

The Left-Behind Parents' View of the Parental Abduction Experience

Its Characteristics and Effect on the Canadian Victims

By

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The opinions and findings expressed in this publication are the views of the author and do not necessarily reflect the views of National Missing Children Services, National Police Services, RCMP.

Table of Contents

Acknowledgements	3
Definitions	4
Executive Summary	5
Introduction.....	8
Background	9
Scope of the Problem	10
Canadian National Picture	10
United States National Picture	10
Review of the Literature.....	11
Reasons for Abduction.....	11
Early Identification of Risk Factors for Parental Abduction.....	12
Severe Risk to the Child.....	13
Abuse and neglect factors	14
Characteristics of Abductors	14
Abductors' age and gender.....	16
Type of abductors	16
Abduction occurrence particulars.....	17
Carrying out the abduction.....	17
Abduction Incident Characteristics.....	18
Legal	18
Site of abduction	18
Length of time the child was missing	18
Located where.....	19
Number of children abducted.....	19
Characteristics of Left-behind Parents	20
Child Victim Characteristics	20
Age of child.....	20
Gender of abducted children.....	21
Parental Support	22
Police Response.....	22
International Parental Abduction	24
Financial Concerns and Difficulties.....	25
Effect on the Child	27
Factors Affecting Child's Adjustment Over Time.....	27
Factor 1: The age of the child at the time of the abduction	28
Factor 2: The child's treatment by the abducting parent and others	28
Factor 3: The abduction duration	29
Factor 4: The child's lifestyle during the abduction.....	29
Factor 5: The support and therapy the child receives after recovery	30
Services to Left-behind Parents	30
Purpose of the Study.....	31

Methodology	31
Sample Selection.....	31
Limitations.....	32
Gathering Data.....	32
Analysis	33
Family Situation at the Time of Abduction	33
Child Victim Characteristics	33
Left-behind Parent Characteristics.....	34
Characteristics of Abductors	34
Abduction Incident Characteristics.....	34
Legal characteristics.....	34
Abduction occurrence	35
Length the time the child was missing	35
Length of time from recovery to return	36
Media.....	36
Location characteristics	36
Reunification Characteristics.....	37
Frustrations with Recovery.....	38
Satisfaction with the Related Services.....	39
Financial Cost to the Left-Behind Parent.....	40
Search and recovery cost.....	40
Communication cost.....	41
Translation cost	41
Loss of income	41
Private investigators	41
Travel	42
Accommodation and meals.....	42
Other costs	42
Financial Support Services	42
Impact on the Child	43
Types of harm.....	43
Behaviour and personality changes	44
Lifestyle change	45
Child adjustment services	45
Discussion	46
Conclusion.....	51
Appendix 1—Perceptions of Harm Suffered by the Child	52
Appendix 2—Perceptions of the Child’s Adjustment.....	54
Appendix 3—Current Status of the Child’s Adjustment	55
Appendix 4—Selection Criteria.....	56
Bibliography.....	57

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Definitions

Parental abduction is the wilful taking of a child with the intent of depriving the other parent, guardian or any other person having lawful care and charge of that child of the possession of that child.

Searching parent or left-behind parent (victim) is the person from whom the child was taken, whether or not this person has legal custody of the child.

Abductor is the person taking the child with the intent to deprive the other parent or legal guardian of the child.

Child victim is the child taken by a parent or legal guardian, most often with no regard for the child's rights and the laws of Canada.

Executive Summary

The purpose of this descriptive study was to determine the characteristics of parental abductions, including the financial difficulties experienced by the searching parent and the trauma experienced by the abducted child.

Since both the study about left-behind parents, and about abducted children, involved the same sample group, it was decided the best approach was to gather this information from both groups in the same questionnaire.

The study was limited to left-behind parents who contacted not-for-profit agencies for help finding their missing children. The not-for-profit agencies whose clients participated were Child Find Canada provincial offices, the Missing Children's Network of Canada and the Missing Children Society of Canada.

In most cases, the questionnaire was limited to information about one child in a family who went missing, except for factors like the age of the child. In seven cases, more than one child went missing. Forty-eight questionnaires were sent out and 19 returned. The number of children abducted was 28.

This study found that over half the couples were separated or divorced when the child was abducted. Prior to the abduction, over half the child victims had a much better relationship with the abductor than did the left-behind parent, who rated their relationship as *poor*.

All the children in this study were living in Canada at the time of the abduction, but 63 per cent were taken outside Canada. More children were located in the United States than other countries. Over half of the left-behind parents' reported there was a known reason or connection to the place where the child was eventually located. Furthermore, an abduction act is not usually an impulsive act but a premeditated type conspiracy. Most abductors work alone during the actual "snatching" but after the event has happened they receive help from family, friends and relatives.

At the time of the abduction, 75 per cent of the left-behind parents had a custody order. Over half the left-behind parents made a Hague application for the return of their children to Canada and found this process useful. Five of the 12 abductors who fled to another country were extradited back to Canada.

This study showed that Canadian law enforcement took a longer period of time than law enforcement in other countries to find the missing child (Chiancone et al, 2001 and Kochan, 2003). Fifty-three per cent of the Canadian children were found in less than one year, while it took more than 1 ½ years to locate the other 47 per cent. Other researchers reported that most of the children were recovered in a few months.

After the child was located, the reunification with the left-behind parents in this study took place in several informal and formal settings, from coffee houses to child protection services facilities. Most parents were satisfied with the way the reunification was handled. A few were unsatisfied, because, for example, their child witnessed the authorities handcuffing and arresting the abductor.

Parents most often used police, legal and not-for-profit agency services. About fifty per cent of the left-behind parents were satisfied with the police and legal services help. Almost all (94%) were satisfied with the help they received from the not-for-profit searching agencies.

The effect on the left-behind parents varied considerably, but several studies—including this study—supported the premise that the parents were afraid they would never see their child again.

As has been found in this study and other research studies, the left-behind parent was better educated than the abductor. Most finished college or university. Their economic status was also better. About one-third were making under \$25,000, and over half between \$25,000 and \$60,000 annually. Over three-quarters were employed at the time of abduction.

Most of the abductors had an annual income of less than \$25,000. One-quarter had a previous criminal record. Over half of the abducting fathers had a college or university education; abducting mothers had less education. Only half the abducting parents were employed at the time of abduction. They worked at jobs that made it easy to find employment in other places. In this study, the abductors seem to be better educated, compared to the findings of other studies.

The findings of this study showed that by far the most extensive costs were legal fees. The average was \$16,250 with a range of \$4,000 to \$50,000. Canadian parents, whose children were abducted and transported to another country, paid a higher price. Consequently, some left-behind parents accumulated a debt load that was not proportional to their income. The left-behind parents in this study spent an average of about \$34,000 in Canadian funds overall. This figure includes the costs of search and recovery; communication; translation; loss of income; travel; accommodation and meals; medical; follow-up services; and, private investigators.

The nature, scope and effects of abduction on abducted children are difficult to qualify. Most left-behind parents reported their children showed some behavioural and personality changes, usually manifested physically and emotionally. This research was able to identify some changes, but the survey instrument was not rigorous enough to report these differences as significant and representative.

As a result of being abducted, all the left-behind parents felt their child experienced emotional harm, followed by some verbal and physical harm. Parents qualified these types of harm by describing some facts from the abduction situation: the child was forced to cross-dress to hide his or her identity; the child was told the other parent

did not love them anymore, or was dead; the child lived like a fugitive; and, changed their identity to escape from authorities.

After the child victims returned home, there were some observable changes, including nightmares, sleeplessness, lack of concentration and difficulty making friends. They also displayed some insecurity, anxiousness and fear.

In essence, those family members, who are touched by the circumstances surrounding an abduction incident, find it very stressful, costly, and frustrating. Furthermore, even though the police response to an abduction report has improved over the last decade, the extent of the risks must be understood more fully. The familiar phrase “the child is with the parent so there is no need to worry” is outdated and unrepresentative. There are victims and the risk is present.

Researchers have made some gains in qualifying this risk but more has to be done – especially research involving the long-term consequences of abduction.

Introduction

Parental abduction is more common than stranger abduction. However, the two types differ in that a child abducted by a stranger is in serious danger of assault and even murder, whereas the abducting parent for the most part has the best interest of the child in mind.

However, in many ways parentally abducted children are harmed emotionally. They are victims of a torn relationship. They are forced to leave their family and friends. They are removed from familiar surroundings. On occasion, they live the life of a fugitive, moving from place to place to escape authorities. In these situations, normal relationships are difficult to develop and sustain. Furthermore, when the child is told that the left-behind parent does not want him or her anymore or has died, the child feels betrayed.

Young children adapt to the new situation fairly readily, but older children may think they have caused the abduction. They may blame themselves and feel guilty for not telling someone. As well, they may be torn between the duty to protect the abducting parent's location and their need to communicate with the left-behind parent.

One of the prime reasons for abductions is the failure of an adult relationship. Most research findings agree that the parents lack the skills to resolve their differences amicably. Another powerful abduction motivator is the compulsion for revenge on the other estranged parent.

The primary abductors are parents—the father or the mother or the legal guardian of the child. In some cases, parents jointly abduct their own children. This type of abduction may occur when the child has been removed from the custody of the parents or there are threats by authorities to change a custody order.

The length of a parental abduction episode can last from several days to many years. On rare occasions, the abducting parent murders his/her child.

Upon reunification with the left-behind parent, the child may fear re-abduction so the relationship with the abductor is strained. Abducted children also develop a lack of trust toward others, which may affect their relationship with the custodial parent. In essence, it takes considerable time for the reunited child to trust others and feel comfortable with the new custody arrangements.

Background

National Missing Children Services (NMCS), National Police Services, Royal Canadian Mounted Police, has a two-fold mandate: operational support, and research and program development.

The operational mandate includes assisting Canadian and international law enforcement agencies with missing children cases. The research and program development mandate includes conducting original research studies to learn more about the issue; to assist law enforcement and other searching agencies find children; and, understand the implications of the episode.

In 2003, following a general meeting of the not-for-profit agencies, an International Parental Child Abduction Working Group (IPCAWG) was formed. The Group was composed of representatives from several not-for-profit missing children searching agencies; from governmental departments who deal with the issue; and, from the NMCS research and development program.

The primary function of the IPCAWG is to review and, if necessary, take action on recommendations stemming from the research findings, including financial recommendations. The Working Group recognizes that it is very expensive for a left-behind parent to travel to the child's location, attend court proceedings and, if successful, return home with the child.

During meeting discussions, a number of issues were identified relating to the financial burden on parents. Consequently, the IPCAWG agreed that it was necessary to determine more specifically the nature and scope of the problem and come up with some solid facts. The Group decided that a survey was necessary to provide a more in-depth picture of the situation.

This survey was financially supported by NMCS. Its purpose was to learn more about the abductor and the victims—the left-behind parent and child or children. Extensive questionnaires were developed to gather as much information as possible.

The agencies who agreed to contact their clients and request their participation were as follows: The Missing Children Society of Canada; Child Find Canada's provincial offices; and The Missing Children's Network Canada.

