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**National Missing Children Services  
National Police Service  
Royal Canadian Mounted Police**

## **The Abduction of Children by Strangers in Canada: Nature and Scope**

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# **The Abduction of Children by Strangers in Canada: Nature and Scope**

## **Introduction**

All parents are concerned for the safety of their child. However, at one point or another in a child's life they "go missing". Most often, they return on their own, safe and unharmed, but at that moment of disappearance parent's experience their worst fears - the possibility of a *missing* child.

In 2002, there was a string of high profile stranger abductions cases in the United States which raised great concern among Canadians. Furthermore, at the same time police investigators were shockingly uncovering bodies of young women buried in the fields of a pig farm on the West coast of Canada. As expected concerns mounted for the safety of those individuals most vulnerable - children and youth.

Stranger abduction in Canada is a rare occurrence. However, each incident tends to shock the nation. The stereotypical view held by the public of countless strangers in the community abducting children is usually fuelled by media releases that meticulously describe a tragic kidnapping. These media reports most often heighten

national paranoia and inflate child safety concerns.

Tragically, those individuals, predators, who harm children are generally known to the child. Consequently, children have difficulty determining who will harm them and who will not. For this reason, the onus is on parents to screen those persons supervising and caring for their child, and to educate their children on how to ***stay and play safe.***

In 2000 and 2001, there were ninety police reports classified as stranger abduction. It is important to note that the Canadian law enforcement definition of a *stranger* not only refers to someone totally unknown to the child victim but also refers to relatives, friends, and acquaintances. In comparison to parental abduction cases, where the only threat to the child is from a parent, all children are at possible risk of abduction by a stranger.

This research study will analyse the information gathered from the national police database occurrence reports and the stranger abduction investigative case reports. Furthermore, a search the Missing Children's Registry database will be conducted to locate additional stranger abduction cases with the same characteristics. A review of the literature will provide a base for interpreting the findings.

## **Review of the Literature**

There are very few Canadian research studies on the subject of stranger abduction. It is anticipated that this research paper will rely heavily on several United States studies which closely relate to the topic, especially as applied to investigations.

## **Types of Abductions**

When a child abduction is portrayed by the media, it is usually a report of the most severe kind; a child is taken from their home, yard or bed, kept for ransom and/or sexual exploitation, and sometimes murdered. This type of stranger abduction is a very rare occurrence and often referred to as a ***stereotypical*** abduction. There is also another more general form of abduction, and one which occurs most frequently, the ***legal*** abduction. In this situation, the child is taken for a short period of time or transported a short distance from the point of abduction.

In an attempt to distinguish between these two types of abductions, the following explanation is provided. The ***stereotypical*** definition includes "the removal of a child from his or her home for an extended period of time primarily for purposes of ransom, sadistic or sexual assault, or even murder" (Finkelhor et al, 1992, Asdigian et al, 1995). The stereotypical abduction term applies to those severe circumstances "where strangers are perpetrators and a) the child was gone overnight, or b) the child was transported more than 50 miles or more from the point of abduction, or c) the child was killed, or d) the child was ransomed, or e) the perpetrator evidenced an intent to keep the child permanently" (Finkelhor et al, 1992). In Canada, these cases apply to only the most severe incidents. Nonetheless, when the media reports an occurrence of stranger abduction, the general public usually considers it to be a stereotypical abduction.

The ***legal*** definition includes the following: the coerced and unauthorized taking of a child into a building, vehicle, or distance of more than 20 feet; the detention of a

child for a period of more than an hour; the luring of a child for the purposes of committing another crime by someone other than a family member; the perpetrator is known to both the parent or the child; the child may be held for only a short period of time, and then released even before the parent or guardian realizes that the child has been missing; the abduction or coerced movement may be masked under another more serious crime, such as sexual assault, homicide, and the like (Steidel, 1994; Collins, 1993). Furthermore, this definition varies between countries and police departments.

Considering the subtle differences in the two definitions, police often find it difficult to distinguish between the two. Also, a number of legal definition abductions may not be reported to the police if the victim feels ashamed of the assault or intimidated by the offender (Finkelhor et al, 1990). It is common for controversy to appear when non-family or stranger abductions are counted using the legal definition, but, the results are interpreted using the stereotypical definition, as is commonly the case (Finkelhor et al, 1990).

To elaborate further, not only is the term “abduction” difficult to define, but also the term “stranger”. Boudreaux et al, (1999) defined ‘stranger’ as: someone who the victim has never come into contact with before the offense; anyone who is not part of the immediate family; and everything in between. Commonly referred to as a “non-family member” this person is someone who is not part of the family, such as a babysitter, family friend, acquaintance, boyfriend, and so on. The Royal Canadian Mounted Police's Canadian Police Information Centre (CPIC) operating data entry guidelines define a “stranger” as someone other than the parent or guardian of the victim. This includes siblings, aunts, uncles, grandparents, cousins, as well as the



non-family members, neighbours and close friends.

## **Abductor**

Four categories of abductors have been classified by the United States' Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI). These are as follows:

- a. *Paedophiles* – The people in this category constitute the single largest number of child abductors. Paedophiles seem to identify with children better than with adults which is the reason why they are able to seduce/lure children easily. They appear to understand the likes and dislikes of children and show a genuine concern for their well-being.
- b. *Profiteers* – This is an individual who is a criminal exploiter who sells children to pornographers or adoption rings, mostly in the black-market industry.
- c. *Serial Killers* – The actions of these individuals are methodical and ritualized, with power, dominance, and control as the most frequent motivator.
- d. *Childless Psychotics* – These individuals tend to abduct children when there are unable to have children of their own or have lost a child and seek another to fill its place (Tedisco & Paludi, 1996).

*Abductors* are generally male and they tend to target victims within their own ethnic group. Their behavioural patterns seem to be dependent upon gender, motivation, and relationship to the victim. To explain further, female offenders rarely abduct for sexual gratification, or profit, but more for emotional satisfaction.

The majority of child abductors who murder their victims have a history of violence. The United States missing children homicide investigative study by Hanfland et al, (1997) revealed that 60% had prior arrests for violent crimes. Almost two-thirds of the killers who were strangers to the victims had committed prior crimes against children, whereas 41% of the child abduction killers who were friends and

acquaintances of the victim had committed crimes against other children.

