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UNH Professor Co-Authors New Federal Study on Missing Children

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DURHAM, N.H. -- One million three hundred thousand children were missing from their caretakers in the course of a year and almost 800,000 were reported to the police as missing, according to a new U.S. Department of Justice study co-authored by University of New Hampshire researcher David Finkelhor. The study, the Second National Incidence Studies of Missing, Abducted, Runaway and Thrownaway Children, is actually the first to provide a unified national estimate of the number of missing children in the U.S.

Finkelhor is a professor of sociology and director of the Crimes against Children Research Center at UNH. He unveiled the study at the first-ever White House Conference on Missing, Exploited and Runaway Children, today, Oct. 2, 2002.

The research found that while stereotypical kidnappings, ones that involve a stranger or slight acquaintance who detains the child overnight, transports the child at least 50 miles, holds the child for ransom, abducts the child with intent to keep the child permanently, or kills the child -- receive the most media attention, they represent an extremely small number of all missing children. An estimated 115 of nonfamily abducted children were victims of these stranger kidnappings.

"The missing children problem is widely misunderstood," said Finkelhor, who has been involved in federally funded studies of the issue since 1986. "There are a lot of different reasons why children can be missing, including some very harmless ones. The stranger abductions that get so much publicity are just a tiny, tiny portion. The problem is in being able to quickly diagnose the serious cases. It's a little like when

people have chest pain, differentiating the heart attacks from simple indigestion."

According to the study, close to half of the missing children being sought by police are runaways and throwaways (children forced out of their households by caretakers). Seven percent of the missing children being sought by police were abducted by family members and just two percent by nonfamily members. Another eight percent were missing because they got lost or injured. A sizable number, 43 percent, of children being sought by police were missing for what the study called "benign explanations," simple communication failures among family members or unexpected delays.

The vast majority of missing children episodes are resolved within a few hours or days, according to the study. An estimated 2,500 children, almost all runaways, had not been located or returned to their caretakers, and most of these were children who ran away from group facilities. The children most likely to be missing are older teenagers. Family abducted children, however, the only group that was not predominantly teenagers, were primarily under the age of 12.

"In so many of the episodes, the real problem is not about locating and returning the child. Rather what needs to be done is to address the family conflict or even poor supervision that brought the episode about in the first place. It doesn't necessarily help a runaway child just to bring her back to a home where she is being physically or psychologically maltreated and say goodbye. Nor does it necessarily help to recover a child from one parent and send him to another, if the custody tug-of-war is just going to continue. The missing children episodes are generally signs of other underlying problems that need to be addressed if we really want to help the child."

The study also looked for changes in the problem since it was last done in 1988. Overall, there was no evidence of any increases, including increases in stranger abductions. There may have actually been a decline in the rate at which children run away from home.

Results from the study are being published in a series of

U.S. Department of Justice bulletins. The first bulletins are being released in conjunction with the White House Conference on Missing, Exploited and Runaway Children and will be available online at www.ojjdp.ncjrs.org.

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