

10-2002

National Estimates of Missing Children: An Overview.

Andrea J. Sedlack

Westat, Inc.

David Finkelhor

University of New Hampshire - Main Campus, David.Finkelhor@unh.edu

Heather Hammer

Temple University

Dana Schultz

Westat, Inc.

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholars.unh.edu/ccrc>



Part of the [Criminology Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Sedlack, Andrea J.; Finkelhor, David; Hammer, Heather; Schultz, Dana J. National estimates of missing children: An overview. *Juvenile Justice Bulletin* – NCJ196465, (pgs. 1-12). Washington, DC: US Government Printing Office.

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Research Institutes, Centers and Programs at University of New Hampshire Scholars' Repository. It has been accepted for inclusion in Crimes Against Children Research Center by an authorized administrator of University of New Hampshire Scholars' Repository. For more information, please contact nicole.hentz@unh.edu.

National Estimates of Missing Children: An Overview.



October 2002

NISMART

National Incidence Studies of Missing, Abducted, Runaway, and Thrownaway Children

J. Robert Flores
OJJDP Administrator

National Estimates of Missing Children: An Overview

Andrea J. Sedlak, David Finkelhor,
Heather Hammer, and Dana J. Schultz

The words “missing child” call to mind tragic and frightening kidnappings reported in the national news. But a child can be missing for many reasons, and the problem of missing children is far more complex than the headlines suggest. Getting a clear picture of how many children become missing—and why—is an important step in addressing the problem. This series of Bulletins provides that clear picture by summarizing findings from the Second National Incidence Studies of Missing, Abducted, Runaway, and Thrownaway Children (NISMART-2). The series offers national estimates of missing children based on surveys of households, juvenile residential facilities, and law enforcement agencies. It also presents statistical profiles of these children, including their demographic characteristics and the circumstances of their disappearance.

The National Incidence Studies of Missing, Abducted, Runaway, and Thrownaway Children (NISMART) were undertaken in response to the mandate of the 1984 Missing Children’s Assistance Act (Pub. L. 98-473) that requires the Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention (OJJDP) to conduct periodic national incidence studies to determine the actual number of children reported missing and the number of missing children who are recovered for a given year.



NISMART–2 Study Descriptions

National Household Surveys of Adult Caretakers and Youth

The Household Surveys were conducted during 1999, using computer-assisted telephone interviewing methodology to collect information on missing child episodes from both adults and youth in a national probability sample of households. A total of 16,111 interviews were completed with an adult primary caretaker, resulting in an 80-percent cooperation rate among eligible households with children, and a 61-percent response rate. The total number of children identified by adult caretakers in the Household Survey sample was 31,787; these data were weighted to reflect the Census-based U.S. population of children age 18 years and younger. Each primary caretaker who completed an interview was asked for permission to interview one randomly selected youth in the household between the ages of 10 and 18. Permission was granted to interview 60 percent of the selected youth, yielding 5,015 youth interviews and a 95-percent response rate among the youth for whom permission was granted. These youth data were weighted to reflect the Census-based U.S. population of children ages 10–18. All of the adult caretakers and sampled youth in the Household Surveys were screened with a set of 17 questions to determine their eligibility for an indepth followup interview designed to collect detailed information about each type of episode.

One obvious limitation of the Household Surveys is that they may have undercounted children who experienced episodes but were living in households without telephones or were not living in households during the study period, including street children and homeless families. Although these are not large populations in comparison to the overall child population, they may be at risk for episodes.

Law Enforcement Study

The Law Enforcement Study (LES) sample consisted of all law enforcement agencies serving a nationally representative sample of 400 counties, including the 400 county sheriff departments and 3,765 municipal law enforcement agencies. The selection of counties took into account the size of their child populations.

Data were collected in two phases. In the first phase, a mail survey was sent to all law enforcement agencies in the sample. This questionnaire asked whether the agency had any stereotypical kidnappings (see definition on page 4) open for investigation during 1997. The response rate for the mail survey was 91 percent. Agencies that reported any stereotypical kidnapping cases were then contacted by telephone for an extensive followup interview with the key investigating officer in each case. Data collection was completed for 99 percent of the cases targeted for followup interviews. Incorporating both phases of the LES, the combined response rate for the study was 91 percent. LES case weights were developed to reflect the probability of the agency and case having been included in the sample and to adjust for nonresponse and refusals.

Juvenile Facilities Study

The Juvenile Facilities Study was developed to estimate the number of runaways from juvenile residential facilities. Respondents were facility staff in a nationally representative sample of 74 facilities, including juvenile detention centers, group homes, residential treatment centers, and runaway and homeless youth shelters. Telephone interviews were conducted to determine the number of children who ran away from each facility in 1997, and details were obtained for the five most recent runaway episodes. All of the selected facilities that were operational participated; the response rate for episode-level interviews was 93 percent. Runaways were assigned weights to reflect the probability of having included the facility and episode in the sample and to adjust for nonresponse.