Hanfland et al, (1997) stated that when the child is abducted and murdered, “contrary to the popular belief, child killers are not *aged perverts* or *dirty old men*.” The abductor’s average age is around 27 years and much younger than the average killer. They are predominately unmarried (85%), half of them live alone or with their parents, half are unemployed, they have a history of sexual, alcohol, drug and mental problems, two thirds have been arrested for violent crimes with slightly half of these prior crimes against children, and many move or change residence often.

Younger offenders, which includes adolescent offenders, attract their victims using different approaches, such as taking away privileges, giving gifts, making threats, and using weapons. In essence, they may need to do more to control their victims. In general though, child abductors are usually skilled in choosing their victims. Tedisco and Paludi (1996) stated:

"Abductors use the advantage of their physical strength over their victims or wield a gun or a knife. Abductors also use age, social position, economic power, authority, and/or manipulative lures as their weapons. They rely on their victims' fear, vulnerability, and obedience to adults' authority. Child abductors are characteristically habitual offenders and carry out their assaults in a highly stereotypical *modus operandi*".

It is also important to consider the fact that most abductors are usually highly skilled in the art of manipulation. "They use seduction techniques, competition, peer pressure, motivation techniques, and threats to get children to comply with their requests to engage in sex, steal, abuse drugs, or participate in prostitution or pornography" (Tedisco & Paludi, 1996). More simply expressed, in order to be successful, they must lower the children's inhibitions or make them afraid of the

consequences if they do not comply.

To help explain an abductors approach, researchers identified two types of offender modus operandi; the “blitz attack” and the “confidence” or “con” assault (Tedisco & Paludi, 1996).

***The Blitz Attack*** – “A stranger appears suddenly. Children's responses resemble reactions to any other sudden, unexpected, dangerous event in their lives: (a) they are in so much shock that it interferes with any defensive action they might take; (b) the shock of the stranger's behaviour precludes seeing or remembering much of the incident, so that they may have considerable difficulty recognizing and identifying the individual at a later time; and (c) they label the experience as an assault and themselves as survivors”. This type of attack may or may not involve an assault with a weapon.

***The Confidence “Con” Assault*** – An elaborate scheme is set up by the abductor. It is more of a psychological assault than it is a physical assault. Initially, the abductor has to gain “the confidence of the targeted child/youth. The target's trust is used to manipulate her or him into physical and psychological vulnerability. The victim begins to notice a change in the behaviour of the abductor from a nice person to an aggressor. However, by the time this realization takes place, the abductor has already assessed his or her potential for escape; many of the child's options are thus eliminated. Trust is devastated after such a con assault. The key to continuing the con assault is to have the abuser convince the victim that he or she is a participant in the crime; the he or she shares the responsibility for the abuse or has no other alternatives”.

### **Relationship Between the Offender and Victim**

The *relationship between the offender and victim* appears to change with the age of the child. Family members and acquaintances often abduct younger children, up to seven years of age, while strangers tend to abduct school age victims (Boudreaux et al, 1999). Further, younger females, one to five years of age, tend to be killed by friends or acquaintances, while older females, 16 to 17 years of age, tend to be killed by strangers. Contrarily, the findings are different for male victims. The younger male

victims, one to five years of age are more likely to be killed by strangers, as are teenage males, 13 to 17 years of age (Hanfland et al, 1997).

### **Family Characteristics**

Researchers have suggested that in many cases, children “from a dysfunctional family and who may already be the victim of sexual and/or physical abuse” are prime abduction targets (Tedisco & Paludi, 1996). Contradictory, Hanfland et al, (1997) reported that most, 66%, of victims of non-family abduction and murder were described by those who knew them as *normal kids* with a good relationship with the family and typically of low risk. It may be noted here that those predators who murder children may do so when the opportunity arises. Therefore, any child could be at risk. On the other hand, children with low self confidence may be more likely to become prey for the potential kidnapper.

### **Homicide**

Finkelhor (1997) stated that "homicide is one of the five leading causes of death among children in the United States". In general, child homicide rates tend to vary with age (Boudreaux et al, 2001; Dalley, 2000). Child homicide appears to have a bimodal pattern; children younger than the age of four and those adolescents between the ages of 13 and 17 tend to be at the highest risk. When examined closely, children under two years of age are at the highest risk for murder. A study conducted by Crittenden and Craig (1990) suggested that "the rate for homicide for children was highest in the first month of life, decreasing as the child aged". The young child is usually killed by parents or family members using personal weapons, such as the hands or feet. Older children and youth are usually victimized by peers and acquaintances and killed by the use of

firearms (Finkelhor & Dziuba-Leatherman, 1994; Dalley, 2000).

Considering the factors of gender and age, males between the ages of thirteen and seventeen outnumber the risk to female victims of the same age group (Boudreaux et al, 2001). It is speculated that males may be more violent and aggressive toward any rival peers during the period of adolescence.

### **Abduction Homicide**

It has been reported by the Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention that "one in four children abducted by parents or relatives was later found to have been murdered by his or her abductors" (Boudreaux et al., 2001). When an abductor murders a child, abductors are more likely to conceal the body than murderers in general. Furthermore, the body is most often found in a rural area, usually at a site greater than one and a half miles from the victim's home. Only five percent were found in the killers residence (Hanfland et al, 1997).

However, for the most part, children are usually considered at low risk for kidnapping and murder. With regard to younger children, gender is usually not a factor in the murder of a child. Very young children are commonly victims of maternal desire or emotion-based crimes. However, Boudreaux et al, (2001) stated that "female children from preschool through high school age were at least three times more likely to be abducted and murdered than male children". Females are also more at risk for abduction-homicide in adolescence.

Lanning (1994) reported that child sexual homicide can be related to three types of deadly force. The first is *inadvertent* where the offender may not have intended to murder the victim. The second is *indiscriminate* where the offender may or may not

choose a child victim. The third and most common is an *act of murder* to avoid detection.

When time of death of the abduction could be determined, victims were more likely to be killed immediately or kept alive for less than 24 hours, with a few victims being kept alive for 24 to 48 hours or more than three days (Boudreaux et al, 1999). Hanfland, 1997 reported even more shocking findings. He stated that 44% were dead in less than an hour, 74% of the victims were dead within the first 3 hours, and 91% within the first 24 hours.