In 1993, NMCS (Swaren and Dalley, Ontario, 1993) conducted a parental abduction study to determine the abductors' characteristics, and the psychological effect on the child. The study findings varied regarding the extent of the trauma to the child and the length of recovery.

The intent of this study is to verify and build upon these previous findings.

Scope of the Problem

Canada's National Picture

NMCS collects data on missing children generated by the Canadian Police Information Centre (CPIC) system. CPIC houses the national database on missing children as well as other valuable information.

Created in 1966, CPIC provides all Canadian law enforcement agencies with information on crimes and criminals. CPIC entries are only made and added to the system by accredited Canadian police agencies.

In 2005, the number of missing children reports decreased to 66,548 from 67,266 in 2004. "Runaway" reports comprise the majority of missing children cases (51,280), followed by "unknown" cases (12,079).

Parental abductions comprised about half of one per cent of the cases. Although the number of reports in 2004 was the lowest since the program began in 1986, it rose slightly in 2005. In the period, 1986 to 2005, the rate of parental abduction reports per 100,000 children in the population decreased. However, there is no official recording of attempted abductions.

Although these CPIC reports help create a national perspective on the number of parental abductions, the exact number is not known. Some cases are processed through the civil courts and these cases may or may not be reported to police agencies. The left-behind parent who makes a police report is most likely prepared to charge the abductor, which could result in a sentence of up to 10 years in prison.

In 2005, NMCS assisted police agencies with parental abduction investigations involving 127 Canadian cases, 174 United States cases and 82 cases from other countries.

United States National Picture

There are several sources of information used by authorities to show the number of United States parental abduction reports.

The 1988 National Incidence studies on Missing, Abducted, Runaway, and Thrownaway Children in America (NISMART), (Finkelhor, Hotaling and Sedlak, 1990) produced nationwide estimates of the number of family abductions of both domestic and international destinations.

NISMART researchers estimated that 354,100 children experienced a "broad-scope" family abduction. Out of the "policy-focal" cases fitting within the "broad scope" definition but characterized by at least one of the following - concealment, out-of-state transportation, and evidence that the abductor intended to keep the child

indefinitely or permanently - the estimated number was 163,200 cases (Grasso et al, 2001, p.3).

The NISMART-2 study, which spanned the years 1997 to 1999, with most cases concentrated in 1999, showed that parental abductions accounted for an estimated seven per cent or 56,500 reports of 797,500 missing children reports.

In comparison, since 2000 the average number of parental abduction reported to Canadian police agencies was 371, about half of one per cent of the missing cases.

Review of the Literature

Reasons for Abduction

Parental abduction usually occurs during periods of separation and divorce. This action has been attributed to the uncertainties surrounding court proceedings and child custody disputes. Several years after a divorce, there is a possibility of a reoccurrence, consequently plaguing the custodial parent for a number of years, if not a lifetime.

Parents abduct a child or children for a variety of reasons. Revenge is one of the most powerful motivators. The abduction may be triggered by:

- family stress;
- marital separation;
- relationship problems;
- power struggles between parents;
- custody order disagreements; or
- physical, sexual, verbal and emotional abuse.

As well, a spouse may want to blame, punish and spite the other parent or try to force the partner to reconcile. Characteristically, they make abduction threats with the hope that the other parent will reconsider the situation and possibly return to the relationship.

Some parents even engage in a power struggle, characterized by multiple abductions (Swaren and Dalley, 1994; Dalley, 2004 Reference Report).

Johnston (1994) findings showed that the act of abduction was an attempt to “rescue” the child from the other parent.

Research conducted by Reunite, a United Kingdom not-for-profit organization, (Freeman, 2003) identified the following reasons why abductors take their child:

- to have a better life;

- to escape the abuse inflicted on the child and/or parent by the left-behind parent;
- to protect the child from maltreatment and sexual abuse;
- to attend more fully to the child's needs;
- to improve their quality of life following a marriage breakup; and
- to avoid feelings of fear, unhappiness and desperation.

In summary, the author stated:

... the reasons are unsurprising. They reflect the emotions routinely experienced in the breakdown of relationships to which abduction is merely an extension" (p.25).¹

Early Identification of Risk Factors for Parental Abduction

In 2001, Johnston, Sagatun-Edwards, Blomquist and Girdner, supported by the United States Department of Justice, developed several profiles of parents at-risk of abducting their children. The profiles are:

Profile 1: There was a **prior threat** of, or an actual abduction.

Profile 2: The parent suspected or believed **abuse** had occurred and friends and family members supported these concerns.

Profile 3: The parent was **paranoid delusional**. These parents held markedly irrational or psychotic delusions.

Profile 4: The parent was a severe **sociopath**.

Profile 5: The parent, who was **citizen of another country**, terminated a mixed-cultural marriage.

Profile 6: The **parent felt alienated from the legal system** and had family and social support in another community.

Greif and Hegar (1993) reported that in over half of the marriages in which an abduction incident occurred, there was parent-to-parent domestic violence. They also showed that about one-third of the left-behind parents either admitted to, or were accused of, violence toward other family members.

In 1997, Plass, Finkelhor and Hotaling's national study revealed some interesting findings. When dissension occurred in families with white children, younger

¹ Freeman, M. (2003). *The Outcomes for Children Returned Following an Abduction*, London, U.K.: Reunite, International Child Abduction Centre Research Unit, The Foreign and Commonwealth Office, September, p.25.

children (under the age of five years), and a history of violence between adults in the household, there was a greater risk of parental abduction.

Shetty and Edleson (2005) found in their study that adult domestic violence was present both in cases of international parental abduction and in cases when battered mothers contested decisions forcing their child to return to an abusive partner.

Finkelhor, Hotaling and Sedlak (1990) reported that in cases where the abducting parent violated the existing custody order, 40 per cent of the abductions took place more than two years after the divorce and 10 per cent four years afterward.

Severe Risk to the Child

Most often, the abducting parent has the best interest of the child in mind, be it real or perceived, and will go to any length to protect the child. Nonetheless, on rare occasions the abducting parent might severely harm or kill the child to get revenge on the other parent.

Dalley (2000) conducted an analysis of all Canadian parents who killed their children over a two-year period to find out if a custody dispute might provoke murder. The researcher found that in five per cent of the cases a custody dispute was ongoing at the time of the killings. Additionally, the findings showed that 23 per cent of the killing incidents were influenced by divorce and separation stressors and mental instability.

The findings from an Australian study by Strang (1996) showed that 35 per cent of the cases of children killed by their parents resulted from a family dispute. The researcher also reported that fundamental structural changes in society, such as the ease of marriage breakup, could result in a rise in killings. She also concluded that failed or failing marriages were characterized by rage, depression and various other psychosocial stressors which could lead to adverse actions.

Bourget and Bradford (1990) also identified several stressors that could prompt parents to abduct and severely harm their child. These include: family discord; unwanted or difficult pregnancies; caring for a disabled or mentally challenged child; financial problems; and, difficult child behaviour.

The National Centre for Missing and Exploited Children's parental abduction study, which involved a large sample—1000 abductors—did not specifically study harm to the child. However, the researcher, Kochan (2003), reported that two children were killed by their abducting father and one child was abducted and killed by a schizophrenic aunt and uncle.

Concrete research findings are sparse with regard to violence and abuse. However, Klain's (1995) study involving parentally abducted children concluded that 30 per cent of the cases involved allegations of both abuse and domestic violence.

Johnston's (1994) study found that the level of domestic violence was not significantly different for families involved in parental abduction than it was for those families involved in contentious levels of custody litigation.

Abuse and neglect factors

Child neglect, physical, sexual, and emotional abuse is discussed by many researchers and most tend to provide some significant findings to substantiate emotional abuse. However, support for physical and sexual abuse is less likely from research studies.

A U.S. state-wide study by Johnston, Girdner, and Sagatun (1999) showed that litigating and abducting families made allegations at higher rates than did mediating families. Compared to litigating families, rates of inter-parental allegations in abducting families were higher for all categories; that is, child neglect, child physical abuse, child sexual abuse, substance abuse, prior child stealing and criminal activity. The exception was family violence. Referring to the differences, Johnston et al stated:

There was some indication that parents, especially women, in abducting families had more negative attitudes toward one another, and they tended to be more dissatisfied with the custody and visitation plans. Female abductors were more likely to fear child abuse and neglect by their ex-partner, and they expressed more distress about their economics and housing compared to male abductors (p. 312).²

Both parents shared elevated levels of anger with, and distrust of, one another and showed an inability to co-operate on matters of child care. Most alleged domestic violence. Furthermore, they showed elevated levels of psychological distress and other symptoms as compared to the general population. Abducting parents showed heightened concern about child abuse and neglect levels.

Canadian studies (Ontario) by Swaren and Dalley (1993) and Kiedrowski, Jayewardene and Dalley (1994) found no clear evidence that abuse was a factor in the abduction.

Characteristics of Abductors

Abductors differ in terms of background, citizenship and education. An Ontario research study (Swaren and Dalley, 1993) involving 16 left-behind Canadian parents found that:

- The abductors were mostly males, in their 30s
- They tended to lack interpersonal skills.

² Johnston, J.R., Girdner, L., & Sagatun-Edwards, I. (1999). "Developing Profiles of Risk for Parental Abduction of Children from a Comparison of Families Victimized by Abduction with Litigating Custody," *Behavioral Science and Law*, 17, p. 312.

- They earned less than \$24,000 yearly.
- Most were unskilled or labourers. These transferable skills made it more difficult for authorities to detect, locate and apprehend abductors.
- Fifty per cent had graduated from high school and 13 per cent from college or university.
- Most did not have a previous criminal record prior to the abduction.
- The abductor was involved in a premeditated conspiracy and did not act impulsively.
- The left-behind parent did not notice any changes in the child's behaviour or learn of any pre-arranged plans to leave town or the country before the abduction

To date, these findings are quite consistent with other, international research studies, except that Canadian abductors tended to have higher levels of education and most did not have a previous criminal record.

The following abductor attributes were developed by Kiedrowski, Jayewardene, and Dalley (1994):

- The abducting parent tended not to use physical force.
- Both separated mothers and fathers were likely to abduct their own child.
- Mothers tended to abduct their child after a court order; fathers tended to abduct before a court order was issued.
- An abductor often told the child that the other parent was dead or did not want to see him or her anymore; this approach was intended to distort the child's impression and memories of the searching parent.

Johnston, Girdner, and Sagatun (1999) in a state-wide study concluded that abducting families were predominantly of low socio-economic status. Abducting women:

- were more likely to be unemployed;
- had low incomes;
- had fewer occupational skills; and,
- were poorly educated.

Many did not have the financial resources to afford the legal counsel that was necessary to help them through the separation and divorce process.

Additionally, these unemployed individuals had portable job skills that enabled them to move undetected from one geographical area to another, which made it more difficult for authorities to track and find them.

Chiancone, Girdner and Hoff (2001), in a United States study on international parental abductions, showed that abductors and left-behind parents often varied in background, citizenship and education. Most were of different nationality, ethnicity and religion. Sixty-two per cent of the abductors were citizens of another country, whereas 23 cent held U.S. citizenship and about 15 per cent held dual citizenship. One half had completed high school, its equivalency, or some college credits.

