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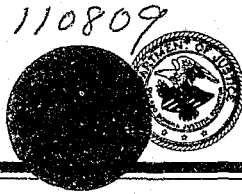
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OJJDP Update on Research

Verne L. Speirs, Administrator

April 1988
NEJRS

First Comprehensive Study of Missing Children in Progress

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ACQUISITIONS

Specially trained interviewers will soon begin a nationwide telephone survey of 40,000 households as part of a Federal effort to find out exactly how many children are missing annually in this country.

The survey is a major part of the National Studies of the Incidence of Missing Children, sponsored by the Justice Department's Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention (OJJDP).

Besides the main telephone survey of American households, researchers will also perform the following:

- Analyze FBI data on the number of children who have been abducted and murdered by strangers.
- Analyze data on throwaways—youth who have been abandoned or forced from their homes.
- Study law enforcement agency records of kidnappings, abductions, and related crimes against children.
- Interview returned runaways about their experiences.
- Survey residential facilities and institutions for youth to determine how many residents run away.

The findings from these surveys and analyses will help determine for the first time—

- The number of children missing annually in the United States.
- The types of children most likely to become missing.

- The circumstances surrounding their disappearances.
- What happens to them while they are gone.

This information is important because it can help parents and the public better understand the dimensions of the problem and identify those factors that place children at the greatest risk of becoming missing. Practitioners and policymakers need this information to design programs and policies to ensure the safety of this country's young people.

The 2-year incidence study is being conducted for OJJDP by the University of New Hampshire, the University of Lowell, and Westat, Inc., of Rockville, Maryland. Preliminary findings are expected to be available this summer, and a final report will be completed in mid-1989.

Who is a missing child?

To the general public the definition of a missing child is relatively simple: a child who is missing from home. But the researchers conducting this study realized that to be as

From the Administrator

Although there is little argument that the problem of missing children is a national concern, there is considerable disagreement about the actual number of children missing in this country annually. Solid, reliable information about such cases simply does not exist.

The Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention (OJJDP) hopes to correct this situation with a \$1.6 million, 2-year project, the National Studies of the Incidence of Missing Children. Such a study was mandated by Congress when it passed the Missing Children's Assistance Act in 1984. The study is being funded by OJJDP's Missing Children's Program.

To make sure that reliable, useful data result from this study, OJJDP has invested a considerable amount

of time, effort, and money into designing a research strategy. Consequently, it has taken the Office longer than we had hoped to get the study off the ground. We believe, however, that the research design, consisting of several integrated studies, is solid and will provide the Nation with accurate information about both the extent and nature of missing children cases.

To keep juvenile justice practitioners informed about the progress of the incidence studies, we prepared this OJJDP Update on Research. It explains the various strategies the researchers will use and the products that we expect to result from this 2-year study.

Verne L. Speirs
Administrator

accurate as possible, they would have to be very specific in defining missing children.

After reviewing the literature and consulting missing children experts, the researchers developed the following working definitions for the five categories of missing cases that will be studied:

- **Runaways.** Children who leave home voluntarily without the knowledge or permission of their parent or guardian and who stay away at least overnight.
- **Throwaways.** Children who do not leave home voluntarily but instead are abandoned, forced from their homes by parents or legal guardians, not allowed to return, or who come and go totally unsupervised.
- **Nonfamily abducted children.** Children who are taken from home or somewhere else, or unlawfully detained by someone who is not a parent, relative, or legal guardian, without the knowledge or against the wishes of a parent or legal guardian.
- **Family abducted children.** Children who are taken from or are not returned to their legal custodian by a parent or other family member or agent acting for a parent in violation of a custody agreement or other living arrangement.
- **Otherwise missing children.** Children who fail to return home or make contact with a parent or guardian for at least an hour because the child is lost, fatally injured, or has suffered serious harm or injury that required medical attention.

Background

No single reliable source of information currently exists about these categories of missing children incidents. Nor can all the information researchers need to know be gathered using just one research strategy. To ensure that the data collected from this project are comprehensive and reliable, OJJDP funded several pilot studies to determine which combination of research strategies would work best. The results of the pilot studies, conducted by Northwestern University and the University of Il-

linois, indicated that the telephone surveys and analyses described above would provide researchers with the most complete data. Each strategy is discussed below.