### **Offender Motivation**

An abduction may occur for many reasons, including a desire to possess a child, sexual gratification, financial gain, retribution, and the desire to kill. Research findings indicate that when a child is killed, the motivation may be either *emotion-based*, where the abductor seeks revenge on the family; *sexual-based*, where the offender seeks sexual gratification from the victim; or *profit-based*, which involves most often ransom for money (Boudreaux et al, 2000 & 2001). Moreover, child homicide usually follows an abduction and is not the reason for the abduction. Abduction-homicide studies have suggested that "a number of abductors kill their victims because of a predisposition to do so" (Hanfland et al, 1997).

Motivational patterns differ according to victim and offender gender, age, and ethnicity. Female offenders rarely commit sexual offences but are most commonly responsible for emotion-based offenses, and typically always responsible for *maternal based* crimes (Boudreaux et al, 1999). Those crimes involving infant abduction are usually perpetrated by a non-family member who typically has a desire to bear a child

or to fill a void in life (Ankrom & Lent, 1995). They are usually females, of child bearing years, somewhat overweight, are of the same race and colour as the abducted infant, have no prior criminal record, are married or living with a partner and are warm and attentive to the infant. Most often they do not harm the abducted child and treat it as if it were their own (Dalley, 2000). These types of offences, commonly known as infant abductions, are most often well-planned.

The most common motive of child abduction which results in murder is *sexual gratification* (Boudreaux et al, 2000, Asdigian et al, 1995). The findings of the United States National Incidence Studies of Missing, Abducted, Run-away, and Thrownaway Children (NISMAART) reported that two thirds of non-family abductions involved sexual assault (Finkelhor et al, 1990). This finding, however, is in contrast to other findings which suggest that only very few abductors are motivated by sexual desire but they consider the sexual act itself a violent way to achieve a sense of power (Tedisco & Paludi, 1996). Females, particularly Caucasian females, are more often the victims of these types of crimes. "Sex offences occurred most often in older school age children by non-family male offenders" (Boudreaux et al, 2000). Because they are more independent and free to move about unsupervised, older school age children are commonly targets for abduction.

Some abductors are sexual sadists, that is an individual driven to pursue their fantasies. These fantasies may include domination, pain, control, and humiliation as the focal points, and the crime is typically well-planned (Hazelwood et al, 1992). According to Hazelwood et al, (1992) "most often, the offender will use a pretext to make the initial contact with the victim and then they will lure the victim to a preselected location that

provides solitude and safety for the offender to act out the chosen fantasy.” Since children are easily lured they are easy prey for these predators.

Abduction for *profit* appears to be the least common motivation for offenders. These crimes are often perpetrated by strangers and acquaintances and the victims are generally older school age males (Boudreaux et al, 2001). As a child grows older and accumulates more valuable possessions, they become more vulnerable to profit motivated abductors. Child murders linked to profit-based motives typically involve drugs, robberies, extortion, or gang related activities. These types of offences are more likely to be carried out by strangers and acquaintances than by family members (Boudreaux et al, 1999).

### **Crime Location**

The crime location and the time of the offence may place certain constraints on the offenders actions (Boudreaux et al, 2000). "Offenders may commit criminal acts by choosing victims from more familiar areas where the offender feels safe and where offenders efforts to victimize are minimized" (Boudreaux et al, 2000). Many factors such as distance, time, money, transportation, and the layout of a geographical area impact upon the offender's choice of the abduction site and actions. "The availability and location of the victim plays a key role in the determination of where and when the offence occurs" (Boudreaux et al, 2000). Older children who spend more unsupervised time away from parental or caregiver supervision are more likely to be targeted.

### **Victimization**

"Childhood is a period of enormous change in size, strength, cognitive



capacities, gender differentiation, relationships, and social environments – all of which affect the potential for victimization" (Finkelhor, 1995). "Children often believe that they can easily identify an abductor – someone who is sinister and offers 'goodies' . . . children are taught to respect adults, especially adults' authority, and to only talk to people who look 'nice'" (Tedisco & Paludi, 1996). As a result of this, "victims faith in their own judgement about other people can be shattered" (Tedisco & Paludi, 1996). Children really do not have a choice with whom they associate and this can put them in considerable involuntary contact with high-risk offenders (Finkelhor & Dziuba - Leatherman, 1994). Finkelhor (1995) also suggested that the type of victimization a child suffers depends upon their age and level of development. A child's age will not only affect their level of victimization but also may affect the likelihood of reporting or disclosing the crime to an authority figure. To elaborate further on Finkelhor's study, 76% percent of victims were Caucasian females approximately 11 years of age. In 64% of the murders of one to five year old females, the killers were friends or acquaintances of the family. On the other hand, strangers were more likely to kill adolescent females.

Another point of consideration is that abduction victims tend not to be chosen randomly. Child victimization appears to be quite dependent on the age of the victim and the motivation of the offender. Offenders generally select victims that hold some kind of significance to them (Boudreaux et al, 2001). "Routine activities most often bring potential victims and offenders together. Crime is most often a result of interactions between motivated offenders, available targets, and lack of vigilant guardianship to prevent crime . . . often, it is this vulnerability, coupled with ease of access, that is apparent to offenders and serves to elevate their interest in children as desirable prey"

(Boudreaux et al, 2001).

In general, female children are more at risk, however, younger victims were found to be more often male, birth to age three. Females from preschool through high school, age three to 18 years, were at least three times more likely to be abducted than males. When murder followed an abduction, adolescent females, age 13 to 17 years, were at the highest risk, followed by young females, age one to 12 years, then young males, and then adolescent boys (Boudreaux et al, 1999). With regard to child abduction murder victims, and compared to all child murders and all murder victims, the victim is more likely to be female (Hanfland et al, 1997).