The first such study, NISMART–1 (Finkelhor, Hotaling, and Sedlak, 1990), conducted almost 15 years ago, addressed this mandate by defining major types of missing child episodes and estimating the number of children who experienced episodes of each type in 1988. At that time, the lack of a standardized definition of a “missing child” made it impossible to provide a single estimate of missing children. This Bulletin describes the NISMART–2 efforts to fill this gap and presents the results: unified estimates of the number of missing children in the United States.

Overview of the NISMART–2 Studies

The unified estimates of the number of missing children are derived from data collected by the four complementary NISMART–2 studies (see table 1 and the sidebar on NISMART–2 study descriptions).¹ These studies were designed to provide a comprehensive picture of the population of children who experienced qualifying episodes, with study components focusing on different aspects of the missing child population. The four NISMART–2 studies used to estimate the number of missing children are:

- National Household Survey of Adult Caretakers.
- National Household Survey of Youth.
- Law Enforcement Study.
- Juvenile Facilities Study.

The two Household Surveys covered all types of episodes for children living in households. The Juvenile Facilities Study obtained information about children who ran away from the institutional settings where they lived. The Law Enforcement Study was designed to provide precise estimates and case characteristics for a rare form of nonfamily abduction, the stereotypical kidnapping.

The NISMART-2 studies spanned the years 1997 to 1999. All data in the individual component studies were collected to reflect a 12-month period.² Because the vast majority of cases were from the studies concentrated in 1999, the annual period being referred to in this Bulletin is 1999.

Conceptualizing the Missing Child Problem

Although the concept of a missing child may seem readily understandable, especially in cases that come to media attention, a careful examination shows that the notion is actually quite complex.

A child can become missing because of a variety of circumstances, such as running away, being abducted, or being delayed by a mishap on the way home. Even simple misunderstandings about schedules and miscommunications about plans and activities can cause a child to be missing. The situations that can cause a child to become missing stem from different sources and require different means of resolution.

Fundamentally, whether a child is “missing” depends on the knowledge and state of mind of the child’s caretaker, rather than the child’s actual condition or circumstance. From the caretaker’s point of view, the child is not where the caretaker expects the child to be, the caretaker does not know the child’s location, and these circumstances raise concern about the child’s well-being. Despite this concern, a missing child may not be in any peril whatsoever, as in the case where the child and parent have had a miscommunication about the time the child is expected to arrive home.

The term “missing children” is also used to mean children who are being sought by the police and missing children’s agencies. This conception of missing children relates to the resources needed by organizations, both public and private, to locate children. The subset of children reported missing by their caretakers for the purpose of locating them provides one measure of the demand on law enforcement because, like reported crimes, missing

Table 1: NISMART-2 Study Sources, by Episode Type

| Episode Type | Study Source |
|---------------------------------------|--|
| Nonfamily abduction | Household Survey of Adult Caretakers Household Survey of Youth Law Enforcement Study (stereotypical kidnappings only) |
| Family abduction | Household Survey of Adult Caretakers Household Survey of Youth |
| Runaway/throwaway | Household Survey of Adult Caretakers Household Survey of Youth Juvenile Facilities Study |
| Missing involuntary, lost, or injured | Household Survey of Adult Caretakers Household Survey of Youth |
| Missing benign explanation | Household Survey of Adult Caretakers Household Survey of Youth |

person reports contribute to the volume of cases the police must deal with. Contacting the police to report a missing child does not necessarily measure the seriousness of the episode itself. Rather, it measures the caretaker’s assessment of the need for law enforcement assistance.

Defining and Counting Missing Children

Thus, NISMART-2 defined a missing child in two ways: first, in terms of those who were missing from their caretakers (“caretaker missing”); and second, in terms of those who were missing from their caretakers and reported to an agency for help locating them (“reported missing”).

NISMART-2 counts a child as missing from the caretaker’s perspective when the child experienced a qualifying episode during which the child’s whereabouts were unknown to the primary caretaker, with the result that the caretaker was alarmed for at least 1 hour and tried to locate the child. For an episode to qualify, the child had to be younger than 18 and the situation had to meet the specific criteria for one of the following NISMART-2 episode types (summarized in the sidebar on page 4):

- Nonfamily abductions (including a subcategory, stereotypical kidnappings).
- Family abductions.
- Runaway/throwaway episodes.

NISMART–2 Definitions of Episode Types

Nonfamily Abduction

A nonfamily abduction occurs when a nonfamily perpetrator takes a child by the use of physical force or threat of bodily harm or detains a child for at least 1 hour in an isolated place by the use of physical force or threat of bodily harm without lawful authority or parental permission; or when a child who is younger than 15 years old or is mentally incompetent, without lawful authority or parental permission, is taken or detained by or voluntarily accompanies a nonfamily perpetrator who conceals the child's whereabouts, demands ransom, or expresses the intention to keep the child permanently.

