Caretaker Satisfaction With Law Enforcement Response to Missing Children.

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Caretaker Satisfaction With Law Enforcement Response to Missing Children

by Heather Hammer, David Finkelhor, Richard K. Ormrod, Andrea J. Sedlak, and Carol Bruce

This series of Bulletins summarizes findings from the Second National Incidence Studies of Missing, Abducted, Runaway, and Thrownaway Children (NISMART–2). The main purpose of the series is to provide a clear picture of how many children become missing—and why. Bulletins in the series offer national estimates of missing children based on surveys of households, juvenile residential facilities, and law enforcement agencies. The Bulletins also present statistical profiles of these children, including their demographic characteristics and the circumstances of their disappearance. In addition, the series offers analyses of selected special topics, based on NISMART–2 data.

This Bulletin examines satisfaction with law enforcement from the perspective of all primary caretakers who contacted police when one or more of their children experienced a qualifying episode in the Second National Incidence Studies of Missing, Abducted, Runaway, and Thrownaway Children (NISMART–2) National Household Survey of Adult Caretakers. Qualifying episodes include children with police contact who were abducted,
ran away, or were thrown away and children who were missing involuntarily or for benign reasons. The National Household Survey of Adult Caretakers was conducted during 1999 and reflects a 12-month period.

**Key Findings**

- Despite current case-management guidelines for missing and abducted children that recommend the dispatch of officers in response to all missing child cases reported to law enforcement, police were dispatched to the household or scene for only an estimated 68 percent of reported missing child type episodes.
- Among the missing child type cases considered in this Bulletin, researchers found no statistically significant differences to indicate that officers are more likely to be dispatched in any particular type of episode.
- Caretakers were satisfied with the way in which police handled the case in an estimated 74 percent of the episodes that involved the dispatch of officers to the household or scene, compared with 35 percent of the episodes in which officers were not dispatched.
- Police arrived at the household or scene in less than 30 minutes after they were contacted in an estimated 70 percent of episodes involving the dispatch of officers.
- Caretaker satisfaction with how the police handled the case is associated with the time it took police to respond. Whereas caretakers were satisfied with the police response in 84 percent of the episodes in which the police arrived in less than 30 minutes, they were satisfied in only a little more than half (54 percent) of the episodes in which the police took 30 minutes or longer to arrive at the household or scene.
- Caretaker satisfaction with how the police handled the case is associated with the type of episode. Caretakers are least satisfied with the way in which police handled family abductions (45 percent).

**Conceptualizing the Problem**

Because the initial response of law enforcement agencies is “unquestionably one of the most critical in the entire missing-child investigative process . . . it is recommended that law-enforcement agencies respond to every report of a missing child as if the child is in immediate danger” (Steidel, 2006:33). It is further recommended that investigators consult, as a resource, the guidelines contained in the “Investigative Checklist for First Responders” included in *Missing and Abducted Children: A Law-Enforcement Guide to Case Investigation and Program Management* (Steidel, 2006).

With these recommendations in mind, the research team designed NISMART–2 to capture detailed information about the time police took to respond when contacted, whether officers were dispatched to the household or scene, the investigative steps officers followed when they arrived, and the level of caretaker satisfaction with law enforcement’s handling of the case. This Bulletin examines the role of law enforcement in all of the NISMART–2 missing child type episodes with any police contact that primary caretakers disclosed in the National Household Survey of Adult Caretakers, including episodes in which the child was reported missing, recovered from a known location, or brought to the attention of law enforcement for some other reason.

**Methodology**

Two characteristics differentiate the findings reported in this Bulletin from others reported in the NISMART–2 series and do not allow for comparisons with estimates in previously published Bulletins. First, in contrast with the other Bulletins in this series that are more concerned with overviews and specific episodes and that unify data across the NISMART–2 surveys, this Bulletin relies exclusively on the National Household Survey of Adult Caretakers because this is the only NISMART–2 component study that asks about caretaker satisfaction with law enforcement. Second, the research team analyzed the data reported in this Bulletin at the episode level rather than the child level. Whereas the other Bulletins rely on a unified methodology that counts each child once in the overall and episode-specific estimates, in this Bulletin, researchers counted children who experienced more than one episode brought to the attention of law enforcement more than once. As a result, the estimated number of episodes with police contact—617,900—represents an
estimated 613,500 individual children, including those who experienced multiple episodes with police contact. Furthermore, as indicated in table 1, this analysis also includes cases in which police were contacted for reasons other than to locate a child thought to be missing—a prerequisite for counting youth as reported missing in NISMART–2.

The National Household Survey of Adult Caretakers was conducted during 1999 using computer-assisted telephone interviewing to collect information from a national probability sample of households. Researchers completed 16,111 interviews with an adult primary caretaker, resulting in an 80-percent cooperation rate among eligible households with children and a 61-percent response rate. Adult caretakers identified 31,787 children in the National Household Survey of Adult Caretakers sample. The researchers weighted the adult interview data to reflect the U.S. Census-based population of children. For additional details about the methodology used for this survey, see OJJDP's NISMART–2 Household Survey Methodology Technical Report (Hammer and Barr, forthcoming).