Also, the economic status of the abductor was lower—almost three-fourths earned less than \$25,000 a year, approximately 35 per cent less than \$15,000 and 20 per cent had no income. Far fewer abductors than left-behind parents were employed at the time of the abduction.

Abductors' age and gender

A Canadian (Ontario) study showed that the abductors were mostly males in their mid-30s. (Swaren and Dalley, 1993).

Finkelhor, Hotaling and Sedlak (1990), United States researchers, stated that both the abductor and the left-behind parent tended to be around the age of 30 years.

Type of abductors

In 2005, NMCS assisted with Canadian law enforcement cases in which more mothers abducted their children than fathers (Dalley, reference report of 2005). Furthermore, mothers who abducted tended to keep their children for longer periods than fathers (Swaren and Dalley, 1993).

The United Kingdom Reunite study results showed that more mothers than fathers were abductors (Freeman, 2003).

Kochan (2003), in a U.S. National Centre for Missing and Exploited Children Centre parental abduction study involving a sample of 1,000 abductors, found that mothers carried out the highest number of parental abductions.

The United States NISMART study found a higher frequency of males abducting, with husbands and boyfriends comprising the largest group, followed by current husbands and boyfriends (Finkelhor, Hotaling and Sedlak, 1990).

Chiancone, Girdner, and Hoff (2001), in a U.S. study, which looked specifically at international abductions, found that mothers and fathers were equally likely to abduct their children.

Most researchers agree that both mothers and fathers are likely to abduct their children, and sometimes together. As well, mothers and fathers are equally likely to abduct their children to other countries, especially to their country of origin, where they can get help from authorities, their families and friends (Dalley, 2001 Reference Report).

A Canadian example explains the phenomenon of both parents abducting their child, On a cold winter day, a newborn baby was abducted from a hospital by his parents. The baby was hidden in a duffel bag. The parents abducted their baby because they

were afraid social services would take custody. Shortly after the authorities began searching, the father returned the baby. Consequently, the parents were charged with child endangerment.

Abduction occurrence particulars

Kiedrowski, Jayewardene, and Dalley (1994) in a literature review and related findings from an analysis of a small sample of Canadian left-behind parents in Ontario, concluded that children tend to be abducted on weekends, in summer and on winter holidays—periods when children were not attending school.

The Canadian Police Information Centre (CPIC) system records the number of reports made to police agencies yearly. In 2001, there were 387 reports of parental abduction. More reports were made in February, March, August and October. This finding corresponds with other findings (Dalley, Reference Report 2001).

Kochan (2003), in an analysis of U.S. family abduction episodes, found that most—33 per cent of the abductions examined — took place in June, July and August. She also found that fathers abducted at a high rate in January.

Carrying out the abduction

A United States analysis of approximately 1,000 National Centre for Missing and Exploited Children Centre parental abduction cases showed that most abducting mothers and fathers abducted alone. A low percentage abducted with associates (Kochan, 2003).

Similarly, the results of a Canadian (Ontario) study showed that most abductors worked alone during the actual child “snatching,” but after the event they received help from relatives and friends. As well, their place of hiding was usually known to someone. The study also revealed that the searching parent believed that the abductor’s family was involved at some stage (Swaren and Dalley, 1993; Kiedrowski, Jayewardene, and Dalley, 1994).

Janvier, McCormick and Donaldson (1990) reported that accomplices were involved in 84 per cent of domestic and 76 per cent of international kidnappings.

Considering international abductions, Hegar and Greif (1991) and Greif and Hegar (1993) suggested that family members and friends in the abducting parent’s originating country assisted to some degree with the child’s concealment.

Chiancone, Girdner and Hoff (2001), in a U.S. study of parental abduction, reported that most abductors had a connection—spoke the language, had family living there, or grew up in the country—to the country where the child was located. About one-third had employment or business interests in the destination country. Eighty per cent of the left-behind parents believed the abductor received assistance from family members in the actual abduction or in making it successful. Some respondents provided evidence that the abduction was premeditated rather than a spur-of-the-moment act.

Johnson and Girdner's (2001) study found that the abducting parents believe they knew what was best for their child and did not consider their actions wrong. As well, the abductor was likely to have emotional, moral and other types of support needed to perform the act

Abduction Incident Characteristics

Legal

In 2005, there were 349 Canadian parental abduction incidents reported to Canadian police agencies; 157 of the parents had a custody order and 192 did not. Parents without a custody order abducted most often (Dalley, Reference Report 2005).

Freeman (2003), researching for Reunite in the U.K., reported that in most cases – 22 cases involving 33 children - there was no judicial pronouncement about custody at the time of abduction. The left-behind parent was legally represented in 95 per cent of the cases and the abductor in 81 per cent of the cases.

Research by Kiedrowski, Jayewardene and Dalley (1994), and MacDonald (1998) showed that mothers tend to abduct after a court order is issued, but fathers tend to abduct before a court order is issued.

Site of abduction

Kiedrowski, Jayewardene, and Dalley (1994) found that Canadian children were most likely to be abducted from their homes and less likely to be taken from school or another person's home.

The Canadian Police Information Centre (CPIC) system showed that in 2005, of 349 parental abduction reports, most of the children were reported as missing from their home.

A U.S. study involving a sample of about 1,000 cases showed that 73 per cent of the children were taken from their home (Kochan, 2003).

Length of time the child was missing

Unfortunately, few Canadian studies definitively report the length of time the child was missing. A Canadian (Ontario) parental abduction study involving interviews with 16 left-behind parents showed that one third of the children were missing for less than a month (Swaren and Dalley, 1994).

A U.S. national household study found that four out of five abductions lasted less than a week (Finkelhor, Hotaling and Sedlak, 1990).

Analysis by the U.S. National Centre for Missing and Exploited Children shows that at the end of one week, 35 per cent of the abducted children had been recovered and in one month most had been recovered. Ninety-one per cent of domestic family-abduction episodes were resolved within one year. In nine per cent of the cases, it took from more than one year to more than 15 years to close the missing file.

Mother abductor episodes lasted longer than father episodes. Children in the five-to-10 age range were abducted for the longest periods. Older children were missing for shorter periods than younger children. The average time missing for infants and children up to 10 years of age was about five months (Kochan, 2003).

Freeman's (2003) study broke down the average length of time a child was missing as follows:

- birth to five years old, 19 weeks;
- five to 10 years old, 22 weeks; and
- more than 10 years old, 10 weeks.

A Canadian (Ontario) parental abduction study showed that abducting-mother episodes tended to be longer than father episodes (Swaren and Dalley, 1993). Similarly, a United States study (Kochan, 2003) showed that mother-abductor episodes lasted longer than father episodes.

Located where

Kochan (2003) compared the distances from the place where the child was taken to the place where the child was found, using about 1,000 U. S. ZIP postal codes. One-quarter of the incidents began and ended in the same ZIP postal code areas. Children abducted by mothers travelled further than fathers. Less than half of the abductors stayed in the same state as the child's home.

A United Kingdom study yielded similar findings: abducting mothers returned with their children to their habitual residence (Freeman, 2003).

When examining the places where children were found, Grief and Hegar (1993) reported that 75 per cent of foreign-born abductors, who left the United States, returned to their countries of origin.

Chiancone, Girdner and Hoff (2001) in a U. S. international parental abduction study, showed that mothers and fathers were equally likely to abduct their children to another country. Mothers were more likely to take their children to Latin America, and fathers were more likely to take their children to the Middle East. Europe was a common destination for both mothers and fathers.

Number of children abducted

Kochan (2003) found that 72 per cent, of domestic-abduction episodes involved the abduction of one child.

Chiancone, Girdner and Hoff (2001), in a study of international parental abduction, found that the number of children taken in a single abduction incident ranged from one to three. However, in 70 per cent of the cases, only one child was taken.

Characteristics of Left-behind Parents

Very few studies address the impact of the abduction on the parents. Studies in the early 90s showed that parents suffered from impaired sleeping patterns, anxiety, despair, defeat and helplessness. Some encountered feelings of loss; rage; impaired sleep; nightmares; loneliness; guilt; fearfulness; loss of appetite and severe depression. A few studies pointed out that the left-behind parent found it difficult to search for the child and maintain work commitments (Kiedrowski, Jayewardene, and Dalley, 1994).

Chiancone, Girdner and Hoff (2001), in a study of international parental abduction, showed that the left-behind parents had more education than the abductors and that their economic status was generally better at the time of the abduction. The left-behind parents' income was distributed relatively evenly across the income range, although most had incomes under \$35,000. Nearly three times as many left-behind parents as abductors had incomes of \$55,000 or more. More left-behind than abducting parents were employed full-time.

Spilman (2006) compared parents in non-family abduction and family abductions and found that parents in family abductions had higher levels of stress in the 12-months before the abduction. However, the statistical values were not significantly different from parents of non-family abducted children. As well, across both parental and stranger abductions, parents with high levels of stress prior to the incident had high levels of distress following the abduction. Both groups experienced interpersonal sensitivity and depression after their child was abducted.

One of the few studies (Greif, 2000) targeting the long-term consequences of parental abduction on victims showed that 70 per cent of the parents were concerned that their child may turn out like the abductor and were troubled by the direction their child's life was taking.

Also, about 10 years after the abduction, 40 per cent of parents experienced rage and a desire for revenge on the other parent. Additionally, 42 per cent of the child victims were still having problems after many years had passed.

Child Victim Characteristics

The child is always a victim in these situations. The child is affected by family discord, the separation from the other parent, familiar persons and surroundings, and as well, forced to deal with the uncertainties surrounding a new lifestyle. Often the child lives the life of a fugitive, moving from one place to another to avoid authorities.

Age of child

The abduction of very young children presents some problems for the abductor as the care and supervision of a preschool child is more involved than care and supervision of an older child. Young children require more individual attention and care, such as bottle feeding, changing diapers, changing clothes, and moving about a

lot. They cry and show signs of displeasure and attract the attention of authorities as they travel from place to place. Johnson and Girdner (2001), and Kiedrowski, Jayewardene and Dalley (1994) noted that younger children were less likely *to make a scene* when taken involuntarily.

Older children were victims as well. However, the older the child, the more difficult it was for the parent to convince the child to leave home without telling someone else, or for the abductor to physically take, hide or conceal the child from the left-behind parent and the authorities. It has been postulated by many researchers that the majority of older children would most likely try to contact a friend, the left-behind parent, or a close relative, such as a grandparent, as soon as they had an opportunity.

On the other hand, some children might delay making contact with significant others if they were told the other parent was dead or did not want to hear from or see them again. In time, they might be curious and want to know more about the other parent and why they were abandoned.

Early parental abduction studies showed that children between the ages of three and five were most likely to be abducted (Agopian, 1981).

Finkelhor, Hotaling and Sedlak (1990) found that more than half of the abducted children were under the age of eight and about a quarter under the age of four.

Johnston, Girdner, and Sagatun-Edwards (1999), comparing litigating and abducting families, found that more preschoolers—three years-old or younger—were abducted. The average abducting age for litigating families was about seven years.

