MISSING AND ABDUCTED CHILDREN

by Bryan Reingold*

Highlights

- In 1996, according to the RCMP, approximately 56,000 cases of children under 18 years of age were reported missing to Canadian police. The majority of these were runaways (78%). Abductions account for less than 1% of all reported missing children.

- The majority of children reported missing are 14 years of age or older (72%).

- According to the Uniform Crime Reporting (UCR) Survey, almost 1,000 children were victims of an attempted or completed abduction in Canada in 1996. Two-thirds of these were parental abductions and one-third were non-parental abductions.

- Between 1983 and 1992, the rate of child abductions increased by 65% (11.8 to 19.5 per 100,000 children under 16). However, over the past 4 years the rate decreased by 23% (15.1 in 1996).

- The majority of those accused of abduction were male (60%).

- Females were more often victims of abduction (58%), particularly in non-parental abductions (66%).

* Senior Analyst
Introduction

Canadian children are reported missing more often than we would like to believe. According to data released by the RCMP, approximately 56,000 children were reported missing in 1996, an average of 153 children a day. A child not returning from school at the normal time, a child wandering off without telling the parent, or a child not being returned after a scheduled visit with a parent or family member - any missing child is of great concern to the searching parent(s) and to society as a whole.

Missing children are a concern for a wide variety of reasons. Most important is that a missing child is at risk, either from themselves or at the hands of someone else. For instance, a study on prostitution found that many runaways were at risk of becoming involved in prostitution (Ministry of Alberta Family and Social Services, 1997). Furthermore, the social costs relating to missing children are incalculable, including the emotional burden to the searching parent(s), family and friends, and the emotional costs to the victim. There are also the financial costs relating to the involvement of social services, police, health care systems, and in some instances the courts and judiciary.

This Juristat will highlight available data to provide a perspective on missing children in Canada and show what is being done to assist in their location and recovery. It will focus more specifically on parental and non-parental abductions.

Missing Children

In 1996, the Canadian Police Information Centre (CPIC) computer network entered 56,000 children under the age of 18 as reported missing (See Box “Missing Children’s Registry”). Between 1992 and 1996, approximately 300,000 children were reported missing.

Missing Children's Registry

When a child under the age of 18 is reported missing to any Canadian police agency, a record is entered in the CPIC system. The RCMP Missing Children's Registry receives a copy of all records entered into CPIC relating to missing children. Information is also available by probable cause (the suspected reason that the child is missing). The record is removed from CPIC when the child is located and/or recovered. This count of entries into and removals from the system is the basis for the information on missing children reported by the RCMP.

By far the greatest number of children reported missing are runaways. Consistently, runaway children account for approximately 78% of all children reported missing (see Figure 1). In addition, in 1996 16% were reported missing for unknown reasons and 3% for “other” reasons (including children who have not returned to a detention home or other institution for young offenders). It is believed that the vast majority of these children are also runaways. Other causes include: wandered off or lost (2%); abductions (both parental and stranger, less than 1%); and, accidents (instances where the disappearance is attributed to a boating accident, flying, hiking, or avalanche where the body has not been recovered, 0.1).

More female children are reported missing than males (57%). Only in cases of suspected accidents or where the child has wandered off are girls less likely to be reported missing (35% and 48%, respectively) (see Figure 2). Almost one-half of the children reported missing were between 14 and 15 years of age. A further 23% were 16 to 17, 21% were 12 to 13, and the remainder were less than 11 years old (See Figure 3).

It is not possible to say with certainty what proportion of children reported missing each year are returned to a parent. In a given year, over 90% of missing children records are removed from CPIC (RCMP, 1991 to 1995). However, it should be...
noted that removal from the system does not necessarily mean that the child has been returned to a parent. It means that the child has been located. Also, some records will be removed in the year in which they are entered, while others relate to reports from previous years.

Over a six year period (1991-1996), children ran away at a rate of almost 117 a day or an average of 5 reported every hour. Although many of these children are located within a short period of time, many who are not located may be living on the streets. According to data provided by the RCMP, approximately 55% of reported runaways are repeat runaways (RCMP, 1994).

Abductions

Bill C-127 was proclaimed into law in 1983. This Bill made revisions to the Criminal Code of Canada, clearly distinguishing between parental abduction with a custody order and parental abduction without a custody order. In addition, there are sections dealing with the abduction of a child under 14 and abduction of an unmarried child under 16. Still in force is Canada's kidnapping section of the Criminal Code (see Box “Legislation on Abductions”). From 1983 onwards, Canadian police forces began reporting occurrences of child abduction to the Canadian Centre for Justice Statistics (CCJS) through the Uniform Crime Reporting (UCR) Survey, providing an accurate description of child abductions occurring in Canada.
According to the UCR survey, between 1983 and 1992, the total abduction rate per 100,000 children under 16 years of age (including attempted and completed offences) increased by 65%, from 11.8 to 19.5 (Figure 4). However, after that it decreased every year. In 1996, the total abduction rate had declined to 15.1, down 23% from 1992. Consistently, parental abductions account for approximately 60% of all abductions, and non-parental for the other 40% (see Table 1). The trends for both parental and non-parental abductions are similar to that for total abductions.

