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Child abduction: understanding police recorded crime statistics

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The offence of child abduction is part of the Violence Against the Person category of police recorded crime. Whilst the offence forms only a small proportion of all Violence Against the Person offences (just 0.1% in 2002/03), the total number of offences recorded by the police increased by 45% in 2002/03 from the previous year, to 846 offences (Simmons and Dodd, 2003). The main types of offence constituting the total number of recorded child abductions across England and Wales in 2002/03 are examined here. Reasons why these offences may have increased so dramatically from the previous year are also discussed.

Key points

- Just over half of all police recorded child abductions were *attempted* abductions.
- More than half (56%) of all police recorded child abductions involved an offender not known to the victim (i.e. a stranger).
- Attempted child abductions by strangers were the largest single type of child abductions (47%). In most offences there was minimal contact between the victim and the offender. The number of these offences appears to have increased dramatically since 2001/02 – changes to the manner in which the police record crime are likely to have contributed to this increase.
- Child abductions by strangers that were actually *successful*, rather than attempts, accounted for 9% of all offences recorded (a total of 68 victims in 2002/03).
- 23% of child abductions were committed by a parent of the child. In some cases the child was not taken outside the UK and it seems that in some of these cases either the offence should not have been recorded or should have been recorded as 'no-crime' at a later stage.
- At least 6% of child abductions (probably considerably more) were sexually motivated.
- 22% of child abductions were classified as 'other'. In these offences some relationship existed between the victim and the offender prior to the abduction, including 'grooming' style relationships, familial relationships, friends, abductions for revenge and abductions by boyfriends.

For the purposes of this research, offences were grouped into four main types:

- parental child abductions – abductions of a child by a natural parent or guardian
- stranger attempted child abductions – abductions by someone not known to the child which did not result in the successful abduction of the child
- stranger successful child abductions – abductions by someone not known to the child that succeeded
- other – successful and attempted abductions of a child by someone with some previous connection to the child.

The views expressed in these findings are those of the authors, not necessarily those of the Home Office (nor do they reflect Government policy)

Definitions

The offence of child abduction is defined under the terms of the Child Abduction Act 1984, which allows for two types of abduction:

Abduction of a child by parent

'a person connected with the child under the age of sixteen ... takes or sends the child out of the United Kingdom without the appropriate consent.'
(Child Abduction Act 1984, Sec 1)

Person connected with the child includes a parent, the father, a guardian, or person with either a residence order or custody over the child.

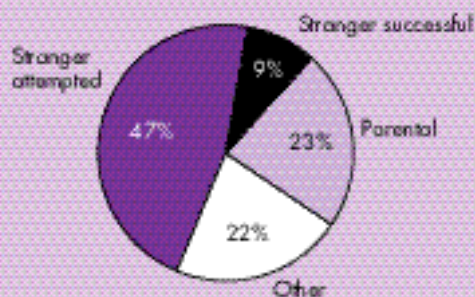
Abduction of child by other persons

'a person other than [the child's mother, father or others covered in sec 1], without lawful authority or reasonable excuse ... takes or detains a child under the age of sixteen ...'
(Child Abduction Act 1984, Sec 2)

The Principal Crime Rule (Home Office Counting Rules) applies to offences of child abduction in cases where a more serious crime is committed as part of the same offence. Therefore, if a child is abducted and then murdered, only one offence of homicide should be recorded. Abductions of children for sexual purposes are covered in a separate offence category of 'abduction', although this applies only to female victims, and is again subject to the Principal Crime Rule (for example, in cases where an abducted victim is raped an offence of rape should be recorded).

Figure 1 shows the proportion that each of the four types accounted for out of the total number of offences recorded in 2002/03.

Figure 1 Type of police recorded offences of child abduction (2002/03)



Note: Percentages do not sum to 100 because of rounding.