Kochan (2003) found children ages three to five years were most often abducted. For domestic abductions only, most children were five years-old or under.

Chiancone, Girdner and Hoff (2001), in a study on international parental abductions showed that abducted children tended to be very young. The mean age was five years.

Two U. K. researchers had differing results. Newiss and Fairbrother (2004) showed the average age of the victims was six years. Freeman (2003) showed that more than half the children studied were less than five years of age.

A Canadian provincial study found that the majority of abducted children were between the ages of five months and 11 years, with an average age of four years (Kiedrowski, Jayewardene, and Dalley, 1994).

Gender of abducted children

Analysis of Canada's National Missing Children Services cases concluded that boys and girls are equally likely to be abducted by a parent. However, investigative assistance is requested for slightly more missing girls.

In 2005, the Canadian national missing children reference report showed there were 349 parental abductions: 173 abductions were girls and 176 were boys. Over a two-year period this finding was consistent. However, in 2000, more boys than girls were abducted and in 2001 and 2003, more girls than boys were abducted (Dalley, 2000 to 2005 Reference Reports).

In Ontario, a parental abduction study showed that marginally more females than males were abducted (Swaren and Dalley, 1993; Kiedrowski, Jayewardene, and Dalley, 1994) .

A United States study by Kochan (2003) found that half the abduction victims were boys and half girls, as did the study on international abductions by Chianone, Girdner and Hoff (2001).

A United Kingdom study found that slightly more boys than girls were abducted, (Freeman, 2003).

In spite of these anomalies, most studies show that gender does not seem to be a factor in a domestic or international parental abduction.

Parental Support

Researchers have very little information about parents' coping abilities before, during and after the abduction. Spilman (2006), in comparing stranger and parental abduction research, stated that all parents experience some emotional change after an incident. However, not all parents experience distress about the incident.

Following an abducted child's recovery, the support of friends helped mitigate the effect of the event on the parents' psychological well-being. Also, this research found that police support was particularly beneficial to the fathers of abducted children. On the other hand, family and attorney support seemed to increase the respondent's level of anxiety. In retrospect, legal and financial help is not the same type of emotional support that one receives from friends. The researcher explained the frustration in these words.

Perhaps parents feel judged for their role in the incident, or they may feel their relatives and attorneys do not understand or accept their feelings and behaviours that stem from the abduction incident. ³

Police Response

Police officials and left-behind parents differ in their opinion as to how they should respond to parental abduction incident reports.

³ Spilman, Sarah (2006). Child Abduction, Parents' Distress, and Social Support. *Violence and Victims*, Volume 21, Number 2, April 2006, pp. 160 and 161.

It is a common belief that police officers do not pursue some cases as aggressively as they should because there is a wide-spread opinion that there is no need to worry—the abductor is the parent and has the child’s best interest in mind. Some police officers firmly believe the child is not in any danger while in the company of the other parent and that some parents actually exaggerate the seriousness of the incident to promote their custody case in court.

Police officials may stall somewhat in accepting a report or acting upon it. Some officers even advise left-behind parents that abduction is a civil matter and should be pursued as such. However, the child may be at risk of harm if the abducting parent is characterized by any of the following factors: violent; an abuser; feels trapped after the abduction episode; or fears apprehension by the police.

On the other hand, the left-behind parent views the situation as critical, fears for the child’s safety, and worries that the child may be transported out of the country. This worry is not unfounded as some children remain missing their whole childhood.

If the child is abducted from Canada to a non-signatory state, there is an added risk. In these incidents, the left-behind parent does not have recourse to the remedies of the *Hague Convention on the Civil Aspects of International Child Abduction*. Generally, such cases must be pursued in a foreign country’s courts with assistance from Canadian consular officials in that country. Canadian officials describe this contact as one of last resort, because, by the time the consular office is contacted, the abductor has already successfully crossed international borders with the child.

Police officials must also be cognizant of the fact that revenge is a powerful abduction motivator. If the anger and “getting even” escalates, the child could be in serious danger of harm or, on occasion, death. Since family disputes and discord have been identified by several researchers as a factor inciting a parent to kill his or her child, police must carefully weigh the risk to the child before waiting several hours to take a missing child report.

In 1995, Plass, Finkelhor and Hotaling found that 62 per cent of the parents were somewhat or very dissatisfied with police handling of their cases.

An Ontario study involving 16 left-behind parents found that 56 per cent were unsatisfied or very unsatisfied and 38 per cent were satisfied or very satisfied with the police response (Swaren and Dalley, 1993; Kiedrowski, Jayewardene, and Dalley, 1994, *Police and Parental Abduction*).

From their study findings, Chiancone, Girdner and Hoff (2001) made the following statement about the U. S. law enforcement response to parental abduction reports.

Unfortunately, parental abduction is still widely regarded as a private family matter. One-third of the parents reported that law enforcement officials would not

take the information they submitted about their cases, mainly because the officials saw the abduction as a domestic situation. ⁴

Their research findings also gave law enforcement mixed reviews. Two-thirds reported that the initial response to their case was inadequate. These delays often resulted in the abductor fleeing the country, making the search for the missing child very difficult for authorities. Additionally, in cases where the country was not a signatory to the *Hague Convention on the Civil Aspects of International Child Abduction*, finding and legally returning the child to the country of origin was compromised.

As well, they found that many United States law enforcement agencies were uninformed regarding some of their principal legal obligations, especially the federal legislation that mandates police officials to enter the child in the National Crime Information Center (NCIC) database as missing.

Plass, Finkelhor and Hotaling (1995) had mixed views about police involvement in parental abduction cases. One view was that police intervention hastens the recovery and minimizes the impact on families. Another view centres on the idea that police complicate efforts to reunite parents with their children. Police involvement tends to make the abductor more aware of the consequences of their act, which often results in more aggressive responses.

Plass, Finkelhor and Hotaling implied that the likelihood of harm to the child increases with police intervention, as without police intervention the abductor might give up more readily.

Since parental abduction is a serious crime in Canada, it is anticipated that the parents who report the abduction to police fear for the child's safety and have determined that the only appropriate action is to charge the abductor with the crime.

Plass and her colleagues pointed out that evaluating the harm is difficult as harm is entangled with other factors affecting the analysis (Plass, Finkelhor and Hotaling, 1997). Therefore, no solid conclusions were drawn. However, their findings are food for thought in developing an appropriate police response with the protection of children from harm at the forefront.

International Parental Abduction

Some of the most difficult challenges parent's encounter during a parental abduction episode is the emotional, legal and financial difficulties. These hardships are compounded when the child is taken to another country. If the country has signed the *Hague Convention on the Civil Aspects of International Child Abduction*, the

⁴ Chianone, J. L., Girdner, L., and Hoff, P. (2001). *Issues in Resolving Cases of International Child Abduction by Parents*. Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Justice, Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention, December issue, p.6.

return is more probable. However, if not, the search, recovery and return process can be difficult to impossible.

In 1983, the Hague Convention came into force and continues to be the only multilateral instrument providing assistance to parents dealing with cross-border abductions. It is based on the principle that it is in the best interest of the child to be promptly returned to his or her state of habitual residence.

In Canada, the provinces and territories have jurisdiction over child custody matters and therefore, the provincial central authority is responsible for administration and enforcement of the Convention.

Financial Concerns and Difficulties

Most researchers report that parents experience financial difficulties while searching for and recovering their child. The cost is not only monetary but personal. In essence, the longer the search, the more stressed the left-behind parent becomes. Such stress often affects their day-to-day living, and for those who are employed, it may cloud their judgment.

Left-behind parents report that their legal and search fees continue to mount and often cripple the average family. Some left-behind parents accumulate a debt load that is not proportional to their income.

Tuohey (2005), a project worker who researches the services and roles of authorities and organizations for the Australia's Commonwealth Attorney-General's Department and International Social Service Branch, wrote that:

...there are growing concerns about the impact of abduction, particularly on children but also the parents, and recognition of the limitations of legal response has prompted the Commonwealth Attorney-General's Department to fund a project to consider the validity of establishing support services (p.1).

Recognizing that parents do need all kinds of support, especially financial,...the Australian's Government's role in administering the Hague Convention for the return of abducted children included a means-tested scheme to provide assistance with overseas legal fees and travel costs to where a child has been removed from Australia, and that translation services were available through the Commonwealth Attorney-General's office (p. 20).⁵

An early study by Janvier and colleagues (1990) found the costs of recovery attempts amounted to \$8,000 for domestic abductions and more than \$25,000 for international abductions.

5 Tuohey, A. (2005). *Living In Limbo: The Experience of International Parental Abduction*. International Social Service, Australian Branch and the Commonwealth Attorney General Department, February 2005, p. 20.

An Ontario study by Swaren and Dalley (1993), and revised by Kiedrowski, Jayewardene and Dalley (1994), showed the financial cost for the search and recovery of a child varied considerably. Of the 14 left-behind parents interviewed and surveyed, two spent less than \$1,000, five spent between \$1,000 and \$3,000, four between \$5,000 and \$10,000 and three over \$10,000. In the same study, six parents reported that they used their saving for transportation alone, three received financial support from family and friends, and two received travel assistance from the Transportation/Reunification Program managed by National Missing Children Services, RCMP. More than half had to borrow money. The primary reasons for borrowing money were to pay legal, travel and investigative assistance costs. Two participants had to sell personal belongings to raise funds for the search. Most were reimbursed for their expenses by the abductor later on.

A U. K. researcher, Freeman (2003), interviewed 22 parents who were victims of international abduction and concluded that there was financial strain on several parents. Some were unable to keep their jobs, mainly because of prolonged periods of sick leave. Two parents sold their homes to meet the legal costs needed to retrieve their children. In over half the incidents following the return of their child, both the abductor and the left-behind parent self-funded their legal expenses. On the abducted child's return, the parents found that there was a lack of funds and support services to address the readjustment situation, including counselling and professional therapy.

With regard to international child abductions, Chiancone, Girdner and Hoff (2001) surveyed three United States national missing children organizations about cases involving children taken or retained by the other parent (abductor) in another country. Their findings showed that...

...many parents, who were frustrated by inadequate investigative effort by law enforcement agencies, hired a private investigator, and others hired a rescuer/mercenary. In most cases, hiring such professionals was very expensive. In addition, respondents who felt powerless in attempting to deal long distance with a foreign country's officials and/or laws may have thought they would have taken more seriously if they could have traveled to the country which in some cases would have been very costly. Even the costs of long distance telephone calls added up very quickly for these parents...Those parents who were dissatisfied with their lawyer felt that they could have hired better legal representation had more funds been available (p. 7).⁶

Chiancone, Girdner and Hoff (2001) also stated that the parents who were victims of international parental abduction spent an average of \$33,500 U.S. for the search and recovery efforts. About one-fourth of these parents spent \$75,000 U.S. or more.

6 Chianone, J. L., Girdner, L., and Hoff, P. (2001). *Issues in Resolving Cases of International Child Abduction by Parents*. Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Justice, Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention, December issue, p.7.

Although parents with higher incomes generally spent more money than those with lower incomes, more than one-half of the parents across all income levels reported spending as much as or more than their annual income.