Household telephone survey

Not all missing child episodes are reported to the police or other agencies. Consequently, researchers cannot rely solely on police records for data, but must seek information directly from families about cases of missing children.

The household telephone survey, consisting of three components, will be used to gather this information. The first part of the survey will be a random sample of 40,000 residential telephone numbers from across the Nation. Considering the national proportion of households with parents of children under 18 years old, researchers expect that approximately 20,000 will be interviewed about missing children events.

During these interviews, respondents will be asked if the household has had experience with missing children episodes. If so, they will be asked about the circumstances of these events, the characteristics of the children and other individuals involved, and whether and how the child was recovered.

The second part of the household survey will use network sampling—a relatively new method of studying rare events such as child abductions. This approach asks respondents not only about abductions their own children may have experienced, but also about any such episodes experienced by children of the respondent's brother or sister. This strategy will help expand the sources of information about child abductions without inflating incidence estimates.

The researchers also plan to supplement information provided by the respondent by directly interviewing those siblings whose children had been abducted. Direct interviews with families who have had a child abducted are expected to provide more accurate and detailed accounts

of the episode than could be given by the primary respondent—the aunt or uncle of the abducted child.

The third part of the household survey is a separate study of returned runaways. Approximately 200 runaways, selected on the basis of age, time away, and returned status, will be interviewed to determine the extent of agreement between parent and child concerning several important aspects of the missing experience.

A survey of residential facilities

In addition to households, researchers also plan to contact, by telephone, a number of youth residential facilities and institutions. These facilities will be initially identified through the household survey. Staff members from these institutions will be interviewed about the youths who have run away during the preceding year.

Research indicates that running away from shelters, group homes, and other juvenile custody facilities and institutions is more frequent than running away from home. Moreover, these youth may be at greater risk of becoming involved with crime or becoming a victim of crime while on the run. Therefore, it is important to try to get information on these youth from those individuals most likely to know about these runaway episodes.

An analysis of child homicide by strangers

Abductions by strangers that result in the murder of a child are the most frightening missing child events—and the ones that have generated much public outcry and concern. Current estimates of the number of children abducted and murdered each year in the United States are far ranging and not based upon reliable data.

To help remedy this situation, a part of the incidence study will focus on the Supplemental Homicide Report (SHR) data compiled by the Federal Bureau of Investigation's (FBI) Uniform Crime Reporting Program. This analysis is based on data voluntarily

submitted by more than 15,000 city, county, and State law enforcement agencies across the country. Like other data sets on homicide, the SHR contains information on the age, race, and sex of homicide victims and the weapons used. Considerably more information, however, is provided in this data file, including information about the circumstances of the homicides, the relationships between victims and offenders, and demographic data on the offenders.

From these data, it is possible to estimate the number of children murdered annually by strangers under circumstances that probably involved an abduction of the child. Demographic information on the victim and offender will also be analyzed to develop a profile of this type of child homicide.

A study of police records

Although the household interview will include questions about nonfamily abductions, few such cases are expected to be identified through this survey. Researchers hope to gather data on nonfamily abductions from a separate study of law enforcement records.

While a parent or caretaker will not always report a runaway or parental abduction to the police, almost all suspected nonfamily abductions are reported to and recorded by law enforcement agencies. Therefore, researchers will survey a nationally representative sample of 20 counties, including those with large, medium, and small populations. Within each county, a random sample of municipal police, sheriff departments, and State police will be surveyed.

In each agency, records concerning all nonfamily abductions will be identified and a summary prepared of each eligible case. These summaries will contain details of the incidents, characteristics of the child and abductor, the eventual resolution of the case, and any additional features that are important for determining whether a case meets study criteria. Information also will be sought on any convictions and sentences resulting from such cases.

Throwaway cases

Neither the household survey nor the police records study is expected to accurately identify cases of throwaway children since parents or legal guardians may be reluctant to disclose throwaway situations. This group of children is included in the study of missing children because of their vulnerability to exploitation, particularly the teenage throwaway.

Researchers determined that the best way to collect information about such cases is to analyze data from the Study of the National Incidence and Prevalence of Child Abuse and Neglect.