### **Offender's Relationship with the Victim**

In a study of the offender's relationship to the victim, Boudreaux et al, (1999) found that: very young children, neonates, are more likely to be victimized by female strangers (73%) due to maternal desire; infants and toddlers were most likely to be victimized by family members (63%) due to emotion-based motivation; preschoolers were also more likely to be victimized by family members (45%) and acquaintances (41%) due to emotion-based and sexual motivations; elementary school children were more likely to be victimized by acquaintances (44%) and strangers (38%) due to sexual motivation; middle school and high school children were more likely to be victimized by acquaintances and strangers due to sexual motivation as well. Adolescent females appear to be at highest risk for non-family abduction followed by murder. Males seem more likely to be victimized by family members, whereas females by acquaintances and strangers. Older children are more likely to be victimized than younger children because they are more mobile and independent of the supervision of parents and

caregivers (Finkelhor, 1995).

### **Characteristics of Victimized Children**

Children become victims for a variety of reasons. "Children that are more vulnerable to stranger abductions are the quiet, thoughtful ones; children who appear to have special and intense needs for adult affection and approval" (Tedisco & Paludi, 1996). Other vulnerable children include those who are considered loners, children who look unclean or unkept, a child who has discipline problems, and those involved in family situations like divorce or parental separation.

Hanfland's 1997 study of murdered children revealed that the typical child victim originates from a middle class or "blue collar" family, lives in an urban or suburban neighbourhood, and a single family residence. Furthermore, the family relationship was stable, and the victim was described as a "normal kid" and not thought of as "a high risk" in any circumstance.

Although abductors more often select female over male children, factors such as the child's attractiveness, physical size, behaviour, dress, and even age were identified as important factors in the victim selection. A child's gender and "other physical characteristics appear to be regarded as the selection criteria for offenders abducting a victim to meet particular sexual fantasies and needs" (Boudreaux et al, 2000).

Different offenders use various methods of abduction. Some offenders search for victims in places where children are most likely to be, such as schools, playgrounds, arcades, etc (Boudreaux et al, 2000). Some may abduct victims by using lures, tricks, physical force, or other means. The levels of force used to restrain a victim varies between abductors. Quite often the victim's gender is the prime criteria for the

abduction. However, studies contrast those findings and suggest that the offenders do not have any predisposed method for choosing their victims.

Ethnicity may also play a role in the victimization of children but this finding may be a factor that reflects the population distribution. Victims appear to be primarily Caucasian with fewer of the other minority populations appearing as victims. Moreover, victim ethnicity tends to vary by the victim's age, with Caucasian children generally older in age than the other minorities (Boudreaux et al, 1999).

### **Physical Setting Related to Abduction Opportunities**

There are also some physical situations that cause children to be more vulnerable to victimization. Huttinger, 1984, listed these as follows:

- walking alone to or from school (especially before and after normal school hours);
- waiting for a school bus alone;
- playing in a public park or playground after hours or late in the evening or playing unsupervised at any time;
- exploring remote areas;
- using enclosed, poorly lit stairways, corridors, and public rooms (e.g., apartment laundries);
- riding a bicycle alone or at night;
- using late night or all night facilities, such as laundry facilities;
- waiting in public parking lots (e.g., at malls) after dark or in normal working hours;
- walking unattended in a crowded mall or other public places; and
- wearing articles of clothing that have their name prominently displayed allowing abductors to portray familiarity.

### **Investigative Considerations**

The greatest majority of missing children are runaway youth. Each year, most runaway children have multiple episodes of running away, some as many as forty times a year. In 2002, this group of children created over 52,000 reports and 74% were repeat occurrences. Children who are abducted by a parent created 429 reports and those

abducted by a stranger, including relatives, neighbours and close friends, created 35 reports (Dalley, 2002).

Consequently, on occasion, missing children approaching the age of adolescence tend not to draw the immediate attention of investigators. Many think that older kids and youth are just being irresponsible by missing a curfew and so forth. The police response to an incident is considered routine if the youth has a history of missing. For children under the age of 16 years, police agencies have a protocol in place for investigators to follow but after this age there appears to exist a “grey area”. On occasion, a missing episode is considered routine, and unfortunately the youth is abducted by a stranger.

### **Reporting Incidents of Missing**

Collins, 1989, stated that many United States abductions are not reported to law enforcement agencies, therefore making it virtually impossible to know the exact number of victims of stranger abduction. Also, data collected for an incident are characteristic of a geographical area and may not be generalized to other areas. It was observed that the data collection relies primarily on local law enforcement agencies and it is questionable as to how systematic the data is collected and recorded. Also, data may not be coded as diligently as it may be for other “serious” crimes, since in the United States, kidnapping is not included routinely on the Uniform Crime Reporting System. Reporting also may vary in how often agencies charge offenders with kidnapping since it usually occurs with other crimes.

Collins (1989) listed some obstacles that are encountered when involved in a stranger abduction investigation. These include:

- a) difficulty in classifying cases due to insufficient information;
- b) difficulty in securing witnesses;
- c) difficulty in obtaining physical evidence;
- d) lack of cooperation from family;
- e) lack of cooperation from other law enforcement agencies;
- f) computer system information not accurate - or access difficult;
- g) other departmental priorities compete for personnel or resources; and
- h) lack of cooperation from friends and peers.

Together with police agency input Collins (1989) developed some indicators to help law enforcement categorize a case as *high investigative priority*. These indicators are: situations where a child is less than eight years of age (72% of agencies); there is an eyewitness account of the incident (67% of agencies); there is danger of sexual exploitation of the victim (66% of agencies); physical evidence exists (55% of agencies); there is a requirement for prescription medication (54 % of agencies); and, there is evidence of a mental handicap or disability (49% of agencies).

### **Purpose of the Study**

The purpose of this study is to determine the *number of* and *nature of* the stranger abduction incidents in Canada for the years 2000 and 2001. Both the Canadian Police Information Centre (CPIC) system database and the Missing Children's Registry (MCR) database were searched for stranger abduction cases.

## Definitions

**Stranger abduction/ kidnapping and foul play missing** - this term refers to an abduction by *anyone other than the subject's parent or guardian*. In other words, the abductor may be a stranger an uncle, sister, cousin, grandfather, neighbour or close friend etc.

**Unknown missing** - this term is used by police agencies when there is *no previous record* on the missing person (child), that is the person(child) has never run away, walked out, or wandered off before. As well, there is *insufficient background* information at the time to enable coding in any of the other causes.