The research team designed the National Household Survey of Adult Caretakers to screen potentially countable NISMAR–2 episodes; to collect demographic information about the household and its members; and to conduct indepth followup interviews about family abductions, nonfamily abductions, runaway/throwaway episodes, and missing child episodes that involved a child who was lost, injured, or stranded, or who was missing due to a benign explanation [e.g., a miscommunication between a parent and child]. Toward the end of each interview, researchers asked a series of questions about police contact, including questions about when and why the caretaker contacted police, how long police took to respond, what police did when they responded, and the caretaker’s level of satisfaction with the way in which police handled the case.

The overall estimates in tables 1 through 6 are based on episode counts that include nonfamily abduction episodes and missing involuntary, lost, or injured episodes in which children were involuntarily missing because they were lost, injured, or stranded. However, the researchers did not report episode-specific estimates for these two types of episodes because each of these categories did not contain enough sample cases to produce reliable estimates.

The researchers based all estimates on cases with complete data only; they excluded cases with “refused,” “don’t know,” or otherwise missing responses to relevant questionnaire items from the estimates and comparisons. The number of cases lost due to item nonresponse varies from item to item and ranges from 5 percent to 12 percent of all eligible episodes.

### Results

Caretakers might contact police to report a missing child or for some other reason related to a missing child type episode, such as to report a crime or to recover a child whose whereabouts are known. Table 1 shows that 72 percent of the episodes with caretaker-police contact were missing child reports. Episodes with children missing for benign reasons were the most likely to involve a missing child report, followed by episodes in which the child ran away or was thrown away. Family abduction episodes, however, involved a missing child report in about half of the cases, with the remainder coming to the attention of law enforcement for other reasons.

### Type of Police Response

Table 2 shows that episodes involving caretakers who contacted the police resulted in the dispatch of officers to the household or scene 68 percent of the time. Differences in the percentage of episodes in which officers were dispatched are not statistically significant.

The “Investigative Checklist for First Responders” provides a framework to help law enforcement perform

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1 The American Association for Public Opinion Research (AAPOR) defines a response rate as the number of completed interviews with reporting units divided by the number of eligible reporting units in the sample; AAPOR defines the cooperation rate as the number of cases interviewed divided by the number of eligible units ever contacted (American Association for Public Opinion Research, 2006). The NISMART–2 response rate and cooperation rate were computed with AAPOR formulas RR4 and COOP2, respectively.

2 Differences in the relative numbers of episodes involving a missing child report are significant at the 95-percent confidence level for each of the types of episodes that appear in table 1.
Table 1: Reason for Police Contact by Type of Episode

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Type of Episode</th>
<th>Reported Missing (weighted row percentage)</th>
<th>Other Reason (weighted row percentage)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>FA*</td>
<td>46</td>
<td>54</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>RATA*</td>
<td>74</td>
<td>26</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>MBE*</td>
<td>87</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Overall</td>
<td>72</td>
<td>28</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Notes: FA = family abduction, RATA = runaway/thrownaway, MBE = missing benign explanation. Separate estimates are not reported for MILI (missing involuntarily, lost, or injured) and NFA (nonfamily abduction) episodes because the sample sizes were too small to produce reliable estimates. The estimated 617,900 missing child type episodes with police contact represented in this table should not be compared with the child-level estimates presented in other NISMART Bulletins because of the methodological differences discussed on pages 2–3 of this Bulletin. All estimates are rounded to the nearest percentage.

*Percentages are significantly different at p<.05.

Table 2: Type of Police Response by Type of Episode

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Type of Police Response</th>
<th>FA</th>
<th>RATA</th>
<th>MBE</th>
<th>Overall</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Police dispatched to household</td>
<td>67</td>
<td>62</td>
<td>71</td>
<td>68</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Took telephone report</td>
<td>44</td>
<td>40</td>
<td>35</td>
<td>38</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Took written report*</td>
<td>43</td>
<td>85</td>
<td>49</td>
<td>60</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gave copy to caretaker†</td>
<td>56</td>
<td>36</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>36</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Obtained photo of child*</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>41</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>26</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Interviewed household member*</td>
<td>46</td>
<td>76</td>
<td>55</td>
<td>59</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Searched, looked around‡</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>N/A</td>
<td>N/A</td>
<td>21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Questioned witnesses/suspects‡</td>
<td>32</td>
<td>N/A</td>
<td>N/A</td>
<td>37</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Promised surveillance‡</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>N/A</td>
<td>N/A</td>
<td>22</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Promised to investigate§</td>
<td>42</td>
<td>N/A</td>
<td>0‖</td>
<td>41</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Referred case to other justice agency*</td>
<td>36</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Notes: FA = family abduction, RATA = runaway/thrownaway, MBE = missing benign explanation. Base counts for specific episodes vary from the totals for type of police response because of item nonresponse and because of “don’t know” and “refused” responses in the data. The loss of episodes because of item nonresponse ranges from 5 percent to 12 percent of cases. The overall estimate includes the MILI (missing involuntarily, lost, or injured) and NFA (nonfamily abduction) episodes that are based on too few sample cases to report separately.