Methodology

Data were collected from all police forces in England and Wales on child abduction offences recorded in 2002/03. Forces were asked to send details of the victims and the nature of the offence committed. Some offences had since been recorded as 'no-crime'. In other cases, insufficient detail was available on the victim and/or the offence. The total number of offences used in this analysis was 798. The description of each type of child abduction is based on the number of offences recorded by the police (each victim should be recorded as a separate offence). Some offences may be part of the same case, i.e. there was more than one victim. Details are provided at the beginning of each section on the number of offences (victims) and the respective number of cases.

Parental child abductions

23% of the child abductions recorded in 2002/03 were abductions by a parent (141 cases involving 180 children).

- The average age of the victims was six years – the lowest for all four types of child abduction (compared with nine years across all types, see Table 1).
- Slightly more victims (56%) were male (Figure 2).
- Victims of parental abduction were much more likely to come from ethnic minority groups compared with other types of child abduction, with just under half of the victims from non-white ethnic groups (Figure 3).

This reflects previous research which indicates that parental abduction of children is closely associated with partners from different nationalities, races or cultural backgrounds disputing the custody of their children (see, for example, Hegar and Greif, 1994; Plass et al., 1997). However, the issue is complex and multifaceted, incorporating problems of domestic violence and abuse as well as concerns with cultural identity and ways of living (Plass et al. 1997; Weiner, 2000).

Nearly 90% of the parental child abductions were successful rather than attempted abductions of the victim.

Crime recording: parental abductions

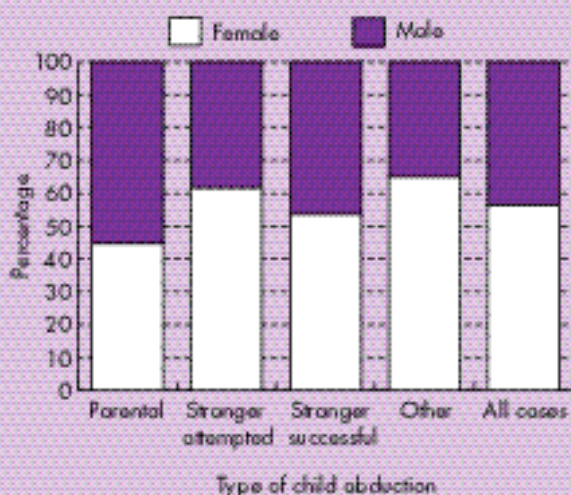
The Child Abduction Act 1984 provides that the offence of abduction of a child by a parent is committed only if the child is taken out of the UK for a period exceeding one month (although there are a number of clauses and caveats which qualify this – see, for example, Carr and Turner, 2002).

It was not possible to say with complete certainty whether each offence of parental child abduction collected in this research did meet the legal criteria to be recorded as such. However, it is estimated that at least one-third of parental child abduction offences should not actually have been recorded by the police, or should have been recorded as 'no-crime' at a later stage, according to the legal definition. In some cases, it may have been difficult to tell at the time of recording whether the child had actually been taken out of the UK or not.

Table 1 Age of victims by type of child abduction

Type of abduction	Average age*	Standard deviation	No.**
Parental	6	4.3	166
Stranger attempted	10	3.9	364
Stranger successful	10	4.5	67
Other	12	4.4	160
All cases	9	4.7	757

Note: * The average age has been rounded to the nearest whole year. ** In 41 cases the age of the victim was not provided.