**True stranger abduction** - this term refers to a case, identified by the investigating officer and researchers, as a confirmed stranger abduction incident.

**High profile case** - this term describes those Canadian stranger abduction cases that have received national media attention.

## **Methodology**

The data for this study was gathered from **two** sources. These are as follows:

1. A search of the **Canadian Police Information Centre (CPIC)** system “stranger abduction” missing category.
2. A search of the **Missing Children’s Registry (MCR)** database “stranger abduction” missing category. The cases identified in this category were mostly the high profile stranger abduction cases. A few cases were originally entered by the investigator in the “unknown” category of missing. The MCR database was used to find these cases because it stores both “closed” and “open” files; a search not possible using the CPIC system alone.

As reported previously in this report, a literature review was also conducted to gather as much information as possible on the subject of stranger abduction for information and comparison purposes. However, the literature available was sparse, so this study relied heavily on a few United States stranger abduction research studies.

### **Phase 1**

#### **Canadian Police Information Centre (CPIC) System Stranger Abduction Data Collection**

After a review of case intake forms, a questionnaire was designed to gather information on the characteristics of the victim, the offender, details of the abduction and specific investigative facts. The questionnaire was mailed to all law enforcement agencies that entered a stranger abduction case on CPIC in the years 2000 and 2001.

As the study progressed, many police agencies telephoned the research officer



to explain that the category entry was incorrect. Rather than chance losing the information on a specific case, at that time an opportunity was provided to respond with the required detail by telephone, letter or e-mail correspondence. Feedback from investigators revealed some category selection difficulties existed. Investigators commented that the most important aspect of the investigation was to reduce the risk to the child and enter the missing child on the system immediately. Given the uncertainties surrounding the case, the researchers were advised a few “high profile” stranger abductions cases were initially entered in the “unknown” category. For this reason, it was necessary to search the MCR database in Phase 2 to locate these cases.

To ensure a high rate of questionnaire return, follow-up letters were faxed to those agencies that did not respond in the time frame allocated, and they were encouraged to respond. Some questionnaires were returned *completed* and some were basically *blank*. The police agencies submitting the *blank* questionnaires were contacted once again, and asked to send a summary of the case details by telephone, letter or e-mail correspondence. As a result, 43% of the questionnaires were returned completed or partially completed, and 57% were case summaries.

From the data received two spreadsheets were produced, one from the data given on the returned completed questionnaires, and one from the detailed summaries received from the police agencies. The spreadsheet produced from the completed questionnaire data was quite large; however, the data from the summaries was significantly shorter due to the sparse amount of information received. Once the data was analysed, it was inserted into the study.

## **Phase 2**

### **Missing Children's Registry (MCR) Stranger Abduction Data Collection**

Additional stranger abduction cases were identified by searching the MCR database at National Missing Children Services, National Police Service (NMCS), RCMP, Ottawa, Ontario. The MCR database was used because it stores both "closed" and "open" files; a search not possible using the CPIC system. The questionnaire designed for the study was used to gather additional information on each case. A MCR operational analyst completed these questionnaires in consultation with the investigating police officer.

### **Limitations of the Study**

This study was limited to the data entered on CPIC in a "stranger abduction" missing category. It is possible that a police officer would choose not to enter a child in this missing category. Therefore, to partially overcome this limitation, a search of the MCR database for stranger abductions was conducted. Three additional "high profile" stranger abduction cases were identified by this search and included in the study.

To explain further, when law enforcement enter a missing child report on CPIC, they can choose from any one of eight categories of missing. Therefore, some cases involving stranger abduction, become embedded in other categories, especially the "unknown" category. Initially a police officer may not have sufficient information to select the kidnapping and foul play category (stranger abduction), so most often they select the "unknown" missing category. In this study, the literature review pointed out that

abduction hardly ever occurs by itself. It usually occurs for the purpose of taking the victim somewhere in order for the abductor to perpetrate another, usually more serious crime. Abduction as it relates to other types of crime, such as sexual assault, homicide, burglary were not included in this study. Additionally, this study did not include attempted abductions which are not entered on the national police database. However, they do occur.

Also, the feedback on the cases was limited to the views and perceptions of the investigating officer or someone who had replaced that officer on the case. It should be noted that the information would be more detailed if the researchers were able to personally scrutinize the police agency's stranger abduction file, and gather the pertinent details themselves for study purposes.

With regard to ethnicity, in the original questionnaire police agencies were given four ethnic choices, that is *white*, *non-white*, *aboriginal*, and *other*. This classification was based on the CPIC system choices. For the *other* choice, there was a blank provided, whereby if the appropriate choice was not provided the data entry clerk or investigator could write the ethnicity of the victim. From this *other* choice, respondents gave the ethnicity as black, Indian, brown and Arabic. Considering *aboriginal* was an option on the questionnaire, it is uncertain as to whether the differences in the choices, aboriginal and East/West Indian, were clearly understood. However, it is in this context that the researchers reported the findings. Since some confusion in the response was identified, perhaps in future studies a greater variety of ethnic choices or clearer instructions should be provided for respondents.

## **Analysis**

The data for this study was gathered from **two** sources. These are as follows: The Canadian Police Information Centre (CPIC) system and the Missing Children's Registry (MCR) database.

## **1. Canadian Police Information Centre (CPIC) System Stranger Abduction Entries**

### **Stranger Abduction Case Total**

In the years 2000 and 2001, 90 stranger abduction missing child reports were entered on national police database. Ten of these reports were eliminated from the study due to entry type errors, thus a total of 80 cases comprised the final analysis. Of this total, two cases were considered to be "true" stranger abductions. In summary, these cases represented 2.5% of the cases over a two-year period. The other 97.5% of cases were either errors in entry, insufficient information to place in a representative missing category, or relatives and close friends of the victim.

### **Non-Abduction Case Total**

There were 78 cases, not considered as "true" stranger abductions, but the researchers concluded it would be helpful to look at these entries and identify commonalities. This analyses might explain why these cases were entered in this missing category in the first place.

### **Non-Abduction Case Discussion**

Of the non-abduction cases, 78 in total, 43 were females and 35 males. The age range was between 13 up to 18 years. As well, a slight bi-modal pattern was identified around the ages of two to four years. These age patterns are also consistent with the findings of stranger abductions studies. Victimized children tended to be female and either infants or very young children or children that were reaching, or have reached,

the stage of puberty.

