Data Missing on Missing Children

Posted Sept. 2, 2002 By Timothy W. Maier



Media Credit: Fred Greaves/Reuters

The Danielle van Dam (parents above) case focused media attention on child abduction.

By now the stories are all too familiar. A child is missing: vanished from the family's back yard, snatched from the bus stop or stolen from his or her own bedroom. The pictures on the evening news have become a ghostly reminder of childhood lost. These stories are heartbreaking for everyone; parents' grief is all but unbearable.

Meanwhile, across the nation, parents fear their child could be next. Justice Department research indicates the risk of abduction by a stranger is relatively low for preschoolers, but increases through elementary school and peaks at age 15. Teen-age girls are considered most vulnerable.

Frightened parents wonder how the society in which they are raising families got this way. Some blame the media for reporting these cases. The FBI charged that reporters were distorting the facts with fear-driven stories about monsters preying on children.

For the media, it started out innocently enough. With no juicy summer sex scandal such as the Chandra Levy or Gary Condit cases to sell papers or build ratings, reporters slowly dissected the tragic kidnapping and murder of Danielle van Dam in San Diego. That story consumed the national press until 14-year-old Elizabeth Smart was snatched from her bedroom in Utah, seizing the attention of the electronic media and making still more headlines. That case seemed to strike fear into the heart of every parent of a beautiful child.

The coverage of child-snatching became even more intense when 5-year-old Samantha Runnion was dragged from her driveway. Samantha's body was discovered after the perpetrator had raped her and discarded her remains a short distance from her home. By now the fear had become a runaway train as new cases were reported in headlines from Philadelphia to Milwaukee.

Writing for Time magazine, Walter Kern put it bluntly: "One wonders if the abduction reports are a runaway habit whose internal momentum can get the best of reporters and editors, flattening everything else that lies before it: stories of war and preparations for war, of corruption among the elites, of floods and droughts. What, no kidnapped kids this morning? Well, find some!"

Many welcome the coverage. Curtis S. Lavarello, executive director for the National Association of School Resource Officers, says: "For critics who claim that copycats may arise as a result of media coverage, I would counter that in all reality, for every case of a possible copycat case, there are most likely hundreds, if not thousands, of parents doing a better job of supervising their children."

The FBI, in fact, insists that child abductions by strangers actually have declined. In the 1980s the number of such child abductions averaged annually about 200 to 300, according to the FBI. In 2000, the number of cases dropped to 93 compared with 134 in 1999 and 115 in 1998, when the FBI first began tracking these statistics.

But that may not be an accurate assessment. Neal Rawls, a security consultant in Palm Beach, Fla., and author of Be Alert, Be Aware, Have a Plan: The Complete Guide to Protecting Yourself, Your Home, Your Family, calls the FBI statistics misleading. "OSHA reports workplace accidents better than the government tracks missing kids," he says.

Rawls contends no one can say for certain if there has been an increase or decrease in the number of missing-kids cases because everyone defines kidnapping differently. "Is luring someone into a house, and then releasing them, considered kidnapping?" he wonders. If so, consider this: One out of seven people who are sexually assaulted is a child younger than age 6, and 67 percent of sexual-assault victims are children. That, he says, indicates a problem bigger than the FBI admits.

According to Rawls, if a child is lured by a stranger and then sexually assaulted and released, the FBI downplays the crime by boasting that most of these missing kids are returned. "The FBI makes it sound insignificant if a child is not killed," he says. "The fact that these kids are returned does not mean that we don't have a monumental problem. The huge problem of sexual predators attacking children is getting swept under the rug."

The National Center for Missing and Exploited Children (NCMEC) also has tried to calm the waters by advising that most of the 725,000 children reported missing in 2001 were returned. Of that number, the NCMEC claims, 3,000 to 5,000 were nonfamily abductions or stranger-kidnapping cases with most being returned. NCMEC statistics don't match the FBI's compilation. About 6 percent of abductions by strangers result in murder.

Most of the general statistics on child-snatching are extrapolated from a 1990 Department of Justice study called National Incidence Studies of Missing, Abducted, Runaway and Thrownaway Children. The study claimed 354,100 abductions per year are committed by family members in custody disputes. The same study says about 114,600 stranger-abductions are attempted per year, of which about 3,200 to 4,600 are successful. (The FBI doesn't track or bother to inform parents how many child-snatching attempts were reported.) The Department of Justice study says about 200 to 300 kidnappings per year involve children taken overnight, transported to another location and killed.

How accurate these statistics are is unknown. David Finkelhor, a sociology professor who heads the University of New Hampshire's Crimes Against Children Center, recently told CNN that "for a crime that gets as much public attention as it does, it's pretty appalling that there are not better statistics."

A follow-up study was published in June 2000 in the Justice Department's Office of

Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention Juvenile Justice Bulletin. That report says 24 percent of all kidnapping cases are "stranger-kidnapping" compared with 49 percent family kidnapping and 27 percent acquaintance kidnapping. However, it based its findings on reviewing 1,214 cases from 1997 in the National Incident-Based Reporting System. Written in part by Finkelhor, this report contradicts the 1990 study, stating "it is impossible to project a reliable national estimate of kidnapping incidents ... because there has been an absence of reliable statistics about the crime." In fact, the FBI does not even include the crime in its Uniform Crime Reporting System.

So how many children are missing, from where and what are their names? No one knows for sure. Dave Thelen, chief executive officer for the nonprofit Committee for Missing Children Inc., has been trying to get reliable statistics for years and would like to see NCMEC back up its numbers with a complete database of names and case histories. So far, no member of Congress has bothered to ask for an accounting of every missing child in the nation. As a result, there has been no national compilation of such rudimentary information as name, age, date missing and status of the case. Experts in the field explain that each jurisdiction defines crimes of kidnapping differently.

Regardless of such problems, both NCMEC President Ernie Allen and the FBI insist that there are enough empirical data to indicate that child-snatching has declined, particularly abductions by strangers. Frank Furedi, author of Paranoid Parenting, insists the FBI statistics indicate the United States is not "experiencing an epidemic of child abduction."

But the White House is not so convinced. "It seems that President George W. Bush regards the threat of child abduction as akin to that of terrorism," observes Furedi. "Recently, he informed the people of America that they were not only under threat from terrorists, they also faced a wave of horrible violence from twisted elements in our own communities." Indeed President Bush has been joined by Attorney General John Ashcroft and Secretary of Education Rod Paige in announcing a White House Conference on Missing, Exploited and Runaway Children to be convened in September. He also has announced release of a new guidebook, Personal Safety for Children: A Guide for Parents.

Meanwhile, Furedi insists, "The cumulative effect of the ceaseless exploitation of the issue of child-snatching by the U.S. media is to poison the relationship between adults and children. As far as American culture goes, adults and children need to be kept apart." For example, he says, at a playground in San Francisco unaccompanied adults are denied entrance by a security guard. "I was also informed that unaccompanied adults could not loiter outside the park," Furedi says. "The age-old idea that adults derive a simple harmless pleasure from just watching children play has given way to the conviction that such instincts are likely to be those of a predator."

But child-advocacy groups welcome the White House conference. Noting that about 85 to 90 percent of the 876,213 persons reported missing in 2000 were children — a 469 percent increase from the 154,341 reported in 1982, the Klass Kids Foundation points out in its literature that, "if any other segment of our population were so impacted, we would declare an epidemic; the Center for Disease Control would fund a cure; we would pass and enforce legislation and we would increase private and public security. But, since it is only our children, many in our society accept these appalling numbers as status quo."

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