Stereotypical Kidnapping

A stereotypical kidnapping occurs when a stranger or slight acquaintance perpetrates a nonfamily abduction in which the child is detained overnight, transported at least 50 miles, held for ransom, abducted with intent to keep the child permanently, or killed.

Family Abduction

A family abduction occurs when, in violation of a custody order, a decree, or other legitimate custodial rights, a member of the child's family, or someone acting on behalf of a family member, takes or fails to return a child, and the child is concealed or transported out of State with the intent to prevent contact or deprive the caretaker of custodial rights indefinitely or permanently. (For a child 15 or older, unless mentally incompetent, there must be evidence that the perpetrator used physical force or threat of bodily harm to take or detain the child.)

Runaway/Throwaway

A runaway incident occurs when a child leaves home without permission and stays away overnight; or a child 14 years old or younger (or older and mentally incompetent) who is away from home chooses not to return when supposed to and stays away overnight; or a child 15 years old or older who is away from home chooses not to return and stays away two nights. A throwaway incident occurs when a child is asked or told to leave home by a parent or other household adult, no adequate alternative care is arranged for the child by a household adult, and the child is out of the household overnight; or a child who is away from home is prevented from returning home by a parent or other household adult, no adequate alternative care is arranged for the child by a household adult, and the child is out of the household overnight.

Missing Involuntary, Lost, or Injured

A missing involuntary, lost, or injured episode occurs when a child's whereabouts are unknown to the child's caretaker and this causes the caretaker to be alarmed for at least 1 hour and try to locate the child, under one of two conditions: (1) the child was trying to get home or make contact with the caretaker but was unable to do so because the child was lost, stranded, or injured; or (2) the child was too young to know how to return home or make contact with the caretaker.

Missing Benign Explanation

A missing benign explanation episode occurs when a child's whereabouts are unknown to the child's caretaker and this causes the caretaker to (1) be alarmed, (2) try to locate the child, and (3) contact the police about the episode for any reason, as long as the child was not lost, injured, abducted, victimized, or classified as runaway/throwaway.

- Missing involuntary, lost, or injured events.
- Missing benign explanation situations.

A caretaker missing child was considered to be reported missing if a caretaker contacted the police or a missing children's agency to locate the child. Note that the category "reported missing" does not include children who were reported to the police for reasons other than locating the missing child, e.g., to report an incident as a crime or simply to recover a child whose whereabouts were known.

Not all children who experience qualifying NISMART–2 episodes can be classified as caretaker missing. For example, when a child is abducted by a family member, the caretaker may know very well where the child is but may be unable to retrieve the child. The parent of a runaway child may not know the child's whereabouts but may not be alarmed or try to find the child. These children would not be counted among the caretaker missing children in NISMART–2 because they fail to meet one or more of the three criteria noted above: the child's whereabouts must be unknown, the caretaker must be alarmed for at least 1 hour, and the caretaker must attempt to locate the child. In addition, to ensure that minor misunderstandings would not inflate the estimates, those who became missing because of benign reasons were only considered to be missing if police were contacted about the episode.

To summarize, NISMART–2 conceptualizes children in terms of three nested classes: The largest set comprises all children with a qualifying NISMART–2 episode who may or may not be missing (e.g., a child runs away from home).³ Within that group, some children meet the additional criteria that classify them as caretaker missing children (the runaway child's parent notices the child is gone, does not know where the child is, becomes alarmed for at least an hour, and tries to find the child). Finally, within that group of caretaker missing children, a subset meets the further requirement that qualifies the children as reported missing (the parent calls the police or a missing children's agency to help locate the child).

Results

Table 2 presents the unified estimates of the number of children who are counted as caretaker missing children. These figures are annual estimates, reflecting the

NISMART–2 Unified Estimate Methodology

Information from all four NISMART–2 studies (see descriptions of studies on page 2) was integrated to construct unified estimates of the number of missing children. Two key principles guided this integration:

Principle 1: To combine episode information within a survey, each sampled child could only be counted once in the unified estimate.

Principle 2: To unify episode information across surveys, a given subgroup of children could be represented by information from one survey only.

Beginning with the information from the Household Survey of Adult Caretakers, children who qualified as missing on the basis of any countable episode *other than* a stereotypical kidnapping were entered into the unified estimate. In accordance with the first principle above, children who were missing on different occasions, because of multiple episodes, were only counted once in the unified estimate. In accordance with the second principle, those with stereotypical kidnappings were excluded at this point, because the Law Enforcement Study data were used to represent these children.

Next, Household Survey children not yet included in the unified estimate were added to it if their responses to the Household Survey of Youth showed that they met the criteria for a missing child. Again, children who were missing solely because of a stereotypical kidnapping were *not* added at this point and children who were missing in multiple qualifying episodes were only added once.