**TABLE 1**  
**Victim Age in Years Distribution**  
**Total for Each Gender**

Age	18	17	16	15	14	13	12	10	9	7	6	5	4	3	2	t
m	0	4	3	9	6	3	1	1	1	0	0	0	3	2	2	35
f	2	5	10	9	6	3	1	1	0	1	1	1	1	1	1	43
t	2	9	13	18	12	6	2	2	1	1	1	1	4	3	3	78

The ethnicity distribution of the of the victims was as follows: White was the most common ethnicity of this group, however there were a large number of “missing information” recorded for this category. This ethnicity distribution corresponds with ethnicity findings of stranger abduction research. However, it also corresponds with the general national population distribution of Canada as well.

An analysis of data by province revealed that Quebec and Ontario had the most reports followed by British Columbia. It is important to note that these provinces have large urban centre populations, and have a total population of about 50% of the Canadian population.

A closer look at the information available to the investigating officer revealed that at the onset of the investigation there was sparse information available regarding the case. However, as the investigator gathered more facts on the case, the entry was changed to reflect the missing episode. Unfortunately, the CPIC system is designed so

that the *initial* entry of stranger abduction remains and is counted as a transaction. This is the reason why many “error” type entries existed, and consequently effected the data collection.

An analysis of these cases before they were re-entered revealed that 29 of the 78 cases were missing *runaways* and not stranger abductions. A few cases were determined to be *parental abductions*. Nonetheless, the characteristics of the missing incident initially were very similar to a stranger abduction incident; the probable reason why the cases were entered as such in the first place. It should be noted that even though more facts surfaced on the parental abduction case, and the entry was modified and re-entered in a more representative category, the initial entry would remain and be counted as a transaction.

There were surprisingly quite a few technical errors which contributed to the inflated number of reported stranger abductions. These entries were not well-explained. Furthermore, one of the reported cases was actually a test and training case, and one was purged and then re-entered (which would explain why there was an entry of two victims over the age of 18 years). Also, a few cases were unfounded and for several others, the entry was not explained.

To overview, the general characteristics of the "non-abduction" entries showed that their characteristics were very similar to those of “true” stranger abductions; a possible explanation as to why some cases were entered on the national police system as such in the first place. Nonetheless, there was a surprising number of other types of missing entries, such as errors in entry and practice entries.

## **Phase 2. Missing Children’s Registry (MCR) database.**

A search of the MCR database for 2000 and 2001 stranger abduction cases revealed an additional five cases. Three of the “high profile” stranger abduction cases were included in this study. The other two cases were eliminated as they were re-entries from previous years.

### **Combined Analysis: Stranger Abduction Cases from the Two Database Sources**

For the years 2000 and 2001, an analysis of the CPIC database stranger abduction missing category showed that there were two “true” stranger abductions entered in this category. A search of the MCR database for stranger abduction cases revealed that there were an additional three “high profile” stranger abduction cases. Thus, for analytical purposes, a total of five stranger abduction cases were grouped together and compared using a case-by-case type analysis.

### **Stranger Abduction Case-by-Case Analysis: Results and Discussion**

#### **1. Victim Analysis**

All five stranger abduction cases involved female children, 5,5,10,10, and 9 year of age. Four victims were white females and the other was a black female. One black female victim was found alive and unharmed, whereas the other four white females victims were found dead. Two victims were abducted from inside the home; one from the yard of the family home; one from the parking lot while playing near the family residence, a townhouse complex; and one while on route to school in a vehicle driven by a family acquaintance who was just released from prison. Four of the children were living in parental separation or divorce situations, and one parent was single.

**TABLE 2**

**Victim Analysis**

<b>Case</b>	<b>Age</b>	<b>Gender</b>	<b>Ethnicity</b>	<b>Assault</b>
Incident 1	5	female	white	sexual/physical
Incident 2	5	female	white	sexual
Incident 3	10	female	black	not harmed
Incident 4	10	female	white	sexual/physical
Incident 5	9	female	white	sexual

**2. Abductor Analysis**

The abductor was a complete stranger in one case, and in the other four cases a friend of the mother's friend; a neighbour; a friend of the father's just released from jail; and, a friend of the family who worked as a babysitter (child recovered unharmed).

The abductors were ages 16, 19, 20, 23 and 31 years: the latter four abductors were arrested for murder. Four abductors were male and one female (age 16, the child was recovered unharmed). One offender was black, whereas the other four offenders were white. Four offenders were single, and one lived in a common law relationship with the best friend of the victim's mother (child was found dead). Three offenders, ages 19, 20 and 31 years, had previous criminal records. One confessed to the murder of the child. Three abductors received life imprisonment for murder, one received open custody and probation (child unharmed), and regarding the other abductor, a murder incident, the trial was pending at the time of the study.



**TABLE 3**

**Abductor Analysis**

<b>Case</b>	<b>Age</b>	<b>Gender</b>	<b>Ethnicity</b>	<b>Marital status</b>	<b>Relationship</b>
Incident 1	19	male	black	single	stranger
Incident 2	31	male	white	common law	friend
Incident 3	16	female	white	single	babysitter
Incident 4	23	male	white	single	stranger
Incident 5	20	male	white	single	stranger - family friend

**3. Search Analysis**

All of the victims were abducted very close to home: two from the home, one from the yard, one from the parking lot, and one from a car driven several blocks from home. For all incidents, the parent reported the incident to police. One child was reported to police as missing immediately, one within an hour, whereas the others, were reported only after several hours had passed, a range of two to four hours. An extensive police search began within 30 minutes of the receiving the report, which in most incidents included a complete search of the area within a two kilometre radius. In about two hours, the radius was extended beyond two kilometres.

In all cases, the police entered the missing child on CPIC, and in four of the five cases they were also entered on NCIC (United States). In only one case was the police

CPIC entry made within 1 hour. All the other entries were significantly delayed. for four to 12 hours.