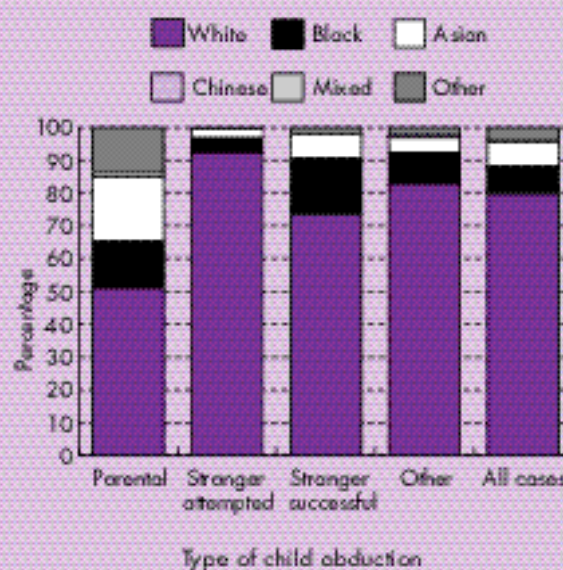
Figure 2 Sex of victims by type of child abduction

Note: In 46 cases the sex of the victim was not provided, therefore the total number of cases in Figure 2 is 752.

However, in less than 40% of the offences was it clear that the victim had been taken outside the UK (in just under 30% of the offences it was clear the victim had *not* left the country). In six offences, the abductor was prevented from removing their child from the country by police at a port. In those offences where the victim was known to have been taken outside the UK, two-thirds of the victims were from non-white ethnic groups.

Stranger attempted child abductions

In 2002/03 there were 361 cases involving a stranger attempting to abduct a child or children, resulting in 377 victims/offences (47% of all child abductions). (These

Figure 3 Ethnicity of victims by type of abduction

Note: In 164 cases the ethnicity of the victim was not provided, therefore the total number of cases in Figure 3 is 634.

figures include one case of a conspiracy to commit child abduction where the offenders' plans to abduct a child were stopped before even an attempt could be made).

- The average age of the victims was ten years, four years higher than the six year average of victims of parental abduction (Table 1).
- 61% of the victims were female (Figure 2).
- Over 90% of the victims were white (Figure 3).

It was very difficult to establish a motive for these offences because in many cases the victim had no or only minimal contact with the offender (in 96% of the stranger attempted child abductions the motive had to be coded as 'not known'). For only 15 offences (4%) was there sufficient information to be certain of the motive – all were sexually motivated. However, it seems reasonable to assume that many of the stranger attempted child abductions where the motive was not known would have actually been sexually motivated offences. The most common scenario in these cases was a male offender attempting to entice a child into a car or physically attempting to drag a victim from a public place.

14 offences of stranger attempted child abduction involved a victim under the age of two years. In each case the offender attempted to remove the child from the direct control of its parent. In three cases, the offender impersonated a member of the social services or health profession. In the remaining 11 cases the offender tried to physically remove the victim.

Stranger successful child abductions

In 2002/03 there were 59 cases involving a stranger successfully abducting a child or children, resulting in 68 victims/offences (9% of all child abductions recorded).

- The average age of these victims was ten years, the same as the victims of stranger attempted abductions (Table 1).
- 54% of the victims were female (Figure 2).
- 74% of victims (n=39) were white, 17% (n=9) were black, 8% (n=4) were Asian, and one victim's ethnic appearance was coded as 'other' (Figure 3).

None of these offences involved the victim being taken overseas. In all offences where information was available (63% of the stranger successful offences) the abducted child was recovered within 24 hours of being taken. There was no information as to when the remaining 25 victims were recovered. In most offences, insufficient details were available to code the motive for the offence reliably. However, in 12 offences (19%) it was clear the motive was sexual. Two victims were subjected to a serious sexual assault; in the remaining ten offences it was not clear (from the information collected) how serious the sexual component of the offence had been.

Other child abductions

155 cases of child abduction, resulting in 173 victims/offences, were classified as 'other' (22% of all child abduction offences recorded by the police in 2002/03). In these cases, some form of relationship existed between the victim and the offender.

- The average age of victims was 12 years, three years older than the average age across all types (Table 1).
- 65% of the victims were female (Figure 2).
- 83% of victims were white, 10% were black and 4% Asian (Figure 3).