“Parental abductions” may be classified into two offences: in contravention of a custody order (where a custody order for the child was in effect and the non-custodial parent abducted the child); and where there is no custody order in effect. Similarly, “non-parental abductions” may be classified into two offences: abduction of a child under 14; and abduction of an unmarried child under 16. Non-parental abductions refer to someone who does not have legal care, control, or guardianship of the child, such as a grandparent, uncle or aunt, family acquaintance, or stranger.
In 1996, there were 964 child abductions reported to the UCR Survey (attempted and completed), a rate of almost 3 per day. Almost two-thirds of these abductions were parental, either with or without a custody order (see Figure 5). Non-parental abductions accounted for the remainder.

The national trend in abductions in Canada, peaking in the early 1990’s and then gradually declining, is influenced by reports from Ontario. In 1996, Ontario accounted for 43% of the Canadian total. Rates in other jurisdictions are more variable because of the small numbers reported.

Over the years, most jurisdictions have experienced a decline in the rate in the late 1980’s and early 1990’s. The exception to this is New Brunswick, where the rate increased between 1987 and 1995, but decreased in 1996 (see Table 2). Figure 6 provides the average abduction rate over 5 years for each jurisdiction (1992 to 1996). The Yukon had the highest average rate of abduction over the 5 years (56.8 per 100,000 children under 16). Newfoundland and Quebec had the lowest rates (8.3 and 9.0, respectively).

The incident-based Uniform Crime Reporting (UCR II) survey is able to provide a broader picture of abductions of children in Canada than the aggregate UCR survey. The UCR II captures information not only on victims and accused persons (where known) but on the nature of criminal incidents as well. As of 1996, the UCR II data represented approximately 47% of incidents reported to police in Canada and, as a result, are not representative of Canada, or any particular region. However, these data do provide a very rich and useful source of information.

The relationship of the accused is already defined by the Criminal Code of Canada offence definitions. Therefore in all cases of parental abductions, the accused was a parent. In cases of non-parental abduction, the largest proportion of accused were strangers (45%), followed by casual acquaintances (17%).

Of those accused of abduction, 60% were male and 40% were female. However, female children were more often the victim of abduction (58%), particularly in non-parental abductions (66%). In cases of parental abductions where there was no custody order in effect, a larger proportion of victims were boys (58%).

The majority of all abductions reported in 1996 took place in a residence (59%). This is not surprising since many abductions involve parents. A further 16% occurred outdoors (e.g., parking lot or street).

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1 This data set, with the exception of Quebec, is composed primarily of urban police departments. 39% of the incidents are currently from Quebec, 38% from Ontario, 10% from Alberta, 8% from British Columbia, 4% from Saskatchewan and less than 1% from New Brunswick.
A review of the literature on child abductions (Kiedrowski, Jayewardene, & Dalley, 1994), provides a profile of parental abductors. According to this report, the majority of parental abductions are short term, often resolved within seven days. However, mothers who abduct their children tend to keep them for a longer period of time than fathers who abduct.

The Adult Criminal Court Survey (ACCS) provides information on those who have been charged with abduction. In 1995/96, 135 abduction cases came before the provincial/territorial courts in nine jurisdictions. Of these, almost 60% were either stayed or withdrawn. A further 27% were found guilty, 7% were sent to Superior Court, while in 4% the charges were waived, the person was found unfit to stand trial, or there was a Charter of Rights challenge. Only 3 of the 135 cases resulted in an acquittal. Excluding the cases that were sent to Superior Court, there was an overall conviction rate of 30% for abduction cases. Parental abduction where there was no custody order had the highest conviction rate (39%), followed by parental abduction in contravention of a custody order (31%). Non-parental abductions of unmarried persons under 16 had a conviction rate of 28%, and non-parental abduction of persons under 14 had the lowest conviction rate (17%).

Persons found guilty of abduction were most likely to be sentenced to a period of probation. More than 60% of the guilty findings resulted in a probation order, most often for terms of between 12 and 24 months. For those who were sentenced to a period of incarceration (24%), the length of imprisonment ranged from less than 1 month to 2 years less 1 day. In cases where a fine was imposed, the amount of the fine ranged between $100 and $300.