**TABLE 4**  
**Search Analysis**

<b>Case</b>	<b>CPIC Category</b>	<b>Report to CPIC Entry Time</b>	<b>Reported Missing to Police</b>	<b>Police Began Search</b>	<b>Search Parameters</b>
Incident 1	Stranger Abduction	4.5 hours	immediately	30 minutes	2 k radius
Incident 2	Unknown	12 hours	3 hours	30 minutes	2 k radius
Incident 3	Stranger abduction	not known	2 hours	immediately	home
Incident 4	Unknown	1 hour	1 hour	immediately	2 k radius
Incident 5	Unknown	4.5 hours	within 4 hours	immediately	2 to 5k radius

#### **4. Recovery Analysis**

The four murdered white female children were found in a farmers field; inside the abductor's apartment; in a body of water; and in an abandoned trailer. One black female child was found alive and unharmed an approximate hour distance from home. She was abducted by a teenage white female babysitter and transported to a major urban centre. In this incident, the abductor's car ran out of gas on-route. One murdered child's body was located in the abductor's house and the others, in rural areas 30 to 50 kilometres away. Three children were found in approximately 1 day; however, regarding two of the cases, only after six and 21 days had passed. Investigators

estimated that the three murdered children were dead within the first 24 hours. All murdered children were asphyxiated. The abductions occurred in central and western Canada, in mostly urban areas but one mid-sized urban area. Two children went missing in the Spring, two in the Fall, and one in the Summer months. The clues that lead police to the abductor included missing keys, witness accounts, a confession, the suspects name was given to police, and a weapon was accidentally found.

**TABLE 5**

**Recovery Analysis**

<b>Case</b>	<b>Found</b>	<b>State</b>	<b>Cause of death</b>	<b>Located</b>
Incident 1	1 day	murdered	asphyxia	stranger's house
Incident 2	6 days	murdered	suffocated	field
Incident 3	1 day	alive	not harmed	urban center
Incident 4	21 days	murdered	strangled	lake
Incident 5	1 ½ days	murdered	hung	abandoned trailer

**Summary and Conclusions**

Most of the research studies on this topic has been completed in the United States. Even though the actual numbers of occurrences differ considerably, the characteristics and patterns of stranger abduction incidents are extremely similar. In the United States, the NISMART 2 study estimated that there were about 115 stereotypical non-family abductions each year. Over the past five years, the number of Canadian cases reported in the stranger abduction category, which includes relatives and close

friends, ranged from 42 cases in 1998 to 35 cases in 2002. In comparing the two countries by population, Canada and the United States have similar and distinctive characteristics regarding the number of stereotypical non-family abductions.

The public awareness of stranger abduction incidents is greatly intensified by media responses. Most often, media report the **stereotypical** abductions, which are rare and yet, they create the greatest concern nationwide. Consequently, the knowledge of these cases increase paranoia from coast to coast and affect parenting styles and supervision. On the other hand, the more general type of abduction, the **legal** abduction, is not so often reported to the police or media because the victim is ashamed or intimidated by the abductor. When a legal abduction occurs, the child is often taken for short periods of time or taken a short distance, perhaps into a building or vehicle. As well, on occasion an abduction might happen when the abductor commits another crime, like a sexual assault, a robbery, or while stealing a vehicle. This practice is one of the reasons why many stranger abductions are not entered on the CPIC system as missing and abducted.

This study also identified confusion in the interpretation of the CPIC definitions of “stranger abduction” and “unknown” missing. Some law enforcement officers stated in follow up interviews that the reason why the entry was made in the “unknown” missing category in the first place was “the necessity to put the child on the system quickly”. However, the research study findings showed that considerable time had passed before the CPIC missing child entry was made. Further analysis showed that the more serious crime was sometimes chosen as the entry category, like sexual assault or homicide, and occasionally the missing/abduction entry was made after the child was found or not

at all. To explain further, if a child was missing and found murdered, the police would enter the incident as a homicide rather than “missing and/or abducted”. However, it is common practice for police to enter the child as missing on CPIC at a later date. Consequently, this practice hinders the data collection process. Furthermore, the CPIC definitions of missing appear to be too broad in scope. For example, the definition of *stranger abduction* includes aunts, uncles, grandparents and other relatives and close friends and mentions that the child may be “**briefly restrained from proceeding to his/her intended destination**” The “restraint” determination seems to confuse data entry personnel. However, it is important to keep in mind that the **stranger abduction** definition clearly states **an abduction is suspected**, whereas the definition for **unknown** denotes clearly a **missing only category**. In essence, if these definitions were made clearer and in sync with other countries, especially the United States, rich data could be collected and comparisons made which would produce more valid and reliable statistics for police and policy makers.

For the most part, the reason why the entries were placed in the selected missing category was understandable, and somewhat justifiable, but for some of the other entries, such as testing, training and error entries, the reasons are puzzling. In essence, to successfully recover abducted children quickly and safely, the CPIC missing children definitions and guidelines must be continually reviewed and kept current.

The common assumption that the offender is someone who just comes out of nowhere and snatches a child is rare. Most commonly the offender is in an area for a legitimate reason and is known to the child and/or family. Therefore, it is easier for the

abductor to lure the child to a suitable destination. Some researchers state that offenders do not have any predisposed methods for choosing their victims. Abductors admit and confess to police, "It just happened!". In this study, the abductor was a complete stranger in one case, and in the other four cases known to the family.

Studies report that the killer is usually a socially inept young white adult male, about 27 years of age, looks like everyone else, and most often has a criminal history of violence. In the Canadian study, the average age of the abductor was 23 years, three of the abductors were white males, one was black and the other, a white female. Three offenders had previous criminal records.

The length of time the child remains alive is usually very short in duration. Researchers reported that the victims were typically killed immediately or kept alive for only about 24 hours. In this study, it was estimated by the investigating officers that the four victims were killed within the first 24 hours.

There was very little information gathered to determine the distance between the murder and body recovery site, with the exception of one case where the abductor, a stranger, told police the body was located inside his home. The other three victim's bodies were found a fairly long distance from the point of abduction - in a body of water, in an abandoned trailer and in a farmer's field. These findings are also consistent with the findings of other studies which showed the bodies are often located quite far away and most often in rural areas.