At the third stage, the runaways from institutions who were identified in the Juvenile Facilities Study were added, but only if they did not also run away from a household during the study year. This restriction was necessary because runaways from households were already represented in the Household Survey data.

Finally, children who were missing because of stereotypical kidnappings were added from the Law Enforcement Study data. The Law Enforcement Study was used as the data source for this rare subset of nonfamily abducted children because no reliable estimate could be developed from the Household Surveys.

A more detailed description of the unified estimate methodology is provided in OJJDP’s forthcoming *Unified Estimate Methodology Technical Report*.

number of children who became missing at some time during the study year. The sidebar on this page explains how the estimates were derived.

The total number of children who were missing from their caretakers in 1999, including children who were reported missing and those who were not, is estimated to be 1,315,600. Because this estimate is based on samples, sampling error qualifies its statistical precision. The 95-percent confidence interval indicates that if the study were to be repeated with the same methodology 100 times, 95 of the replications would produce an estimate between 1,131,100 and 1,500,100. The total estimate of a little more than 1.3 million reflects an annual rate of 18.8 children per 1,000 in the general population of children nationwide.⁴ The number of missing children who were reported missing in 1999 (i.e., reported to police or missing children’s agencies in order to locate them)

Table 2: Unified Estimates of Caretaker Missing Children and Reported Missing Children

| Category | Estimated Total (95% Confidence Interval)* | Rate per 1,000 in U.S. Child Population (95% Confidence Interval)* |
|--|---|--|
| Caretaker missing children [†] (reported and not reported) | 1,315,600 (1,131,100–1,500,100) | 18.8 (16.1–21.4) |
| Reported missing children [‡] | 797,500 (645,400–949,500) | 11.4 (9.2–13.5) |

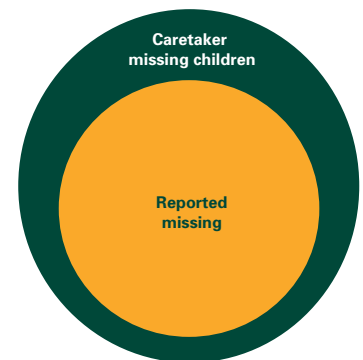
Note: All estimates are rounded to the nearest 100.

* The 95-percent confidence interval indicates that if the study were repeated 100 times, 95 of the replications would produce estimates within the ranges noted.

[†] Child’s whereabouts were unknown, caretaker was alarmed and tried to locate the child.

[‡] Reported to police or a missing children’s agency for purposes of locating the child.

The diagram illustrates the proportional relationship between the total number of caretaker missing children and the subset of children who were reported missing.



was estimated to be 797,500, which is equivalent to a rate of 11.4 children per 1,000 in the U.S. population. Children reported missing to police and other missing children’s agencies represent 61 percent of all children classified as caretaker missing. The diagram accompanying table 2 illustrates the fact that children who were reported missing are a subset of the caretaker missing children.

In considering these estimates, it is important to recognize that nearly all of the caretaker missing children (1,312,800 or 99.8 percent) were returned home alive or located by the time the study data were collected. Only a fraction of a percent (0.2 percent or 2,500) of all caretaker missing children had not returned home or been located, and the vast majority of these were runaways from institutions who had been identified through the Juvenile Facilities Study.⁵ (Details on episode outcomes—whether the child was returned home alive or

located—are presented in the NISMART-2 episode-specific Bulletins.)

Estimates by Type of Episode

Table 3 reports the reasons children became missing. Data are shown for all caretaker missing children and for those who were reported missing.

Of all caretaker missing children, nearly one-half (48 percent) were missing because of a runaway/throwaway episode. More than one-fourth (28 percent) became missing as a result of benign explanation circumstances (miscommunications or misunderstandings between child and caretaker). Children who were missing because they became lost or injured accounted for 15 percent of all caretaker missing children. Less than one-tenth (9 percent) of caretaker missing children were abducted by family members, and only 3 percent were abducted by nonfamily perpetrators.

Table 3: Reasons Children Became Missing

| Episode Type | Estimated Total* | 95% Confidence Interval† | Percent* | Rate per 1,000 Children in U.S. Population (N = 70,172,700) |
|---|---------------------|--------------------------|----------------|---|
| Caretaker Missing Children (n = 1,315,600) | | | | |
| Nonfamily abduction‡ | 33,000 [§] | (2,000–64,000) | 3 [§] | 0.47 [§] |
| Family abduction | 117,200 | (79,000–155,400) | 9 | 1.67 |
| Runaway/throwaway | 628,900 | (481,000–776,900) | 48 | 8.96 |
| Missing involuntary, lost, or injured | 198,300 | (124,800–271,800) | 15 | 2.83 |
| Missing benign explanation | 374,700 | (289,900–459,500) | 28 | 5.34 |
| Reported Missing Children (n = 797,500) | | | | |
| Nonfamily abduction‡ | 12,100 [§] | (<100–31,000) | 2 [§] | 0.17 [§] |
| Family abduction | 56,500 | (22,600–90,400) | 7 | 0.81 |
| Runaway/throwaway | 357,600 | (238,000–477,200) | 45 | 5.10 |
| Missing involuntary, lost, or injured | 61,900 | (19,700–104,100) | 8 | 0.88 |
| Missing benign explanation | 340,500 | (256,000–425,000) | 43 | 4.85 |

Note: All estimates are rounded to the nearest 100.