Effect on the Child

...these children become overwhelmed with the stress of new stimuli and are unable to make sense of the situation...(which) may lead the child to excessive anxiety and fears, which in turn may develop into chronic anxiety, stress reactions, depression, paranoia and other complications (p. 11).⁷

Once reunited, abducted children may also develop a lack of trust in others and have difficulty attaching emotionally to the left-behind parent. Other psychological disorders identified were post-traumatic stress disorder, reactive attachment disorder, general anxiety disorder, separation anxiety disorder and learned helplessness (Faulkner, 1999). Upon reunification with the other parent, the child may fear re-abduction; an additional stressor (Hoff, 1994).

The results of a small sample study by Forehand in 1989 concluded that abducted children had widespread problems after the abduction but showed marked improvement over time.

Feeman(2003) found that 63 per cent of the parents felt their child suffered harm as a result of the abduction.

Greif and Hegar (1998 a and b) findings pointed out that the child's adjustment was more difficult in situations where the child was missing over a long period of time and/or when there was limited to no contact with the abducting parent after recovery.

In 2000, Greif also studied the effects on children who had been missing for an average of 2.7 years and followed for a decade through contact with the parent who recovered them. Although it was hypothesized that these children would be progressing satisfactorily into young adulthood, and that their relationship with their parents would be non-problematic, it was found that a significant minority continued to suffer emotionally. Furthermore, they had more physical ailments than their peers. Twenty-five per cent of the left-behind parent described their children as *self-destructive*.

Factors Affecting Child's Adjustment Over Time

In the early 1980s, researcher Agopian identified several factors that might affect adjustment following an abduction episode. Using a very small sample of five

⁷ Faulkner, N. (1999). *Parental Child Abduction is Child Abuse*, presentation to the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child, June 9, p.11.

episodes, he concluded that there were five factors that play a major role. These expanded somewhat were:

- the *age* of the child at the time of the abduction;
- the child's *treatment* by the abducting parent (and/or significant others);
- the abduction *duration*;
- *lifestyle* during the abduction; and
- the nature and extent of the *support and therapy* received after recovery.

Although these factors originated from an earlier study, they have been quoted by current researchers, seemingly passing the test of time.

The factors are discussed more fully by the author, based upon her knowledge and research of the issue. On occasion, the findings of other research studies will be included.

A discussion of these five factors follows.

Factor 1: The age of the child at the time of the abduction

It is important to note that younger children are less likely to make a scene when taken involuntarily (Dalley, 1994). Consequently, they are easier to abduct.

Sometimes young children view the situation as *a game*. If their basic needs are met they tend to be happy and adjust to the situation quite readily.

Upon reunification with the other parent, a very young child will probably forget the abductor. They may, however, experience conflicting emotions and confusion as they adjust to a new situation (Hoff, 1994; MacDonald, 1998).

Older children, around seven and eight years old, develop a strong sense of self and know the difference between right and wrong. The abduction act and ensuing lifestyle changes tax their moral growth. The child may view "self" as an accomplice to the act. They question why the situation came about and why they were separated from the other parent in the first place. They may blame themselves for not contacting the other parent sooner and feel guilty for not doing so (Hoff, 1994). Conversely, they may think the other parent did not search for them, resulting in a feeling of anger, withdrawal, depression and betrayal (MacDonald, 1998).

Factor 2: The child's treatment by the abducting parent and others

The child's treatment varies from exceptionally good to unbelievably poor. A small majority of children are treated very poorly. They are placed in boarding schools or "shipped off" to relatives or acquaintances in isolated places where contact with other people is almost impossible. They live in remote areas in other countries, in campsites or live permanently in motor homes. On rare occasions, they are abandoned and live with individuals who are practically strangers to them.

On the other hand, some children experience minor lifestyle changes. They move from province to province or to another country and adapt with relative ease. Most often they have good support from family and friends. However, adapting might be more difficult if they live in another country with a different language and culture.

The child's ability to cope and respond positively to the abduction circumstances is influenced by factors, such as what the abducting parent told the child about the other parent. If they were told the other parent was dead, they must deal with their grief. If they were told the parent did not want them anymore, they feel rejected.

Factor 3: The abduction duration

Children may be missing from a few days to the end of their childhood.

Most research studies show the majority were recovered fairly quickly—one week to a month.

However, the longer the child and the left-behind parent are separated, the more difficult the adjustment after reunification. Victims of long-term abduction fared worse than other victims. They feel deceived by and angry at both parents for the lack of opportunities to form healthy childhood relationships.

Factor 4: The child's lifestyle during the abduction

For some children, life after abduction continues in a way similar to life before the abduction. However, the abducting parent and child experience a certain degree of anxiety as they hide to avoid discovery.

Sometimes the child does not attend school regularly or changes schools often, which affects school achievement. Their friends change regularly, making it difficult to form solid, trusting relationships.

The abducting parent often lacks a steady income to provide the necessities of life. Life on the run becomes stressful, frustrating and full of uncertainties for both the abductor and child.

Very young children do not understand the situation and may view the upheaval as a game.

Older children, however, realize their lifestyle is different and wrong. Unfortunately, they sometimes perceive themselves as accomplices in an unwanted situation as well as harbouring feelings of guilt for agreeing to leave the other parent in the first place.

Children who were told that the other parent was no good, an abuser, did not love them anymore, or is dead, are troubled. This knowledge weighs heavily on the child, who feels very much alone with a secret.

On a rare occasion, if a family problem existed and the situation was difficult and stressful, in order to keep the peace, they will leave the other parent willingly and without question.

Factor 5: The support and therapy the child receives after recovery

Most researchers agree that professional, mental health therapy is required after recovery. Understandably, a young child might be frightened meeting the other parent for the first time; a parent they do not know or remember. The older child experiences anger, shame and guilt for not contacting the other parent sooner.

Researchers also suggested that victims of long-term abduction tended to fare worse than those who were recovered quickly. A 1993 Hegar and Greif follow-up study to a previous study found that those children who received mental health services treatment were considered to be healthy after the abduction episode. The findings also showed that their behaviour and school performance was considered satisfactory or very satisfactory.

Services to Left-behind Parents

The RCMP National Missing Children Services, Transportation and Reunification program helps parents in financial need. When an abducted child is found, and after certain criteria are met, this program provides a parent or guardian with transportation *to* and *from* any location. Air Canada airlines and Via Rail support this program. However, this service does not apply to their partner transportation carriers.

More than 28 parents were unable to afford to travel to pick up their child over a three-year period. The breakdown is:

- in 2005, 13 children were returned, 10 of these requests were for international travel;
- in 2004, seven children were returned, two of these requests were for international travel; and
- in 2003, eight children were returned, four of these requests were for international travel (Dalley, 2003, 2004 and 2005 Reference Reports).

In essence, this statistic identifies 28 families who could not afford to travel to pick up their recovered child. Given this fact, it is postulated that for some parents travel costs are high compared to their income.

As warranted, the Missing Children Society of Canada and other not-for-profit organizations provide some transportation and related types of support to parents in need also.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this descriptive study was to determine the characteristics of parental abductions, including the financial difficulties experienced by the searching parent, as well as trauma, if any, experienced by the abducted child.

Methodology

A parental abduction questionnaire was designed to collect information from left-behind parents. The first draft of the questionnaire was developed by a law student, who was volunteering with International Social Service Canada. The National Missing Children Service's researcher provided this student with examples of pilot-tested questionnaires.

The NMCS researcher and the executive director of International Social Service met with the law student and gave her some feedback on the initial draft. The questionnaire was redrafted and sent to the International Parental Child Abduction Working Group (IPCAWG) for review and comments. The IPCAWG identified some additional factors to include and these were later added.

During the same period, the NMCS researcher was in the process of collecting data on the effects of the abduction on the child victim. Since both studies would involve the same sample group, it was decided the best approach was to gather this information at the same time.

Following this discussion, and with IPCAWG and NMCS support, the researcher broadened the scope of the questionnaire. A section targeting the effects on the child was added.

The redrafted questionnaire was then reviewed by selected members of the IPCAWG and approved. Copies were made for distribution.

Sample Selection

The researcher met with the not-for-profit (NGO) representatives at the 2005 National Missing Children training conference held in Ottawa, Ontario to solicit their participation. For those who agreed to participate, the purpose of the study and the steps to follow was explained.

A copy of the questionnaire was forwarded by e-mail and direct mail to all the agencies participating. A few agencies were members of the IPCAWG, so they were further briefed at these meetings.

As the study evolved, all agencies were contacted by e-mail and given updates. Instructions were sent by e-mail. E-mail attachments were: instructions; a copy of the questionnaire, Parts 1 and 2; an informed-consent form; and a letter to the parents explaining the purpose of the study.

This was followed by another e-mail soliciting questions and concerns. Some agencies experienced difficulty printing the information. To address these concerns the information was sent by courier.

Some agencies did not respond. The researcher contacted them by telephone and explained the importance of their participation and encouraged them to reconsider.

Child Find Canada provincial offices, the Missing Children’s Network of Canada and the Missing Children Society of Canada participated in the study. Forty per cent of these questionnaires sent out were returned.

Limitations

It is very difficult to conduct a study of this nature. Left-behind parents are reluctant to participate because it sometimes awakens dormant emotions and reminds them of the abduction, which was probably a very painful time in their lives.

The study was limited to left-behind parents who contacted not-for-profit agencies for help finding their missing children.

The questionnaire was limited to information about one child in a family who went missing. In seven cases, more than one child went missing. Nonetheless, while filling out the questionnaire, it was assumed that one child was considered in the response. In the trauma section, it was necessary for the researcher to conclude that all the children abducted were considered in answering some questions. The researcher concluded that the instructions to parents who had more than one child abducted were not as clear as was intended.

Occasionally, there were inconsistencies in reporting facts, such as the length of time the child was missing. Occasionally, the time was rounded off or advanced. However, the researcher was able to verify questionable responses by referring to other questions included in the questionnaire. These questions helped the researcher decipher and qualify some of the responses.

As well, parents sometimes gave more information than was required in an answer, making the analysis—especially text analysis—more complex.

The researcher allowed estimates in answers to questions about cost to the left-behind parent. It was decided beforehand that the chance of omitting these questions would be greater if estimates were not permitted.

Gathering Data

Missing Children Society of Canada	12
Child Find Nova Scotia	2
Child Find PEI	2
Child Find New Brunswick	1
Child Find Ontario	1
Child Find Manitoba	1

The data for this research study was gathered from Canadian not-for-profit sector agencies working with and for left-behind parents of missing children. The researcher drew up the selection criteria for the study sample and e-mailed it to all the agencies in Canada. (See Appendix 4 for the selection criteria.) Those willing to participate sent out the questionnaire to their clients. The questionnaire was returned to the principal researcher to prevent contamination. Forty eight questionnaires were sent out and 19 returned to the researcher: a 40 per cent return rate.

