter revocation criteria for federal probationers. Also, in 2006 President Bush signed the "Adam Walsh Child Protection and Safety Act," which entails strict and uniform requirements for reporting sex offenders across all states. It also created a nationwide sex offender database (Griffin & Miller, 2008). Finally, another less formal policy that has been adopted is the "stranger-danger" initiative that takes place in schools in which children

are warned, usually by local police officers, of the dangers in talking to persons whom they do not know. These policies have all been designed to prevent the least frequently occurring types of abductions: abductions by nonfamily members, particularly strangers. It should be noted, however, that these aforementioned policies are indeed useful to those victims who may be affected by their regulations, and as such, their importance cannot be underscored enough.

However, policies that address the most commonly occurring type of child abduction incident, the family abduction, are lacking because the media has not spurred strong reactions from the public like they have with other less frequently occurring abduction incidents. Though some policies do exist that address family abduction incidents after they have occurred (e.g., the International Parental Kidnapping Crime Act and the Hague Convention on the Civil Aspects of International Child Abduction), few exist to actually prevent the crime from occurring. Most of these prevention policies focus on the court's and law enforcement's role in upholding custody decisions in order to avoid family abductions. For example, the Parental Kidnapping Prevention Act of 1980 requires appropriate authorities of every state to give full faith and credit to child custody decisions made in other states. Similarly, both the Uniform Child Custody Jurisdiction Act (UCCJA) and the Uniform Child Custody Jurisdiction and Enforcement Act (UCCJEA) establish jurisdictional rules for interstate child custody and visitation cases. Both laws require interstate enforcement of valid custody and visitation orders (National Center for Missing and Exploited Children, 2009) (also see the Uniform Child Abduction Prevention Act and the Family Abduction Prevention Act of 2004).

Furthermore, it could be argued that very few policies exist that address the root causes of family abduction incidents. Since most of these types of abductions are the result of the erosion in the structure of family life, Forst and Bloomquist (1991) suggest that child abductions should not even be considered a crime problem, but rather a family problem. The authors claim that prosecuting parents who abduct their children is only a limited solution since the problem is tied to much more complex social issues, such as family conflict, family dissolution, poverty, and high divorce rates. Solutions, therefore, require improvements in basic social institutions, such as the family, education, the job market, and the neighborhood. As such, any policies that are to be enacted to address the most commonly occurring type of child abduction incident should also address these societal issues (Forst & Bloomquist, 1991).

Directions for Future Research

There are two suggestions for future research on the topic of the media's coverage of child abduction incidents. First, a deeper analysis on the findings regarding the media's tendency to over-report nonfamily abductions should be conducted. More specifically, future studies should focus on *why* the media reports heavily on nonfamily abductions. Perhaps qualitative studies interviewing media personnel on this particular topic could shed some light on the issue. Second, the sampling frame should be drawn randomly, not conveniently, so that the results can be more generalizabale. Pragmatically, however, it may not be possible to get a random sample of every newspaper in the United States. At the very least, though, future studies should include newspapers from each major geographic region in the United States.

Summary

In sum, the results of the current study lend support to the notion that there is a lack of congruency between media accounts of child abduction incidents and empirical data in that the former does indeed overemphasize the issue of nonfamily abductions and stereotypical kidnappings. Even though newspapers did not report more on the most horrific type of child abduction incident (the stereotypical kidnapping) but rather the second most dramatic type of child abduction incident (the nonfamily abduction), it did over-report on the type of abductions committed by nonfamily members in general, even though abductions committed by family members are much more common. In addition, the media was significantly more likely to report on nonfamily abductions and stereotypical kidnappings in comparison to the frequency of such occurrences in the NISMART-2 data, while simultaneously under-reporting on family abductions in comparison to the frequency of such occurrences in the NISMART-2 data. This has resulted in policies being enacted that address only a small proportion of child abduction victims and exclude a much larger proportion of them (i.e., victims of family abductions).

References

Boudreaux, M. C., Lord, W. D., & Etter, S. E. (2000). Child abduction: An overview of current and historical perspectives. *Child Maltreatment,* 5(1), 63-71.

Carmody, D. C., & Plass, P. S. (2000). Family abductions: An examination of the role of offender gender. *Gender Issues,* 18(2), 58-73.