* Estimates sum to more than the total of 1,315,600, and percents sum to more than 100, because children who had multiple episodes are included in every row that applies to them.

† The 95-percent confidence interval indicates that, if the study were repeated 100 times, 95 of the replications would produce estimates within the ranges noted.

‡ Nonfamily abduction includes stereotypical kidnapping.

§ Estimate is based on an extremely small sample of cases; therefore, its precision and confidence interval are unreliable.

A somewhat different picture emerges from the estimates of children who were reported missing to police or missing children’s agencies. Although runaway/throwaway children reflect a substantial minority of reported missing children (45 percent), nearly as many children (43 percent) became missing because of benign reasons. Comparable percentages of reported missing children were missing because they were lost or injured (8 percent) and because they had been abducted by a family member (7 percent). Only a small percentage were missing because of a nonfamily abduction (2 percent).

Stereotypical kidnappings. In table 3, the estimates for nonfamily abducted children include primarily crimes involving a modest amount of forced movement or detention that correspond with the way in which abduction is legally defined in most State statutes. Such abductions are rare enough that the estimates of the number of caretaker missing and reported missing children abducted by a nonfamily perpetrator are not very reliable and have very large confidence intervals. Stereotypical kidnappings are the particular type of nonfamily abduction that receives the most media attention and involves 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. They represent an extremely small portion of all missing children. (The Law Enforcement Study found that an estimated 115 of the nonfamily abducted children were victims of stereotypical kidnappings and that 90 of these qualified as reported missing.)⁶

Multiple episodes. In table 3, children who had multiple types of episodes are included in every row that applies to them. Of the 1,315,600 caretaker missing

children, 36,500 (3 percent) experienced more than one type of episode during the year. All of these multiple-episode children experienced a runaway/throwaway episode and one other type of episode (missing benign explanation for 86 percent of the children, family abduction for 8 percent, and missing involuntary, lost, or injured for 5 percent). Of the estimated 797,500 reported missing children, 31,100 (4 percent) experienced multiple types of episodes. Every reported missing child with multiple episodes experienced a runaway/throwaway episode and a missing benign explanation episode.

Estimates by Age, Gender, and Race/Ethnicity

Tables 4–6 show the demographic characteristics of missing children. The tables show distributions by age, gender, and race/ethnicity for caretaker missing children and for children who were reported missing to police or missing children’s agencies. The tables also include demographic distributions for all children in the U.S.

Table 4: Ages of Missing Children

| Age | Estimated Total | 95% Confidence Interval* | Percent | 95% Confidence Interval* | Percent of U.S. Child Population (N = 70,172,700) |
|-----------------------------------|-----------------|--------------------------|---------|--------------------------|---|
| Caretaker Missing Children | | | | | |
| 0–5 | 138,200 | (89,600–186,700) | 11 | (7–14) | 33 |
| 6–11 | 175,300 | (117,100–233,600) | 13 | (9–17) | 34 |
| 12–14 | 402,400 | (292,400–512,500) | 31 | (23–38) | 17 |
| 15–17 | 596,900 | (476,700–717,100) | 45 | (38–53) | 17 |
| Total | 1,315,600 | (1,131,100–1,500,100) | 100 | | 100 |
| Reported Missing Children | | | | | |
| 0–5 | 96,500 | (48,400–144,700) | 12 | (7–17) | 33 |
| 6–11 | 113,400 | (61,500–165,300) | 14 | (8–20) | 34 |
| 12–14 | 235,500 | (161,300–309,700) | 30 | (19–40) | 17 |
| 15–17 | 349,300 | (253,600–444,900) | 44 | (35–53) | 17 |
| Total | 797,500 | (645,400–949,500) | 100 | | 100 |

Note: All estimates are rounded to the nearest 100. Percents may not sum to 100 because of rounding.
 * The 95-percent confidence interval indicates that if the study were repeated 100 times, 95 of the replications would produce estimates within the ranges noted.

population, providing a basis for assessing the relative level of risk of becoming caretaker missing (and being reported missing) for children in each demographic group.