Analysis

Family Situation at the Time of Abduction

Over half (58 per cent) of the couples were separated or divorced at the time of the abduction. Before the abduction, 53 per cent of the respondents (left-behind parent) rated their relationship with the abductor as *poor*. However, the child's relationship with the abductor was much better—32 per cent said it was *good*, 26 per cent said it was *fair*. Only 10 per cent said it was *poor*. Before the abduction, all the children lived in Canada. Following the abduction and child's return, 68 per cent of the left-behind parents reported that the abductors were a part of the child's life in some way.

The respondents were asked what they thought had prompted the abduction. Only 10 of the 19 respondents gave some explanation. Mothers most often reported the father wanted revenge, whereas fathers reported that the mother needed to control.

Researchers generally agree that a prime reason for abduction is the failure of an adult relationship, usually characterized by a separation or divorce. Most often, the parents are not able to solve their differences amicably, so one parent abducts the child for revenge on the other parent or to start a power struggle for control.

Child Victim Characteristics

The results of this study showed that slightly more boys (10) than girls (9) were abducted by their parents. Most were Canadian citizens (89 per cent) and the remainder had dual citizenship or selected "other."

The average age of the 28 abducted children was 8 (7.73) and the mean was 7 years. This finding concurs with some studies, but more often studies report that abducted children are less than five years of age.

Ethnicity was captured by a category breakdown of white or non-white. The majority of the children were white. Most of the victims (68 per cent) were living with their mothers when they were abducted.

Left-behind Parent Characteristics

Twelve fathers and seven mothers filled out the questionnaire. Classified by white or non-white ethnicity, most were white. The average age was 43 years-old. Ten respondents said they were born in Canada and five had immigrated to Canada. At the time of the abduction, 76 per cent of the respondents were employed. Most were blue-collar workers—technicians, a miner, a machinist, fast food workers, armed forces member, restaurant owner, businessman and a nurse.

Their annual income was higher than the abductor's. Thirty-five per cent were making less than \$25,000 and 53 per cent between \$25,000 and \$60,000. Seventy-seven per cent of the fathers and 67 per cent of the mothers had college or university education.

Consistent with other research studies, the left-behind parent was better educated, as most finished college or university. Their economic status was also better.

Characteristics of Abductors

Mothers represented 63 per cent of the abductors and fathers represented 37 per cent. Eighty four per cent of the abductors were white. The average age of the abductor was 42 years-old. Of the 12 left-behind parents who answered this question, half the abductors were employed and half unemployed at the time of the abduction. The employed abductors were a teacher, a lawyer, a real estate agent and two restaurant workers. One abducting parent was a pensioner with income. It is worth noting that most jobs were portable.

The majority of abductors (92 per cent) were making less than \$25,000 a year at the time of the abduction. Twenty-six per cent (26 per cent) had a previous criminal record. Fathers tended to be better educated than mothers; 67 per cent had a college or university education compared to 38 per cent of the mothers.

Canadian abductors appeared to be better educated than those living outside Canada. Research conducted outside Canada showed that the abductor was from a low socio-economic class and was poorly educated.

The abductor was older in comparison to the Canadian study conducted in the early 1990s. Their salary levels were consistent with the findings of other studies, that is, an income of less than \$25,000 annually. Although some had a previous criminal record, most did not.

Abduction Incident Characteristics

Legal characteristics

A court order specifying custody arrangements was in effect in 79 per cent of the cases at the time of the abduction.

Although research findings are scarce regarding this factor, a Canadian study and U. K. study show that abductions occurred most often when there was not a custody order in place. However, this study differs in showing that most parents had a court order in place specifying custody arrangements.

Additionally, over half (58 per cent) had made a Hague application for the return of their child back to Canada from the country of location. The majority of these respondents found the Hague Agreement useful for the return of their child from a foreign country.

The *Hague Convention on the Civil Aspects of International Child Abduction* applies to all Canadian provinces and territories and many countries around the world which have signed and ratified the agreement. The Convention aims to secure the prompt return of children removed to or retained in any country that is a contracting state to the convention, and is in breach of custody rights. The Convention also promotes the peaceful enjoyment of rights of access.

The Department of Justice Canada, Private Law Section is responsible for negotiating private international law instruments dealing with family law, including the Hague Convention on the Civil Aspects of International Child Abduction. In cases where the Hague Convention applies, Foreign Affairs Canada assists in making direct contact with relevant Canadian provincial and territorial central authorities and assists the central authorities both in Canada and abroad.

Some abductors are extradited back to Canada to face charges of child abduction. Parental abduction is a Canadian Criminal Code offence, with a possible sentence of up to 10 years in prison. Five abductors were extradited back to Canada—one in 2001, three in 2004 and one in 2005.

Abduction occurrence

Although research has shown that children are abducted in every month of the year there appears to be a trend to abduct them around school holiday breaks. Seven abductions occurred June through to September, and four in March and April. This is consistent with the findings of other research studies.

Length the time the child was missing

The length of time the child was missing varied considerably from study to study. In this study, 53 per cent were found in less than a year, while 47 per cent were found in over one and a half years. The range of time missing was from 24 hours to 14 years.

Other research study findings vary considerably from this study. Most children were found within a few weeks to a month. Only small percentages were missing for more than a year, and even fewer for several years.

Length of time from recovery to return

Once a child is found the left-behind parent is relieved. However, the stress of the situation does not necessarily end with this good news. When the respondents were asked how long it took for the child to be returned to their care, the period of time varied. Of the 10 individuals who responded to this question, two answered that the child was returned immediately; three said in two or three days; one said in about two weeks and four said in about two to five years.

Media

The media can be very helpful in the search. Forty-seven per cent of the left-behind parents used the media to broadcast particulars of the missing child. Furthermore, they found it useful in the search for the missing child. Spilman (2006) stated:

... the use of mass media as well as several high-profile cases have made missing children a well-known, and highly feared social problem. Support resources may be of a different nature and availability than they were fifteen years ago (p. 161).⁸

Location characteristics

All 19 respondents were living in Canada at the time of the abduction. When the child was located, 37 per cent were found in Canada, 37 per cent in the United States, and 26 per cent in other countries. In essence, the abductor fled to another country 63 per cent of the time; one fled to another country and then returned to Canada to hide. Fifty six per cent of 16 respondents reported there was a connection to or reason why the missing child was located in this particular place. This finding is consistent with other research findings.

Both fathers and mothers tended to leave the country with their children: 83 per cent of fathers and 61 per cent of mothers. Of those abducted within Canada, only one mother abductor remained in the same Canadian province after the abduction, and none of the fathers.

Of the eight mother abductors who left the country (one returned to Canada to hide), four travelled to the United States and four to other countries. Of the five father abductors who left the country, three travelled to the United States and two to other countries.

This study also showed that most of the left-behind parents did not have any contact with the child while the child was missing.

⁸ Spilman, Sarah (2006). Child Abduction, Parents' Distress, and Social Support. *Violence and Victims*, Volume 21, Number 2, April 2006, p.161.

Reunification Characteristics

It is very critical that the child have a reasonable experience when reunited with the left-behind parent. However, many factors affect how the child responds at the point of reunification: the age of the child, the length of time missing, the reasons given to the child for the separation and the child's lifestyle while missing.

For example, if the child was told the other parent was dead or did not want him or her anymore, a reunion in this kind of situation would be very emotional. In four of the 19 cases, the abductor told the child the left-behind parent was dead. The situation would also be unpleasant if the abductor were handcuffed and lead away, as was the situation in one case.

To make the reunification as stress-free as possible, the reunion must be planned with the well-being and safety of the child in mind.

The findings of this study showed that the child was reunited with the left-behind parent in 18 of the 19 cases; nine within Canada, seven within the United States, one in Yugoslavia and one in Germany. One child was reported as not reunited.

Most reunifications took place in an office or an area of family services or child protection, at restaurants, fast-food establishments and airports. Table 2 shows the places where they were physically reunited.

Table 2—Reunification sites

Place	Number
Police vehicle	1
Court house	1
Restaurant	2
Fast food establishment	2
Social service	2
Children and family service	2
Missing children services office	1
Airport	4
Home	2
Hotel	1
Not reunited	1
Total	19

The respondents were asked to rate their level of satisfaction with the situation: 79 per cent of the time they were satisfied or very satisfied (excellent), and 68 per cent of the time they were satisfied or very satisfied (excellent) with the experience for their child.

Table 3—Parent

Excellent	Satisfactory	Poor	No response
11	4	3	1

Table 4—Child

Excellent	Satisfactory	Poor	No response
7	6	5	1

Frustrations with Recovery

Many parents suffer emotionally when their child is missing. As the days, weeks and months pass, the uncertainty turns to fear. Although they suspect that the abducting parent has the best interest of the child in mind, the other parent knows that the child may be seriously harmed and sometimes killed for revenge on the other parent.

If the left-behind parent suspects the child has been abducted to another country additional concerns surface, including the complexities and cost involved in the search, and travel and court hearings costs in the other country. Searching parents also realize that certain countries do not have an agreement with Canada to return an abducted Canadian child to the country of origin. This realization compounds the stress.

When left-behind parents were asked to elaborate on their main frustrations, most often they cited emotional frustrations such as, worry, stress, separation anxiety, parent alienation syndrome effects, and fear. Several respondents expressed their frustration with authorities who did not take their complaint seriously and who were not well-informed about the legal process.

Some comments that expressed the left-behind parent's frustrations were:

- Dealing with the abductor.
- Dealing with lies told to the abducted child about the left-behind parent.
- Being in the presence of the abductor and her boyfriend.
- Placing the children in foster care.
- Having the children see their mother in prison.
- The child seeing the abductor arrested and handcuffed.
- Finding the money for the trips overseas.
- Dealing with the left-behind parent's health issues.
- Taking absences from work.
- Frustrations with the progress of the search.
- Dealing with very difficult judicial processes.

- Delay in responding to the crime by authorities.
- Lack of concern for the safety of the children by provincial agencies (Eastern Canada).
- The abduction was not considered a priority, despite a court order.
- Reluctance of police to see the criminal nature of parental abduction.
- Canadian police (Central Canada) were discriminating and quoted incorrect information about the Hague articles.
- Police (Central Canada) refused to take the left-behind parents' statement, although they were asked by other government departments to process the case.
- Anticipating and preparing for a court appearance in another country
- Gathering and preparing evidence.
- Dealing with foreign Hague authorities.
- NMCS Travel/reunification program frustrations (Air Canada did not support recovery travel costs in the summer months).
- The ministry of family and children services did not deal with the problem properly.

Satisfaction with the Related Services

When parents feel their case is not given the priority needed by police, or when they feel it is not progressing well, they often seek the assistance of not-for-profit agencies that search for missing children, such as those used in this study.

Of the 16 of 19 individuals who responded to this question, 94 per cent were very satisfied and satisfied with the service provided by the missing children not-for-profit searching agencies. These agencies concentrate on missing children cases exclusively, thus bringing knowledge and expertise to the investigation. Such agencies also work with the parent and their families by providing emotional support during a stressful and emotionally challenging period. Additionally, these agencies, if recognized by NMCS, can access investigative and other kinds of advice as required and deemed appropriate.

Over half (53 per cent) of the respondents were very satisfied and satisfied with police service; 50 per cent of the respondents with legal services; and 31 per cent with children's aid services. The left-behind parents relied on law enforcement and other authorities to help them search for, recover and return their missing child. Some parents mentioned that the police authorities were insensitive to their report of child abduction, and not well-informed of their legal obligations to respond appropriately.