There were several main sub-categories of 'other' offences:

- **'Grooming' and exploitative relationships**
77 (45%) 'other' child abduction offences could be grouped under the general heading of 'grooming' style offences or other exploitative relationships that adult offenders formed with child victims. This included offenders offering refuge to young people who had repeatedly gone missing and enticing them into using alcohol, drugs and possibly becoming involved in prostitution. Four of these offences involved taking a child overseas. 17% (13 offences) could with some certainty be classified as sexually motivated. It seems certain that other offences were of a sexual nature but insufficient information was obtained to code them as such reliably. Four offences involved contact initiated over the Internet – three were of an overtly sexual nature.

- **Abductions by other family members, partners or friends**

Abductions by family members other than the child's parents (including friends and partners or ex-partners of one parent) accounted for a further 32 offences (18% of the 'other' category). Seven offences occurred as a result of disputes over the custody of the victim. Two offences involved taking a child overseas.

- **Abductions for revenge/altercation**

8% of other offences (n=14) were the result of ongoing altercations between the victim and offender or for the purpose of revenge. Three offences could be described as 'punishment beatings' for offences committed by the victim. In nine offences the victim suffered physical injuries as a result of being assaulted and in a further three offences the victim was threatened (in two cases with a weapon).

- **Abductions by boyfriends**

Nine offences (5% of other offences) involved the victim going missing with their known boyfriend. All victims were females aged between 13 and 15. (These were not classified as sexually motivated child abductions for the purposes of this study.)

Crime recording: sexual offences

Across all types of child abduction offences recorded in 2002/03, a total of 45 offences (6%) could reliably be classified as sexually motivated. 32 of these offences involved female victims. This is likely to be a considerable underestimate of the actual number of sexually motivated offences within the total number of child abduction offences recorded by police (in 96% of the stranger attempted child abductions it was not possible to classify the motive).

Whilst it may have been difficult for the police to establish the exact motive at the time the offence was reported, it is possible that at least some of these offences would have been classified more appropriately as offences of abduction (see Definitions box) rather than child abduction. However, this is an area where crime recording is likely to change over the next year with the introduction of a broader 'preparatory' sexual offence. Section 62 of the Sexual Offences Act 2003, which received Royal Assent in November 2003 and should come into force in May 2004, provides for the offence of "committing an offence with the intent to commit a sexual offence" and would include abduction.

Why have recorded offences of child abduction increased?

Police recorded offences of child abduction increased by 45% from 2001/02 to 2002/03 (Simmons and Dodd, 2003). In an attempt to provide some explanation for this increase, data were collected on child abductions recorded in the previous year (2001/02) from the five forces which recorded the largest numerical increases in England and Wales. The increases ranged from 16 to 61 offences. Together, these forces accounted for 57% of the total increase across all forces from 2001/02 to 2002/03, and recorded just over one-third of all offences of child abduction in England and Wales in 2002/03. Table 2 shows how the type of child abductions recorded changed in these five forces.

Whilst the actual number of all types of child abduction increased across the five forces, the largest increase was in stranger attempted abductions. The actual number of stranger attempted child abductions recorded across the five forces increased by nearly 200% (from 43 offences in 2001/02 to 128 offences in 2002/03). As a proportion of child abduction offences recorded in the five forces, stranger attempted child abductions increased from less than one-third in 2001/02 to nearly half in 2002/03. This matches the proportion of stranger attempted abductions recorded by all forces in 2002/03 (see Table 2).

The number of parental abductions increased by nearly two-thirds across the five forces from 56 offences in 2001/02 to 92 offences in 2002/03. However, as a proportion of all child abduction offences recorded in the five forces in 2002/03 parental abductions decreased from 39% to 33% (the rise in the actual number of this type of abduction was offset by the much larger rise in stranger attempted child abductions). This gives a clear indication that stranger attempted abductions are the primary reason for the large increase in all child abductions recorded in 2002/03, followed by the rise in parental abductions.