Age. As shown in table 4, the great majority of missing children were older teenagers (ages 15–17) and young adolescents (ages 12–14). Together, these age groups accounted for about three-fourths of caretaker missing children. The age distribution of reported missing children mirrors that of caretaker missing children. The table also shows that, for nearly all age levels, the percentage in the U.S. child population falls well outside of the 95-percent confidence interval for the study. This means that children age 12 and older had a risk of becoming caretaker missing (and of being reported missing) that was significantly higher than would be expected on the basis of their representation in the U.S. child population, whereas the risk for younger children was significantly lower than would be expected.

Gender. Table 5 shows that, although boys appear to be somewhat overrepresented among caretaker missing and reported missing children, the U.S. child population percentages fall within the 95-percent confidence intervals. This means that the gender distribution for missing

children is not significantly different from the distribution for the U.S. child population.

Race/ethnicity. White children had a significantly lower risk of being caretaker missing and reported missing than one would expect based on their representation in the overall U.S. child population. Although the percentages of minority children among missing children appear slightly higher than their percentages in the U.S. child population, no single group of minority children had a significantly higher risk of becoming missing.

Children Not Classified as Missing

The earlier discussion under “Conceptualizing the Missing Child Problem” notes that children counted as “caretaker missing” or “reported missing” in NISMART–2 were not the only children to experience episodes of interest to the study. Some children experienced nonfamily or family abduction episodes or runaway/throwaway episodes but were neither missing from their caretakers nor reported missing to authorities. Examples include children who ran away to the homes of relatives or friends, causing their caretakers little or no concern; children who were held by family members in known locations (e.g., an ex-spouse’s home); and children who were abducted by nonfamily perpetrators but released before anyone noticed that they were missing. These children experienced episodes but were not counted as missing children.

For each of the five types of episodes, table 7 shows the total number of children who experienced an episode, the percentage who were classified as caretaker missing, and the percentage who were classified as reported missing. As the table shows, all children who experienced missing involuntary, lost, or injured episodes and missing benign explanation episodes were classified as caretaker missing; this is because such episodes involve

Table 5: Gender of Missing Children

| Gender | Estimated Total | 95% Confidence Interval* | Percent | 95% Confidence Interval* | Percent of U.S. Child Population (N = 70,172,700) |
|-----------------------------------|-----------------|--------------------------|---------|--------------------------|---|
| Caretaker Missing Children | | | | | |
| Male | 754,500 | (604,200–904,800) | 57 | (51–64) | 51 |
| Female | 561,100 | (459,000–663,200) | 43 | (36–49) | 49 |
| Total | 1,315,600 | (1,131,100–1,500,100) | 100 | | 100 |
| Reported Missing Children | | | | | |
| Male | 409,400 | (290,400–528,400) | 51 | (42–61) | 51 |
| Female | 388,000 | (296,900–479,200) | 49 | (39–58) | 49 |
| Total | 797,500 | (645,400–949,500) | 100 | | 100 |

Note: All estimates are rounded to the nearest 100. Percents may not sum to 100 because of rounding.

* The 95-percent confidence interval indicates that if the study were repeated 100 times, 95 of the replications would produce estimates within the ranges noted.

a missing child by definition. Only a little more than half of the children who experienced family and nonfamily abductions and 37 percent of those who experienced runaway/throwaway episodes, however, were included in NISMART estimates of caretaker missing children. For all types of episodes except missing benign explanation, between one-fifth and one-third of children experiencing episodes were reported missing. (Benign explanation episodes, by definition, involve police contact. The percentage of children reported missing for this type of episode is 91 percent, not 100 percent, because some cases were reported to the police for reasons other than locating the child.)

Summary

By unifying information across four studies, NISMART-2 provides, for the first time, annual estimates of the number of missing children. In 1999, an estimated 1,315,600 children met the criteria for being classified as caretaker missing, i.e., their caretakers did not know their whereabouts and were alarmed for at least 1 hour while trying to locate them.

Among these missing children, an estimated 797,500 met the additional criterion for being classified as reported missing, i.e., the caretaker contacted the police or a missing children’s agency to help locate the child.

Only a fraction of 1 percent of the children who were reported missing had not been recovered by the time they entered the NISMART-2 study data. Thus, the study shows that, although the number of caretaker missing children is fairly large and a majority come to the attention of law enforcement or missing children’s agencies, all but a very small percentage are recovered fairly quickly.