Cherbonneau, M. G., & Copes, H. (2003). Media construction of carjacking: A content analysis of newspaper articles from 1993-2002. *Journal of Crime and Justice*, 26(2), 1-21.

Cohen, S. (1972). *Folk devils and moral panics*. London: McGibbon and Kee.

Duwe, G. (2005). A circle of distortion: The social construction of mass murder in the United States. *Western Criminology Review*, 6(1), 59-78.

Finkelhor, D., Hammer, H., & Sedlak, A. (2002). *Nonfamily abducted children: National estimates and characteristics*. Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Justice.

Finkelhor, D., Hotaling, G., & Sedlak, A. J. (1990). *Missing, abducted, runaway, and thrownaway children in America. First report: Numbers and characteristics national incidence studies.* Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Justice, Office of Justice Programs, Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention.

Finkelhor, D., Hotaling, G., & Sedlak, A. J. (1992). The abduction of children by strangers and nonfamily members: Estimating the incidence using multiple methods. *Journal of Interpersonal Violence*, 7(2), 226-243.

Forst, M. L., & Blomquist, M. E. (1991). *Missing children: Rhetoric and reality*. Lexington, MA: Lexington Books.

Fu, L., Moellers, B., Moscowitz, L., Duvall, S., & Tan, Y. (2009). "Every parent's worst nightmare": Myths of child abductions in the news. *Paper presented at the annual meeting of the International Communication Association*, Sheraton New York, New York City, NY on May 25, 2009. Accessed online November 19, 2009 from http://www.allacademic.com/meta/p14968_index.html.

Graber, D. A. (1980). *Crime news and the public*. Westport, CT: Praeger Publishers.

Griffin, T., & Miller, M. K. (2008). Child abduction, AMBER Alert, and crime control theater. *Criminal Justice Review*, 33(2), 159-176.

Hammer, H., Finkelhor, D., & Sedlak, A. J. (2002). *Children abducted by family members: national estimates and characteristics*. Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Justice.

Irsay, S. (2002, July 24). *A parent's worst nightmare: Are child abductions on the rise?* Retrieved November 19, 2009, from CNN.com's website: http://archives.cnn.com/2002/LAW/07/24/ctv.missing/

Krajicek, D. J. (1998). *SCOOPED! Media miss real stories on crime while chasing sex, sleaze, and celebrities*. New York City, NY: Columbia University Press.

Miller, J. M., Kurlycheck, M., Hansen, J. A., & Wilson, K. (2008). Examining child by offender type patterns. *Justice Quarterly*, 25(3), 523-543.

Miller, K. S., Potter, G. W., & Kappeler, V. E. (2006). The myth of the juvenile superpredator. In B. Sims & B. Preston (Eds.) *The handbook of juvenile justice: Theory and practice* (pp. 173-192). Boca Raton, FL: Taylor and Francis Group.

Muschert, G. W., Young-Spillers, M., & Carr, D. (2005). *Child abduction policy: Influenced by media coverage or empirical data?* Unpublished manuscript.

Muschert, G. W., Young-Spillers, M., & Carr, D. (2006). "Smart" policy decisions to combat a social problem: The case of child abductions. *Justice Policy Journal*, 3(2), 1-32.

National Center for Missing and Exploited Children. (2009). Family abduction: Prevention and response (6th ed.). Alexandria, VA: Patricia M. Hoff.

Neuendorf, K. A. (2002). *The content analysis guidebook*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications, Inc.

Pritchard, D. (1985). Race, homicide, and newspapers. *Journalism Quarterly*, 62, 500-507.

Pritchard, D., & Hughes, K. D. (1997). Patterns of deviance in crime news. *Journal of Communication*, 47(3), 49-67.

Shutt, J. E., Miller, J. M., Schrek, C. J., & Brown, N. K. (2004). Reconsidering the leading myths of stranger abduction. *Crime Justice Studies*, 17(1), 127-134.

Spector, M., & Kitsuse, J. I. (2006). *Constructing social problems*. New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction Publishers.

Surette, R. (1992). *Media, crime, and criminal justice: Images and realities*. Pacific Grove, CA: Brooks/Cole.