Some research studies showed that the abductor targets children who appear to have low self esteem, come from a dysfunctional family or may be a victim of physical or sexual abuse. On the contrary, other researchers who study *abduction and murder*

incidents stated that murder victims were “normal” children with stable family relationships. Unfortunately, in the Canadian study there was not enough information gathered on this factor to draw conclusions.

Researchers reported that abductors seldom “stalk” their victim. However, they are usually very skilled at manipulating and luring children. Those lures commonly involve requests for assistance, to find a lost pet, to claim an emergency, calling the victim by name, posing as an authority figure or soliciting the victim by internet computer chats. In this study, very young females, four white and one black, were abducted. One child was physically removed from her father’s home while sleeping, two were abducted while being transported in the family vehicle, and the other two were abducted from their yard while playing. The study showed that one child was lured into the abductor’s home and panicked when she was asked to remove her clothes. It is speculated that the children playing in their yard and the parking lot were lured away as well but this circumstance is not known for sure.

The parents of the children in the Canadian study were separated, divorced or single for the most part. However, the relationship between the child and their parents was not known.

In this study, the motivation for the abduction varied. In three of the four missing and homicide cases, the child was sexually assaulted thus supporting the fact that the offender’s motivation was sexually based. Two victims were physically assaulted. It is also postulated that the abductors had a desire to kill.

Researchers have stated that the child’s murder is rarely the reason for the abduction but it is a result of the abduction. In this study, one offender confessed his

crime and told police that he did not really mean to kill the child.

It has been noted that age is a major factor in the way a child is murdered. As expected, a young child cannot match the strength of an adult, and consequently they are quite easy to restrain. On the other hand, older children and youth when threatened with violence have more physical strength to fight back,. In this study, four of the murdered victims were young children, 5 to 10 year of age. All murdered children were asphyxiated in one way or the other; a finding consistent with other studies.

Researchers, like Boudreaux et al, (1999) stated that girls from preschool age through high school are three times more likely to be abducted than males. Also, that females are chosen with the same ethnicity as the abductor. In the Canadian study, one white female offender abducted a black female child. Nonetheless, the abductor's ethnicity matched their victims for the other victims. Hanfland (1997) reported that young girls are more likely to be abducted by friends and acquaintances, which was consistent with the findings of this study. The abductor was a complete stranger in one case, and in the other four cases known to the family and sometimes the victim.

With regard to risk of harm, it should be noted that **all** missing children reports must be treated as critical. An older child is just as much at risk as a younger child. A common police department practice is to allow a certain length of time to expire before a youth is entered on the national police database, CPIC, as missing. This is mainly due to the fact that many older children and teenagers have a history of running away. However, a missing youth report must be treated with the same urgency as any other type of report. Researchers have pointed out that teenagers between the ages of 13 and 17 years were at the *highest risk* and more likely to be abducted by **strangers**. In



support of this findings, a few years ago a well known Canadian serial killer, abducted and killed a youth with no previous record of missing as well as several chronic runaways. These killers do not discriminate, nor should law enforcement officers. In essence, all missing children incidents must be treated seriously and entered immediately on the national police database.

The ultimate goal of this study was to bring policy makers attention to the data entry inconsistencies, and to encourage data entry personnel to enter missing children in a correct and representative missing category. As well, to encourage their help in the compilation of accurate and reliable statistics, so that the numbers can be reported with confidence. In essence, if this study had not occurred all of the entries in the kidnapping/stranger abduction category would have been counted as stranger abductions; numbers which greatly magnify the Canadian incident frequency.

In summary, stranger abduction is a very serious crime. Thankfully, it is a rare occurrence in Canada. In the future, it is hoped that law enforcement investigators will approach each case with an open mind and a sense of urgency, therefore giving every missing child or youth a chance to be found before it's too late. Although, it is recognized by most investigators that entries on the national police information system must be made immediately, data should be entered in a correct and representative category. This practice will assist in the search, and help analysts and policy makers improve the process. It is hoped that those policy bodies responsible for definition change, will review and consider tightening the missing children definitions, and as well align them with the current trends. These definitions must be mutually exclusive, all inclusive and meaningful. Then, analysts can make sense of the abducted situation in

Canada for the purpose of assisting investigators, informing the public and feeding into policy and law changes; all critical to the safe recovery of missing children.

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## APPENDIX 1

### National Missing Children Services National Police Service, RCMP

#### Highlights of the Stranger Abduction in Canada Study by Marlene Dalley, PhD.

To obtain the data for this study, all the stranger abduction cases entered on Canadian Police Information Centre (CPIC), and the Missing Children's Registry databases for the years 2000 and 2001 were retrieved, 90 and 5 respectively.

After an review of these cases, the final study was comprised of **five** stranger abduction cases. These were mostly "high profile" stereotypical abduction cases.

The findings were as follows:

- All five stranger abductions were abductions of young female children.
- Four victims were classified as white females, and the other victim was a black female.
- Three white and one black female child victim were found dead. One white female child victim was found alive and unharmed.
- Two victims were abducted from inside their home; one from the yard of the family home; one from the parking lot near the family residence - a townhouse complex; and one was abducted while on route to school in a vehicle.
- One child was reported missing immediately, whereas the others were reported only after several hours had passed, up to six hours.
- The abductor was a complete stranger in one case, and in the other four cases: a friend of the mother's friend; a neighbour; a friend of the family who worked as a babysitter; and a father's friend who was recently released from prison.
- Four abductors were male and one was a female. The adolescent female abductor ran out of gas on route to a major urban area. The child victim, after calling home, was recovered unharmed.
- Four abductors were white and one abductor was black.

- Four abductors were single, and one lived in a common law relationship with the best friend of victim's mother.
- The abductors were ages 16 (female), 19, 20, 23 and 31 years (male); the latter four offenders were arrested for murder.
- Three of the abductors, ages 19, 20 and 31 years, had previous criminal records.
- Four of the five missing children were murdered and found in a farmers field, inside the abductor's apartment, in a body of water, and in an abandoned trailer.
- The bodies of two murdered children were found 30 to 50 miles from their home; the unharmed victim was found even further away. However, the body of the child who was abducted by a stranger was found in the home of the abductor.
- All the murdered children were sexually assaulted.
- Four of the parents of the missing children were separated or divorced, and one was single.

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