A 1993 similar Canadian study showed that 38 per cent were satisfied with police investigative services, different from these findings.

United States researchers Chiancone, Girdner and Hoff (2001) pointed out that parental abduction is still widely regarded as a private family matter by U.S. authorities. One third of parents studied reported law enforcement officials would not take the information they submitted about their cases, mainly because the officials saw the abduction as a domestic situation.

This practice compromises an investigation, enabling the abductor to successfully flee the country unchallenged. If the child is taken to a country that is not a signatory to the *Hague Convention on the Civil Aspects of International Child Abduction*, finding and legally returning the child to the country of origin is very complex. Therefore, law enforcement authorities must not delay but *act quickly*.

Financial Cost to the Left-Behind Parent

In the search and recovery of a missing child, financial strain is high. However, the nature and extent of the strain is not well-known. A Canadian study by Swaren and Dalley (1993) showed that costs varied considerably. About half the respondents stated they used their saving for transportation and borrowed money to pay for legal costs, travel and investigative assistance. Two other research studies, originating in the United States and the United Kingdom, also reported that parents were burdened with expenses, such as legal expenses.

A United States study (Chiancone, Girdner and Hoff, 2001) stated parents whose children were abducted abroad paid a high price. The parents in their study spent an average of \$33,500 U.S. in their search and recovery efforts. About one-fourth spent \$75,000 U.S. or more. One-half of all income levels reported spending as much as, or more, than their annual income.

An earlier study by Janvier and McCormick (1990) estimated an \$8,000 U.S. cost for a domestic case, and \$25,000 U.S. for an international case. Swaren and Dalley, (1993) showed 50 per cent spent from \$5,000 to more than \$10,000 in Canadian funds.

This study attempted to provide insight into some of these costs.

Search and recovery cost

The findings of this study showed that all 19 respondents experienced financial difficulties related to the search and recovery of the missing child. Twelve respondents identified legal fees, mostly lawyer's fees, as a major expense. An average of \$16,250 was spent. However, the range was between \$4,000 and \$50,000. The amount spent depended mostly upon the length of time the child was

missing, whether the child was found in Canada or in a foreign country, and the extent of the language and cultural barriers.

Communication cost

Sixteen of the 19 parents answered the communication cost question, which included telephone calls, Internet messages and postal services. The average cost was \$1,272, with a range from \$25 to \$4,750.

Translation cost

Although translation of documents is often required for communication purposes, this factor was analyzed separately. Translation costs were required in six of 19 cases, with only four left-behind parents incurring personal costs. The cost of translation ranged from \$50 to \$1,000, with an average cost of \$433. German, Spanish, Serbian and Singhalese documents were translated into English.

Loss of income

Twelve parents reported they lost income during search and recovery. The loss of income was a very difficult factor to qualify. Many had absences from work, some lost promotions, which affected their income levels, others could not function well at work, and one withdrew from university to search for his missing child. The estimated range of loss of income was \$350 to \$25,000. Sixteen respondents stated they lost in the range of one to 30 days of work. The average loss of income was \$2,934.

Private investigators

It is not unusual for the left-behind parent to hire a private investigator. Occasionally, a not-for-profit searching agency will help the parent by hiring a private investigator, but for the most part, the parent must pay for this service.

With regard to international searches, Chiancone, Girdner and Hoff (2001) stated that a lack of sufficient funds to expand the search internationally was the obstacle most frequently identified. Many parents who were frustrated by inadequate investigative efforts by law enforcement agencies hired a private investigator, while others hired a rescuer-mercenary. This service could be potentially very costly, especially mercenary service. The cost of a private investigator ranged from \$200 to \$40,000, with a mean cost of about \$4,000.

In this Canadian study, six of the 19 respondents hired a private investigator. The cost ranged from \$52 to \$5,000, with an average cost of \$1,667. Some left-behind parents responded that they used the not-for-profit searching agency services, which may or may not include the services of a private investigator. Others stated that they just could not afford the service of a private investigator.

Travel

Travel costs within Canada and to foreign countries varied considerably. The left-behind parent is often obliged to travel to the location where the child was found, attend court, and, when everything is in order legally, return home with the child. If the left-behind parent qualifies for the National Missing Children Services (NMCS) Travel/Reunification program assistance, travel is provided free of charge.

In this study, 14 of the 19 left-behind parents traveled to destinations in Canada and to foreign countries. The cost of travel ranged considerably, from \$120 to \$20,000. The average cost was \$4,000. Four parents qualified for the NMCS Transportation - Reunification program to travel from Canada to another country and return with their child.

In comparison, a United States study by researchers Chiancone, Girdner and Hoff (2001) involving international parental abductions reported that travel costs range from \$600 to \$20,000 with a mean of \$4,463.

There are many options for travel. This study showed parents choose to travel by airplane to pick up their child. The 1993 Canadian study showed Ontario parents choose to travel by bus or car, different findings from this study.

Accommodation and meals

Thirteen parents estimated the cost of accommodations and meals. Some stayed with family, while others spent as much as 100 days paying accommodations and meals in a foreign country. The estimated expenditure was about \$2,000.

Other costs

About one-third of the respondents revealed they needed medical services that cost under \$500. Some parents used psychological services, mostly for their child (13 respondents) and themselves (11 respondents), spending an average of \$1,125 on these services. One-third used mediation services before and after the abduction.

Following the abduction, 15 parents reported that they needed other types of follow up services for themselves (8 respondents), their children (6 respondents) and a sibling (1 respondent). The average cost for a child was \$1,175 and for the parent, \$2,143. The estimated cost for the sibling was \$800.

Financial Support Services

For the most part, the left-behind parents experienced financial strain but received help from other sources, including—most often—their families. Other financial assistance came from service clubs, religious groups, not-for-profit agencies, community agencies, colleagues, loans and savings.

Impact on the Child

All the left-behind parents felt their child suffered harm as a result of the abduction. However, 59 per cent rated the child's adjustment after returning to the left-behind parent as *good to excellent*.

Forehand (1989) showed in a similar, small, sample study that there were widespread problems initially but marked improvement over time.

However, Grief (2000) assessed the long-term consequences and concluded that 42 per cent were still having problems after many years. An unexpected finding was that the victims still feared the abductor, even though they had matured. He also reported that between 25 per cent and 40 per cent remain troubled, manifesting their problems physically, as almost half had more physical ailments than their peers. Some children were diagnosed as self destructive.

Types of harm

Child neglect, physical, sexual and emotional abuse all tend to be factors many researchers identify as possible effects. The results show that there are varying degrees of emotional abuse. Physical and sexual abuse is less common. An earlier Ontario study (Swaren and Dalley, 1993) showed abducted children suffered mostly from emotional abuse.

In this study, 19 respondents identified the types of harm they believed their child experienced; emotional and verbal harm were the main types of harm.

Table 5—Type of harm reported

Harm	Number*
Physical	6
Sexual	1
Emotional	19
Verbal	9
Other	3
Total	38
*More than one factor could be chosen.	

Other types of harm included worry because the abductor's boyfriend was jailed for possession of child pornography; seeing the abductor being handcuffed and taken away by police; and knowing the abducting parent was an alcoholic and addicted to drugs.

The following left-behind parent's statements more graphically describe the harm.

The child:

- Was forced to dress like a girl to conceal his identity.

- Was forced to change his identity from time to time.
- Was confused as to where to live permanently.
- Was told the searching parent did not love him/her anymore.
- Was told the parent was dead.
- Lived like a fugitive out of a backpack.
- Was neglected, that is, did not wash, lived in a tent, and wore dirty clothes.
- Was told lies about the left-behind parent.
- Lived with a parent who was a known thief.
- Lived with a parent who was addicted to alcohol and drugs.
- Now fears police officers.
- Lacked any formal education.
- Was diagnosed with “catastrophic trauma.”
- Feared being abducted again.

Behaviour and personality changes

The parents were asked to check off the factors which best describe the changes in their child’s behaviour or personality after the abduction.

Of 78 responses to the question in the “often” and “occasionally” categories, the factors that appeared as “noticeable changes occurring often (more than 5 times a month),” and “occasionally (3 to 5 times a month)” were:

- nightmares,
- not sleeping well,
- lacking the ability to concentrate, and
- difficulty making friends.

Other choices selected that are worthy of note were temper tantrums, forgetfulness and lagging school grades. However, when compared to those respondents who chose “not often (up to two times a month)”, there did not appear to be a difference.

An analysis of 11 factors describing the child’s changes after returning home—angry, insecure, confused, irritable, withdrawn, anxious, guilty, loss of appetite, growth delayed, afraid, afraid of abductor—showed the victim more often displayed more feelings of insecurity, anxiousness and fear.

Six parents stated that the child was “noticeably afraid” of the abducting parent, whereas 13 rated this fear as “not noticeable”. Worthy of note is the findings resulting from a longitudinal study conducted in 2000, which showed that a child’s fear of the abductor did not disappear with age. The researcher remarked that as the

years pass, the older child or young adult may have greater awareness of the abductor; an awareness that was not as clear to them when they were younger (Greif 2000, page 68).

The results of this study showed that forty-two per cent of the children saw the abducting parent regularly, and 58 per cent did not.

Lifestyle change

When the 19 left-behind parents were asked if the child’s lifestyle changed while they were missing, 68 per cent replied “yes.” Table 6 show the factors that best described how the missing child’s lifestyle changed.

Table 6 — Changes in lifestyle

Never attended school at all	7
Never attended school regularly	8
Moved from place to place often	10
Did not have many friends	13
Did not have any contact with left-behind family and relatives	15
Did not have contact with abductor’s family or relatives	6
Used another name (alias)	6
Was physically abused	3
Was emotionally abused	10
Was sexually abused	3
Was verbally abused	13
Was told the parent was dead	4
Lived in another country	10
Experienced cultural change	9
Experienced developmental delays (intellectually)	13
*More than one factor could be chosen	

Child adjustment services

In “Financial Cost to the Left-Behind Parent” section, page 40, it was revealed that many professional services were used following the abduction to help the child, parent and family adjust. About half of the parents used child psychologist and school counsellor services. One-fourth (26 per cent) used social service support.

Previous research has shown that after an abduction incident the child’s adjustment is very dependent upon the amount and quality of follow up therapy. Since most of the respondents reported their child adjusted very well after returning, it would appear that the services of psychologists and school counsellors were successful in achieving emotional stability, adjustment and reconnection with family.

Discussion

Parental abduction is a global problem.

In Canada, it has been hypothesized that parental abduction is influenced by the increase in the rate of separation and divorce among Canadians and mixed cultural relationships and marriages. These situations often contribute to a clash in practices and expectations.

Advanced communication opportunities and accessible transportation within Canada and to foreign countries make it easier for parents to escape authorities. Therefore, when a relationship is *in trouble* and parents are not able to resolve their problems amicably, the quick and easy way to deal with the situation is to take the child and run. Some leave to gain control of a seemingly uncontrollable situation and others leave to get revenge on the other parent. In any event, both the child and the left-behind parent are victims of an unwanted circumstance.