The large increase in recorded stranger attempted child abductions may, at least in part, be attributable to the general move to a more prima facie approach to the recording of crime (based on the victim's perception of a

crime occurring). This has had an impact in several areas of crime recording, not least violent crime. Simmons, Legg and Hosking (2003) describe the impact of the National Crime Recording Standard (NCRS) – a standard adopted nationally on 1 April, 2002, although some police forces did implement the same practices earlier. It is feasible that reports of attempted child abductions where no contact was made with the victim may have gone unrecorded as crimes prior to the introduction of the NCRS. The latest figures therefore may provide a truer reflection of the extent of child abduction in England and Wales.

The move to a more victim-focused approach to crime recording may have led to some offences of parental abduction being recorded which fell outside the scope of the legal definition of this offence. This might be coupled with a very real increase in the number of cases of parental abduction, although at this stage there is insufficient data to provide firm evidence of such a trend. There is anecdotal evidence that officers are increasingly better trained to recognise the potential seriousness of parental abductions and therefore not to consider them solely as 'domestic' issues which lie outside the scope of police involvement (Hillier, 2000).

Detection and identification of the suspect

The detection rate for child abduction offences fell from 50% in 2001/02 to 37% in 2002/03 (compared to an average for all Violence Against the Person offences of 58% in 2001/02 and 54% in 2002/03). This research did not examine the actual disposal code for each offence recorded in 2002/03 (to do so would have required many forces to examine more than one recording system). However, data were collected on whether a suspect had been identified for the offence:

- in all parental abductions and 90% of 'other' abductions a suspect was identified
- in 54% of stranger successful abductions a suspect had been identified
- in only 13% of stranger attempted abductions a suspect been identified.

Table 2 Type of child abduction offences recorded in five forces, 2001/02 to 2002/03

Type of abduction	Proportion of cases by type of abduction					
	2001/02 Five forces		2002/03 Five forces		2002/03 All forces	
	%	No.	%	No.	%	No.
Parental	39	56	33	92	23	180
Stranger attempted	30	43	46	128	47	377
Stranger successful	8	12	6	16	9	68
Other	22	32	16	44	22	173
Total	100	143	100	280	100	798

Note: Percentages do not add to 100 due to rounding.

Given that stranger attempted child abductions are likely to have accounted for a large part of the overall increase in child abduction offences (owing at least in part to the effect of the NCRS), this could provide a good indication of why the detection rate has fallen.

Whilst suspects were identified in all cases of parental abduction but just over half of stranger successful abductions, previous research has shown that *offenders convicted* of child abduction are mainly sexually motivated and are not related to the victim (Erikson and Friendship, 2002). This is likely to reflect a higher propensity of the police and Crown Prosecution Service to pursue a prosecution against an offender who abducts a child not known to him or her, particularly for sexual purposes. Whilst it was not possible to produce reliable data on whether the police pursued a case against a known offender, it was clear that of the 2002/03 cases of parental child abduction, the vast majority did not result in prosecution. Information provided in one police force indicated that the police tended to encourage estranged parents to pursue a formal custody settlement in the civil courts.

Recommendations

- The Home Office, through the National Crime Recording Steering Group (NCRSG), should review the instructions for the recording and reclassification of child abductions by parents to ensure that only

appropriate offences are recorded by the police. Guidance should be issued if necessary.

- The Home Office, through the NCRSG, should review the instructions for the recording and reclassification of child abductions of a sexual nature, and should consider issuing guidance to police forces to clarify the specific circumstances in which an abduction of a child for sexual purposes should be recorded as a child abduction (Violence Against the Person offence) or an abduction (sexual offence). This review could be undertaken as part of the implementation of the prospective new sex offences legislation.
- The Home Office should monitor the number of child abductions recorded by the police closely and should undertake further work on why these offences are increasing, if this continues to be the case.
- The Home Office should liaise with the Foreign and Commonwealth Office and the Department for Constitutional Affairs to monitor patterns and trends in parental child abductions overseas.

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