This study was conducted in 1986 by Westat, Inc., for the Department of Health and Human Services. It surveyed a nationally representative sample of local child protective services, police, juvenile courts and probation, social services, welfare, and medical professionals to identify cases of child abuse. Included among the neglect cases were several types of maltreatment, such as parents refusing to take custody of their children, abandoning them, or forcing them out of the home without making alternate plans for supervision.

Analyzing existing data will help researchers cost effectively estimate the number of throwaway children, without duplicating efforts.

Keeping the public informed

One of OJJDP's goals is to provide the public and juvenile justice professionals with reliable, useful information on a regular and timely basis.

To make findings from the National Studies of the Incidence of Missing Children available as soon as possible, the Office plans to release a series of preliminary and final reports. This series will include the following:

- ⊙ A summary of findings from the analysis of child homicide by strangers from the Supplemental Homicide Reports.
- ⊙ A technical report discussing methodological and definitional

issues that arose during the study design. It will describe how the definitions were constructed. This document is essential not only for interpreting the results of the studies done in 1988 but also for future studies.

- ⊙ A report about throwaways based on the analysis of the 1986 Study of the National Incidence and Prevalence of Child Abuse and Neglect.

- ⊙ Preliminary findings from the household telephone survey. This report will include profile characteristics, risk factors, and estimates of each type of missing child case: runaways, throwaways, family abductions, nonfamily abductions, and otherwise missing children.

- ⊙ Key findings from the study of the law enforcement records regarding nonfamily abductions.

- ⊙ A separate report examining the point of view of runaways who have returned home.

- ⊙ A final research report summarizing all aspects of the study.

Three special topic papers will also be written from the study results. Each will examine a specific issue with policy implications. For example, one paper may focus on problems of formal and informal custody agreements that contribute to family abductions, while another paper will present information on why some missing child experiences are reported immediately to law enforcement agencies and others are never reported to the police or any other professional resource.

OJJDP hopes that information from this study will increase knowledge about missing children and help policymakers and practitioners make more informed decisions about safeguarding the Nation's children.

Listed below are some examples of research and writing on missing children:

Agopian, M. W. (1984). The Impact on Children of Abduction by Parents. *Child Welfare* 23(6): 511-519.

Collins, J. J., McCalla, M. E., Powers, L. L., and Stutts, E. S. (March

1988). The Police and Missing Children: Findings From a National Survey. *OJJDP Update on Research*, U.S. Department of Justice.

Department of Health, Education, and Welfare (1976). *National Statistical Survey on Runaway Youth*. U.S. Government Printing Office: Washington, D.C.

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Farber, E.D., Kinast, C., McCoard, W.D., and Falkner, D. (1984). Violence in Families of Adolescent Runaways. *Child Abuse and Neglect*, 8: 295-299.

Gelles, R.J. (1984). Parental Child Snatching: A Preliminary Estimate of the National Incidence. *Journal of Marriage and the Family* 46 (3): 735-740.

Hotaling, G.T., and Finkelhor, D. (1985). The Sexual Exploitation of Missing Children: A Research Review. Prepared for the Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention, U.S. Department of Justice: Washington, D.C.

Montemayor, and Leigh, K. (1982). Parent-Absent Children: A Demographic Analysis of Children and Adolescents Living Apart From Their Parents. *Family Relations* 31: 567-573.

Terr, L.C. (1983). Chowchilla Revisited: The Effects of Psychic Trauma Four Years After a School-Bus Kidnapping. *American Journal of Psychiatry* 140(12): 1543-1550.

This Update was written with the help of Gerald T. Hotaling and David Finkelhor, of the University of New Hampshire; Andrea J. Sedlak and

Ronna J. Cook of Westat, Inc.; and Barbara Allen-Hagen of OJJDP. It was edited by Kay McKinney of OJJDP.

For more information about this and other OJJDP projects, contact the Juvenile Justice Clearinghouse, Box 6000, Rockville, MD 20850, or call toll free 800-638-8736 (301-251-5500 for the Washington, D.C., area).

The Assistant Attorney General, Office of Justice Programs, coordinates the activities of the following program Offices and Bureaus: Bureau of Justice Statistics, National Institute of Justice, Bureau of Justice Assistance, Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention, and Office for Victims of Crime.

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