International Abductions

International abductions can be as close as an hour away for most Canadians. The Canada-United States border is within easy commuting distance for the vast majority of Canadians. However, international abductions stretch around the world. The issue of international parentally-abducted children has been raised in the House of Commons. In 1996, a case of a non-custodial father taking his child to another country was brought to the floor of the House. Although the abducting parent had committed a crime in Canada, he could not be apprehended because there was no formal extradition agreement between Canada and the other nation. Also, the other nation was not a signatory of the Hague Convention on the Civil Aspects of International Child Abduction (see Box “The Hague Convention on the Civil Aspects of International Child Abduction”).

To assist in the recovery process from other countries, Canada has ratified the Hague Convention on the Civil Aspects of International Child Abduction. However, application of the Hague Convention does not guarantee the return of the abducted child. It is a legal civil process that asks a foreign signatory nation to respect a Canadian custody order or custody rights to ensure that the best interests of the child are taken into account. The Department of Justice Canada is the federal central authority for Canada, with each province and territory having its own central authority dealing with international child abductions. According to the Department of Justice Canada, since 1993, there have been slightly more than 300 requests for assistance in the return of an abducted child, and an additional 100 requests for assistance in gaining access. Of requests for the return of a child, more than one-half were made by Canadian parents or caregivers. Almost two-thirds of these requests were made by fathers seeking the return of their child. Because of the application of the Hague Convention, since 1993 more than 100 children have been returned.

The Hague Convention on the Civil Aspects of International Child Abduction

This convention is an agreement between ratifying nations to respect the rights of custody and of access under the law of the contracting states.

The removal or retention of a child is to be considered wrongful where:

a) it is in breach of rights of custody to a person, an institution or any other body, either jointly or alone, under law of the State in which the child was habitually resident immediately before the removal or retention; and
b) at the time of removal or retention those rights were actually exercised, either jointly or alone, or would have been so exercised but for the removal or retention.

Every effort is made to insure the custody order is recognized but it is also within the powers of the authorities not to return the child when:

a) it is demonstrated that the child is now settled in his/her new environment;
b) the person, institution or other body having care of the person of the child was not actually exercising the custody rights at the time of the removal or retention;
c) there is grave risk that his or her return would expose the child to physical or psychological harm or otherwise place the child in an intolerable situation;
d) the judicial or administrative authority may also refuse to order the return of the child if it finds that the child objects to being returned and has attained an age and degree of maturity at which it is appropriate to take account of his/her views.
Data from other nations' reveal that Canada is not alone in its concern over domestic or international child abductions and the issue of missing children. In Japan, more than 23,000 children under the age of 19 were reported missing in 1995, most between 15 and 19. In Australia there were 469 persons reported abducted or kidnapped in 1995, 54% under the age of 18. In the U.S.A. in 1995, 969,000 missing persons were reported to the Federal Bureau of Investigation's (FBI) National Crime Information Center (NCIC). The FBI estimates that approximately 85% to 90% of these were juveniles.

Canadian police widely make use of the Canadian Police Information Centre (CPIC) computer network to share information with other police agencies within Canada and in the United States. Children reported missing to a police agency are entered into the CPIC system with all pertinent information related to the child, such as name, weight, height, date last seen, date of birth, sex, hair and eye colour, distinguishing marks, etc. CPIC is maintained by the RCMP on behalf of Canadian police agencies.

International cases are brought to the attention of the RCMP Missing Children's Registry, which provides assistance to any law enforcement or searching agency needing assistance in Canada or to Canadian agencies searching for a missing child believed to be outside Canada. Utilizing their contacts with the police community through INTERPOL and through direct contact with other law enforcement agencies and non-governmental agencies around the world, the RCMP is an integral part of the location and recovery process. Their efforts are enhanced by the efforts of other law enforcement agencies such as the United States Border Patrol, United States Customs, the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) and INTERPOL.

Children reported as abducted from the United States, and who are believed to be in Canada or heading towards Canada, are brought to the attention of the RCMP or local police authorities, who take an active role in the investigation. Canada Customs sets up border alerts in an attempt to return the persons being sought. Canada Customs has become an important link in the efforts to locate and recover children being taken out of, or into, Canada. Border points display photographs of missing children in the hope that the child is recognized by a Customs officer or a traveller. Customs has also established International Project Return, which is part of a Joint Forces Operation with the RCMP Missing Children's Registry, Immigration Canada and the Department of Foreign Affairs and International Trade. Since 1986, Customs and Immigration officers have been responsible for returning over 639 missing children, including both those who have been abducted and those who have run away.