Table 6: Race/Ethnicity of Missing Children

| Race/ Ethnicity | Estimated Total | 95% Confidence Interval* | Percent | 95% Confidence Interval* | Percent of U.S. Child Population (N = 70,172,700) |
|-----------------------------------|--------------------|--------------------------------|-----------------|--------------------------------|--|
| Caretaker Missing Children | | | | | |
| White, non-Hispanic | 752,300 | (624,800–879,700) | 57 | (51–63) | 65 |
| Black, non-Hispanic | 215,000 | (140,100–289,900) | 16 | (11–22) | 15 |
| Hispanic | 234,500 | (149,100–319,800) | 18 | (12–24) | 16 |
| Other | 107,200 | (50,400–164,000) | 8 | (4–12) | 5 |
| No information | 6,700 [†] | (<100–15,000) | 1 [†] | (<1–1) | — |
| Total | 1,315,600 | (1,131,100–1,500,100) | 100 | | 100 |
| Reported Missing Children | | | | | |
| White, non-Hispanic | 428,800 | (331,500–526,100) | 54 | (46–62) | 65 |
| Black, non-Hispanic | 149,700 | (90,100–209,400) | 19 | (12–26) | 15 |
| Hispanic | 163,900 | (88,900–238,900) | 21 | (13–29) | 16 |
| Other | 52,100 | (19,000–85,200) | 7 | (3–10) | 5 |
| No information | 3,000 [†] | (<100–6,900) | <1 [†] | (<1–1) | — |
| Total | 797,500 | (645,400–949,500) | 100 | | 100 |

Note: All estimates are rounded to the nearest 100. Percents may not sum to 100 because of rounding.
 * The 95-percent confidence interval indicates that, if the study were repeated 100 times, 95 of the replications would produce estimates within the ranges noted.
[†] Estimate is based on too few sample cases to be reliable.

Most of the caretaker missing children became missing because they ran away (48 percent) or because of benign misunderstandings about where they should be (28 percent). Together, these two reasons accounted for 84 percent of all children who were reported missing. (This estimated combined percentage was carefully developed to count each child only once. Because some children had more than one type of episode, the estimates in table 3 should not be summed.) This is consistent with the fact that about three-fourths of those who were caretaker missing (or reported missing) were young

Table 7: Estimated Total Number of Children With Episodes and the Percent Who Were Counted as Caretaker Missing and Reported Missing

| Episode Type | Total Number of Children With Episodes (Missing and Nonmissing) | Percent in Row Counted as Caretaker Missing* | Percent in Row Counted as Reported Missing† |
|---------------------------------------|---|--|---|
| Nonfamily abduction | 58,200 | 57 | 21 |
| Family abduction | 203,900 | 57 | 28 |
| Runaway/throwaway | 1,682,900 | 37 | 21 |
| Missing involuntary, lost, or injured | 198,300 | 100‡ | 31 |
| Missing benign explanation | 374,700 | 100‡ | 91 |

Note: These estimates cannot be added or combined. All estimates are rounded to the nearest 100.

* Whereabouts unknown to caretaker, caretaker was alarmed and tried to locate child.

† Reported to police or a missing children's agency for purposes of locating the child.

‡ By definition, all children with episodes in this category are caretaker missing.

An analogy from the medical domain offers context for understanding the implications at both levels. The symptom of chest pain can arise from many different sources—some relatively minor (indigestion, muscle sprain), some potentially very serious (heart attack, gall bladder attack). Only with a differential diagnosis is it possible to know which specialist to consult and how to address the problem. Similarly, a missing child can indicate a relatively innocuous situation (such as a misunderstanding about where the child should be) or something quite serious (a stereotypical kidnapping). Caretakers and others who are attempting to find an

adolescents and teenagers (age 12 and older), an age group with more independent comings and goings than younger children and more conflicts with parents and other caretakers. No significant gender differences were found, but white children were at significantly lower risk of becoming missing.

Contrary to the common assumption that abduction is a principal reason why children become missing, the NISMART-2 findings indicate that only a small minority of missing children were abducted, and most of these children were abducted by family members (9 percent of all caretaker missing children). Close to 3 percent of caretaker missing children were abducted by a nonfamily perpetrator; among these, an extremely small number (90) were victims of stereotypical kidnapping.

Conclusion

The complexity of the concept of a missing child is evident in these data, which show that children become missing because of a wide range of circumstances. This complexity has implications at two levels: finding the individual missing child and developing policies to address the broader problem.

individual missing child need to know why the child is missing—the type of episode—in order to resolve the crisis. Policymakers who are attempting to address the broader problem of missing children need information about the relative frequency of the different types of episodes in order to develop effective strategies for reducing the problem and design appropriately scaled interventions. Other Bulletins in this series contribute to the policymaking effort by providing details from NISMART-2 about children who experienced each type of episode.

Endnotes

1. Because of important differences in both definitions and methodology, the NISMART-1 and NISMART-2 data and findings should not be compared directly.
2. The reference dates for some of the NISMART-2 component studies vary because of a delay caused by pending Federal legislation that, had it passed, would have made it impossible to conduct the National Household Survey of Youth, a key component of NISMART-2. In anticipation of a quick resolution, OJJDP decided to proceed with the Law Enforcement Study and the Juvenile Facilities Study because neither involved interviewing youth. Had these

1997 studies been postponed until 1999, it is highly unlikely that those estimates would have been statistically different.

