Child abduction: What surveys tell us

Police-recorded crime statistics give only a partial account of children’s experience of actual or attempted abduction. Some incidents are never reported while others may not be recorded. Further information is available in our separate briefing paper Child Abduction: 5 things you should know about police-recorded crime statistics.

Two surveys provide a fuller picture:

- The first, by the NSPCC (conducted in 2009) asked children about attempted kidnap, regardless of who the perpetrator was. The same survey asked children about abduction by a family member.

- The second, by the University of Huddersfield (conducted in 1996/7) asked children about abduction by a stranger.

**NSPCC survey: kidnap**

Radford et al. (2011) examined the prevalence of child abuse and neglect in the UK in 2009 using surveys of a random probability sample of 2,160 parents or guardians of children under 11; 2,275 young people between the ages of 11 and 17; and 1,761 young adults between the ages of 18 and 24.

Respondents were asked if – at any time in their childhood – anyone had tried to kidnap them. Kidnapping was described to the participants as an incident when they were made to go somewhere, like into a car, by someone who they thought might hurt them. (The label ‘kidnapping’ is the choice of the researchers. It doesn’t imply incidents that would meet the legal definition of kidnap or child abduction).

0.2 per cent (1 in 500) of children under 11; 1.9 per cent (1 in 53) of 11 to 17 year-olds; and 2.1 per cent (1 in 48) of 18 to 24 year-olds indicated that they had been the victim of (an attempted) kidnap.

Nearly half of the attempted kidnappings (in each age group) were perpetrated by a stranger. The other half either by family members, non-resident adults known to the children (e.g. neighbours, family friends) or other young people.

**NSPCC survey: family abduction**

The NSPCC survey also asked children the following: “sometimes a family argues over where a child should live. At any time in your life, did a parent take, keep, or hide you to stop you from being with another parent?” This question uses the same wording as the US Juvenile Victimisation Questionnaire (developed by the US Crimes Against Children Research Centre) where it is titled ‘Custodial interference/family abduction’.
1.1 per cent (1 in 91) of children under 11, 2.5 per cent (1 in 40) of 11 to 17 year-olds, and 4.2 per cent (1 in 24) of 18 to 24 year-olds indicated they had been the victim of family abduction.

Again, this survey uses a broader definition of abduction from the Child Abduction Act, 1984. However, the findings suggest that children’s experience of abduction or custody interference by a parent is considerably higher than the account given by crime statistics.

**University of Huddersfield: stranger child abduction**

Gallagher et al. (2008)\(^1\) carried out a survey of 2,420 school children (aged 9 to 16) in the North West of England in 1996/7. They asked the children if, when they were away from home, a stranger had ever tried to get them to go with them when they didn’t want to.

41 children (1.7 per cent, or 1 in 59) reported this had happened to them. And 4 children (0.2 per cent, or 1 in 605) reported a stranger succeeded in taking them away - three of them said that they had been sexually assaulted. Gallagher et al. found that 60 per cent of victims of attempted abduction did not report the incident to the police.

**Summary**

Survey data highlights the gap between the number of child abduction offences recorded by police, and the self-reported experiences of young people themselves. This may, in part, be explained by the use of broad, child-friendly definitions in surveys, which do not match the legal criteria of child abduction. Whilst relatively few children are actually taken and suffer harm as a result, attempted abduction and incidents in which children fear for their own safety are far more common.

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