What is Being Done To Recover Missing Children

Many agencies, both governmental and non-governmental, are providing material to make the public more aware of the nature of child abductions and what can be done to reduce their incidence. Streetproofing, and making children more aware of the dangers that may be present, are strongly promoted. By understanding the nature of abductions, as well as how they occur and when, the opportunity for abductions to occur should diminish. Child Find Canada and their associated chapters, the Missing Children Society of Canada, the Missing Children’s Network of Canada, Victims of Violence, Operation Go Home and the National Missing Children's Locate Centre are participating private sector agencies that specialize in the location and recovery process through the distribution of photos, counselling for searching parents, public awareness campaigns, and information distribution. In addition, agencies such as the National Center for Missing and Exploited Children (NCMEC) of the United States provide educational material which is useful for parents teaching their children how to protect themselves, and for professionals involved in child abuse and abduction situations.

Both the RCMP and the NCMEC have the capability of developing photo age enhancements to help locate missing children who have aged since they were reported missing. Age enhanced photos are useful to depict what the child may look like after having been missing over time.

The media also helps make the public aware of sensitive issues such as missing children, and often informs the public when a child is missing. The business sector has helped with public awareness by displaying photos on milk cartons and public education promotions by retailers.

The Internet has recently become a medium to promote public awareness, child safety and assistance in the recovery of children. There are a number of World Wide Web (WWW) sites that have been created to promote public awareness of missing children and issues related to the abduction and disappearance of children (Appendix A). Canadian, American and other international sites have been established to provide the public with everything from pictures of missing children and their abductors to information on streetproofing. The Internet has become an important link in the efforts to locate and recover children.

Methodology

Abduction data are provided by the Uniform Crime Reporting (UCR) survey, collected since 1962. Kidnapping data are not included because the aggregate UCR cannot distinguish whether the person kidnapped is a child. The aggregate UCR survey records the number of incidents reported to the police. It includes the number of reported offences and the number of actual offences (excluding those that are unfounded), the number of offences cleared by charge, the number of persons charged by sex and by an adult/youth breakdown. It does not include victim characteristics. Unless otherwise mentioned, analysis in this report is based on aggregate survey counts.

\* Data between Canada and other nations is not comparable. Reporting practices may vary as well as definitions used.
The revised UCR survey (UCR II) captures detailed information on individual criminal incidents reported to police, including characteristics of victims, accused persons and the incident. In 1996, detailed information was collected from 154 departments in six provinces through the revised UCR Survey. These data represent 47% of the national volume of actual Criminal Code crimes. The reader is cautioned that these data are not nationally representative.

Data on missing children under the age of 18 are captured from reported activity of the Canadian Police Information Centre computer (CPIC) network (see Boxes “Missing Children’s Registry” and “Canadian Police Information Centre”). This network counts the number of cases (entries and removals) from the system. It was not designed as a statistical data base but serves as an investigative tool for police. Therefore, although the source of data is the same as the UCR Survey, the reporting of information is for different purposes. Also, the CPIC data provide the probable cause for the child being missing, which may not turn into an offence reported on the UCR survey.

The Adult Criminal Court Survey (ACCS) provides data on persons who have gone through the court system for abduction. The objective of the ACCS is to develop and maintain a national adult court criminal court database of statistical information on appearances, charges, and cases. The survey is intended to be a census of federal and provincial/territorial statute charges and municipal by-law infractions heard in provincial/territorial courts in Canada. The ACCS collects detailed data on completed charges, appearances, and cases for federal statute offences, and aggregate data on completed and pending charges, appearances, and cases for both federal and provincial/territorial statutes and municipal by-laws.

Table 1

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1 Uniform Crime Reporting Survey data include attempted and completed incidents.
2 Each offence is equal to one victim.
**Table 2**

### Provincial/Territorial Abductions\(^1,2\), Number ofOffences and Rate Per 100,000 Under 16 Years of Age, 1983 to 1996

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**Source:** Uniform Crime Reporting Survey, Canadian Centre for Justice Statistics, Statistics Canada.

1. Uniform Crime Reporting Survey data include attempted and completed incidents.
2. Each offence is equal to one victim.

- Figures are too small to be expressed.
Appendix A

Web Sites of Interest

www.statcan.ca
Statistics Canada

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Criminal Justice statistics plus links to USA and international statistics

www.fbi.gov
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References


Canadian Centre for Justice Statistics

For further information, please contact the Canadian Centre for Justice Statistics, 19th floor, R.H. Coats Building, Ottawa, Ontario K1A 0T6 at (613) 951-9023, or call toll-free 1 800 387-2231, or fax (613) 951-6615. To order a publication, you may telephone (613) 951-7277 or fax (613) 951-1584 or internet: order@statcan.ca. You may also call 1 800 267-6677 (Canada and United States) toll-free. If you order by telephone, written confirmation is not required.

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