3. NISMART–2 Bulletins on each of the episode types will describe the characteristics of all children who experienced these episodes in addition to presenting estimates of those who were counted as missing and reported missing.

4. All information concerning the U.S. child population reflects the average monthly estimate for the population ages 0–17 in 1999, as computed from the U.S. Census Bureau’s National Monthly Population Estimates (Monthly Postcensal Resident Population, by Single Year of Age, Sex, Race, and Hispanic Origin, census.gov/popest/archives/national/nat_90s_detail/nat_90s_1.php).

5. The category included only 40 missing children who had been stereotypically kidnapped and killed (an estimated 35) or were still missing (approximately 5) at the time of the study interviews. Information about the child’s recovery or return was unknown for an estimated 300 children, all of whom were runaways from institutions. Although individual facilities report their runaways to the authorities legally responsible for the youth (e.g., child welfare, juvenile justice, mental health), these authorities sometimes place a recovered child in another facility without notifying the original facility.

6. The Law Enforcement Survey classified stereotypically kidnapped children as reported missing only if the police were notified either by someone who discovered the child was missing or by someone who witnessed the abduction. Even in a stereotypical kidnapping, a child may not be reported missing if no one notices the child’s absence or if the discovery of the child’s body is the first evidence of the episode.

Reference

Finkelhor, D., Hotaling, G., and Sedlak, A. 1990. *Missing, Abducted, Runaway, and Thrownaway Children in America. First Report: Numbers and Characteristics National Incidence Studies*. Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Justice, Office of Justice Programs, Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention.

This Bulletin was prepared under grant number 95–MC–CX–K004 from the Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention, U.S. Department of Justice, to Temple University.

The Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention is a component of the Office of Justice Programs, which also includes the Bureau of Justice Assistance, the Bureau of Justice Statistics, the National Institute of Justice, and the Office for Victims of Crime.

Acknowledgments

Andrea J. Sedlak, Ph.D., is Associate Director of Human Services Research at Westat, Inc.; Project Director of the NISMART–2 Unified Estimate, Juvenile Facilities Study, and Law Enforcement Study; and Advisor to the NISMART–2 Household Survey. David Finkelhor, Ph.D., is Professor of Sociology and Director, Crimes against Children Research Center, University of New Hampshire, and Advisor to NISMART–2. Heather Hammer, Ph.D., is a Senior Study Director at the Temple University Institute for Survey Research, Philadelphia, PA, and Principal Investigator of NISMART–2. Dana J. Schultz, M.P.P., is a Policy Analyst at Westat, Inc., Operations Manager of the Juvenile Facilities Study and Law Enforcement Study, and Analyst for the Unified Estimate.

Other contributors include Louise Hanson, M.A.S., Senior Study Director at the Temple University Institute for Survey Research and Director of Data Collection for the NISMART–2 Household Surveys; Michael K. Barr, M.A., Associate Study Director at the Temple University Institute for Survey Research; Lorraine E. Porcellini, M.A., Sampling Department Manager at the Temple University Institute for Survey Research; Richard Ormrod, Ph.D., Research Professor of Geography at the University of New Hampshire Crimes against Children Research Center; G. Hussain Choudhry, Ph.D., Senior Statistician at Westat, Inc.; Svetlana Ryaboy, Statistician at Westat, Inc.; Ying Long, Programmer at Westat, Inc.; Karol P. Krotki, Ph.D., Chief Statistician at NuStats; and Karl Landis, Ph.D.

The authors extend their appreciation to Barbara Allen-Hagen, Senior Social Analyst at OJJDP and NISMART–2 Program Manager, for her support and guidance in every phase of this project. The authors also thank the many individuals who responded to the NISMART–2 surveys for their cooperation and candor.



For Further Information

NISMART Questions and Answers, a fact sheet, offers a straightforward introduction to *NISMART-2*. It answers anticipated questions—such as *What is NISMART? Have abductions by strangers declined or increased?* and *Why can't I compare NISMART-1 statistics with NISMART-2 statistics?*—to help explain *NISMART*'s purpose, methodology, and findings.

Other Bulletins in the *NISMART* series provide more detailed information on the specific types of episodes studied—nonfamily abduction (including stereotypical kidnapping), family abduction, and runaway/throwaway.

All *NISMART*-related publications are available at OJJDP's Web site, ojjdp.ncjrs.org.

Take the Online Path to OJJDP Information

Want to know more about the issues in this Bulletin or related information? Log on to ojjdp.ncjrs.org:

- Browse titles alphabetically or by topic.
- Discover the latest OJJDP releases.
- Subscribe to OJJDP's listserv JUVJUST and the electronic newsletter JUSTINFO.
- Link to the NCJRS Abstracts Database to search for publications of interest.

It's Fast > It's Easy > It's Free