* Differences in row values are statistically significant at p<.05.
† Base numbers for these percentages are those cases in which police took a written report.
‡ These questions were asked in the FA and NFA interviews only.
§ This question was asked only in the general interview that covered the MBE and MILI episodes, FA interview, and NFA interview.
‖ Estimate is based on too few sample cases to be reliable.
for runaway/thrownaway episodes compared with other
types of episodes. Family abductions are least likely to
result in police writing a report or obtaining a photo of
the child involved in the episode.

**Time of Police Response**

Table 3 presents the caretaker-based estimates for the
time it took police to arrive at the household or scene
from the time they were contacted. Overall, police
arrived at the household or scene in less than 30 minutes
after contact for an estimated 70 percent of cases brought
to their attention. None of the differences in time to
arrival for the various types of episodes are statistically
significant.

**Satisfaction With Law Enforcement**

Table 4 indicates that caretakers were satisfied with the
way in which police handled 61 percent of the episodes
brought to their attention. The differences in caretaker
satisfaction with police response to the various types of
episodes are all statistically significant, and caretakers
whose children were missing for benign reasons reported
the highest level of satisfaction (75 percent). Caretakers
were least satisfied with the way in which police handled
family abductions (45 percent).

The National Study of Law Enforcement Policies and
Practices Regarding Missing Children and Homeless
Youth (Research Triangle Institute, 1993) found that par­
ents of missing children are more satisfied when officers
pay an in-person visit, request a photograph of the child,
and keep in contact during the investigation (Steidel,
2006). NISMART–2 supports the positive association
between parent satisfaction and the dispatch of officers
to the home or scene.

Table 5 shows that the majority of caretakers were satis­
fied with the way in which police handled the case when
police officers were dispatched to the household or scene
(74 percent), while only 35 percent were satisfied when

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3 The difference between the episode-specific estimates for interviewing
household members is statistically significant at the 95-percent confidence
level, with runaway/thrownaway episodes most likely to elicit interviews of
household members.
Table 5: Caretaker Satisfaction by Police Response

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Type of Episode</th>
<th>Police Response</th>
<th>Percent Satisfied</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>FA</td>
<td>Dispatched to household or scene</td>
<td>48</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Not dispatched</td>
<td>39</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>RATA*</td>
<td>Dispatched to household or scene</td>
<td>73</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Not dispatched</td>
<td>22</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>MBE</td>
<td>Dispatched to household or scene</td>
<td>84</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Not dispatched</td>
<td>51</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Overall*</td>
<td>Dispatched to household or scene</td>
<td>74</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Not dispatched</td>
<td>35</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Notes: FA = family abduction, RATA = runaway/throwaway, MBE = missing benign explanation. The overall estimate includes the MILI (missing involuntary, lost, or injured) and NFA (nonfamily abduction) episodes that are based on too few sample cases to report separately. All estimates are rounded to the nearest percentage. *

Differences in percentages are significantly different at p<.05.

Table 6: Overall Caretaker Satisfaction by Time of Police Response

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Time to Police Response</th>
<th>Percent Satisfied</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Less than 30 minutes</td>
<td>84</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>30 minutes or more</td>
<td>54</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Notes: The overall estimate includes the MILI (missing involuntary, lost, or injured) and NFA (nonfamily abduction) episodes that are based on too few sample cases to report separately. All estimates are rounded to the nearest percentage. Differences in percentages are significantly different at p<.05.

Cases had satisfied caretakers when the police took 30 minutes or more to arrive at the scene.

Implications

Despite recommendations that law enforcement dispatch an officer in response to every report concerning a missing child (Steidel, 2006), estimates based on the NISMART–2 National Household Survey of Adult Caretakers indicate that officers are dispatched to the household or scene in 68 percent of the cases involving reports of a child who is or may be missing.

It is possible that some law enforcement agencies may not be aware of the guidelines contained in Missing and Abducted Children: A Law-Enforcement Guide to Case Investigation and Program Management, which were first published in 1994 (Steidel, 2006). Another possible reason why law enforcement agencies did not dispatch officers in response to every report of a potentially missing, abducted, or runaway/throwaway child may reflect competing priorities for personnel and other resources. If individual agencies do not have enough officers to handle all incoming reports according to the best practice guidelines, they may be forced to make triage decisions about the children who are most likely to be in immediate danger rather than treating each missing child report as if the child is in immediate danger.

It is also possible that well-informed law enforcement personnel and policymakers do not, in spite of official policies, believe that the recommendation for universal dispatch of police in all missing children related reports is warranted or efficacious. If there are indeed such doubts, then research is needed to assess whether a universal dispatch policy results in better outcomes than a policy in which dispatch is conditioned on certain risk factors. On the other hand, if there is general consensus about the need for universal dispatch in the law enforcement community, then more discussion is needed about how to provide the funding and personnel to achieve this goal.

References


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