This study found that over half the couples were separated or divorced at the time of abduction. Additionally, over half the child victims had a much better relationship with the abductor than did the left-behind parents, who rated their relationship with the abducting parents as *poor*.

Given the reasons for abduction, the primary concern in the handling of these cases is the child's safety. It is important to be vigilant and not underestimate a parent's reaction or take for granted the child's safety in a volatile situation. When considering serious harm to a child, Dalley (2000) found that parents killed their child when a custody dispute was ongoing in five per cent of the cases. Also, she found that divorce, separation and mental instability were additional stressors.

Greif (2000) found that even after 10 years had passed, 40 per cent of the parents still experienced rage, with a desire for revenge against the other parent for abducting their child.

The exact number of parental abductions occurring yearly is difficult to determine. In each of the last five years, the average number of Canadian parental abductions reported to police was about 360 incidents. However, this figure does not include cases processed through the civil courts or attempted abductions.

When parents separate or divorce, it is important to formalize custody orders during the process. A 2006 Canadian Police Information Centre transaction analysis showed that abductions occurred more often without a custody order. The results of this study showed that when the abducted occurred, 79 per cent had a custody order. Nonetheless, parental abduction is a crime whether or not there is a custody order.

Accessible transportation within Canada and to a foreign county makes it easy to take a child and flee. Some abductors stay in Canada, while others try to hide in

another country, sometimes returning to country of origin. Most travel by airplane. In this study, 63 per cent of children were taken outside Canada. Over half the left-behind parents made a Hague application for the return of their children to Canada and found this process useful. Only five of the 12 abductors who fled to another country were extradited back to Canada.

In 1983, the Hague Convention came into force and continues to be the only multilateral instrument providing assistance in cross-border abduction. It is based on the principle that it is in the best interest of the child to be promptly returned to the state of habitual residence. In Canada, the provinces and territories have jurisdiction over child custody matters and therefore, provincial and territorial authorities are responsible for administration and enforcement of the Convention.

This parental abduction study showed that Canadian law enforcement took a longer period of time than other country law enforcement agencies to find a missing child. In Canada, 53 per cent were found in less than a year, while 47 per cent were found in over one and a half years, with 2 of these children taking 9 and 14 years to find. Some U.S. researchers reported that most children were found within a few weeks to a month, while other researchers found that 88 per cent were located in six months, and 91 per cent in a year

One explanation for this difference might be the nature of the cases referred to the not-for-profit searching agencies. The sample for this study was drawn from their clients and perhaps these incidents were complex investigations involving international transportation. Another explanation might be that Canadian police officers view the abduction as a civil matter, and *stall* somewhat accepting and acting upon the missing child report. Such a delay gives the abductor more time to plan an escape or leave Canada with the child.

Researchers have suggested that victims of long-term recovery tended to fair worse than those who were recovered quickly, supporting the importance of a *quick start* in an investigation. The left-behind parent and the located child's separation period were not as long as when the country implicated was a signatory to the Hague Convention on the Civil Aspects of International Child Abduction, compared to non-Hague countries.

All the children involved in this study were living in Canada at the time of the abduction, but 63 per cent were found in another country. More children were located in the U. S. than other countries. Canada and the United States are neighbours and work together on parental abduction cases.

Over half of the left-behind parents reported there was a known reason or connection to the place where the child was eventually located. An abduction act is not usually an impulsive act but a premeditated type conspiracy. Most abductors work alone during the actual *snatching* but after the event has happened they receive help from family, friends and relatives.

Although the number of incidents differ from country to country, the effect on the victims are similar. Upon recovery, a young child might be frightened when they meet the left-behind parent for the first time—a parent they do not know or remember. On the other hand, older children feel anger, confusion, shame and guilt for not contacting the other parent sooner.

The aim of the authorities handling these cases is to provide a stress-free reunification atmosphere for the family. The reunifications in this study took place in several informal and formal settings, from coffee houses to child protection services facilities. Most parents were satisfied with the way the reunification was handled. A few were unsatisfied, because, for example, their child witnessed the authorities handcuffing and arresting the abductor. Reunification plans must be made beforehand so authorities can apprehend the abductor without the child witnessing such actions.

Parents most often used police, legal and not-for-profit agency services. Half of the left-behind parents were satisfied with the police and legal services help, and about one third with children's aid services. Almost all the respondents were satisfied with the help they received from the not-for-profit searching agencies.

The effect on the left-behind parents varied considerably, but several studies—including this study—supported the premise that after the abduction, the parents were afraid they would never see their child again. As Greif (2000) found, these parents' expressed rage and a desire to revenge the other parent. Additionally, their written comments revealed a sense of frustration with the search and judicial process.

To elaborate further, if the left-behind parent suspected the child was in danger of harm from a violent or abusive partner, the weight of situation increased. They also felt powerless and frustrated with a system that was complex, challenging and unsupportive. In situations where they suspected the child was taken to another country, they were obliged to deal with cultural and language differences, additional stressors.

To alleviate some of this frustration, it is important for authorities to accept and act on a missing child report as soon as possible. A prompt missing child entry in the Canadian Police Information Centre (CPIC) system and requesting a border alert are vital in stopping an abductor from leaving the country.

Some sources show that mothers tend to abduct their children slightly more often than fathers (Dalley 2006, reference report). However, internationally focused studies showed that both mothers and fathers were equally likely to abduct their children.

Consistent with other research study findings, the left-behind parent was better educated than the abductor. Most finished college or university. Their economic status was also better. About one-third were making under \$25,000, and over half

between \$25,000 and \$60,000 annually. Over three-quarters were employed at the time of abduction.

Most of the abducting parents had an annual income of less than \$25,000. One-quarter had a previous criminal record. Over half of the abducting fathers had a college or university education; abducting mothers had less education. Only half were employed at the time of abduction. They worked at portable jobs, which made it easier to find employment in other places. The Canadian abductors seem to be better educated, compared to the findings of other studies.

Most researchers reported that the left-behind parents experienced financial difficulties, but few have broken down the costs. This study attempted to determine the types of expenses and the amount. The financial strain is determined by considering many factors—the length of time the child was missing; the child's lifestyle and experiences while abducted; the age of the child; whether the abductor hid in Canada or a foreign country; the extent of the language barrier; court costs; communication costs; and the support and therapy the victims received after recovery.

In this study, the results showed that by far the most extensive costs were legal fees. The average cost was \$16,250 with a range of \$4,000 to \$50,000. Parents whose children were abducted to other countries paid a higher price. Consequently, some left-behind parents accumulated a debt load that was not proportional to their income.

A 2001 study conducted in the United States showed that parents spend an average of \$33,500 U.S. in their search and recovery efforts. This study showed that the left-behind parents spent an average of about \$34,000 in Canadian funds. This figure is based upon the estimation of averages of: search and recovery; communication; translation; loss of income; travel; accommodation and meals; medical; follow-up services; and, private investigator costs.

Researchers generally agree that parental abduction does have an effect on the child. However, the nature, scope and effects are difficult to qualify. Most relate children exhibit some behavioural and personality changes, usually manifested physically and emotionally. This researcher was able to identify some changes but the survey instrument was not rigorous enough to report these differences as significant and representative. However, all the parents responded that they felt their child was harmed by the abduction. They clearly identified emotional harm as their main concern, followed by verbal and physical harm. They qualified these types of harm by describing some factors: the child was forced to cross-dress to hide his or her identity; was told the other parent did not love them anymore, or was dead; lived like a fugitive; and, changed their identity to escape from authorities.

After they returned home, there were some observable changes, including nightmares, sleeplessness, lack of concentration and difficulty making friends. They

also displayed some insecurity, anxiousness and fear. A 1993 Canadian study identified some observable changes as well, including anxiety, fear, depression and paranoia.

One-third of the left-behind parents reported their child was afraid of the abductor. Some researchers have speculated that the child's fear of re-abduction weighs heavily on them. In this study, more than one-third of the children met the abductor regularly.

The abduction of very young children, those under five years, does not appear to have the same effect as the abduction of an older child. If younger children's basic needs are met, they usually adjust quite readily. Sometimes they view the change in their situation as *a game*.

Older children do not react to abduction the same way. As stated by a number of researchers, and it holds true in this study, an abduction taxes a child's moral growth. They blame themselves for the separation or divorce and the upheaval in the family. They feel guilty for not trying to contact the left-behind parent. If they were told the other parent died or did not want to see them anymore, they feel rejected or may grieve.

Slightly more boys than girls were abducted but most studies point out that gender is not a factor in domestic or international parental abductions.

After recovery, over half of the parents rated their child's adjustment as *good to excellent*. This finding is consistent with other findings. However, there are very few follow up or longitudinal studies addressing long-term consequences.

Greif and Hegar (1998) findings pointed out that the child's adjustment was more difficult in situations where the child was missing for long periods of time, and when there was limited to no contact with the abducting parent after the child was recovered.

In 2000, Greif also studied the effects on children missing for an average of 2.7 years and followed for a decade through contact with the parent who recovered them. Although it was hypothesized that these children would be progressing satisfactorily into adulthood, and that their relationship with their parents would be non-problematic, it was found that a significant minority continued to suffer emotionally. Also, they seemed to have more physical ailments than their peers, including self-destructive behaviours.

Most professionals would agree that abducted children should receive mental health therapy after returning, mainly because they would have to deal with a new set of life circumstances, and some of these circumstances would be more difficult than others. For example, they might be required to spend time with the abductor; meet their siblings for the first time; and on an occasion, spend time with a person who may be emotionally abusive – or abusive in other ways.

Since most of the respondents reported their child adjusted very well after returning, it would appear that the services of psychologists and school counsellors were important in achieving reintegration and emotional stability.

Conclusion

There appears to be some consensus among researchers in the United Kingdom, United States, Australia and Canada about the nature and scope of the problem, and general victim and abductor characteristics.

However, solid findings on the long-term consequences of the abduction experience on the victims are scarce. This may be due to the fact that most parents see this as a private matter and find reliving the experience to provide research information very stressful.

Although parents report their child was very well-adjusted after the abduction, it is suspected some long-term consequences may linger. A few researchers have substantiated this premise by reporting that the long-term consequences do extend into young adulthood. However, more research is required on the effects of an abduction event on the child victims as they grow and mature to adulthood, and as adults.

A few United States researchers have identified the early risk factors for parental abduction; these factors should be taken into consideration when authorities evaluate a missing report (See the section on the early identification of risk factors for parental abduction).

Police officials must view the abduction report as serious and not assume the child is safe with the other parent. They must keep in mind that a fast response by police and transportation authorities is critical to prevent an abductor from leaving the country. When the abductor is apprehended, it is important that the child does not witness the parent being restrained or handcuffed.

Other studies have addressed the financial strain on the left-behind parent, but they provide few details. This study showed some insight into the nature and extent of those costs. The findings identified legal costs as the most crippling aspect. Parents whose children were abducted to other countries paid a higher price in terms of financial cost. Unfortunately, some left-behind parents accumulated a debt load that was not proportional to their income.

One researcher titled her paper *Living In Limbo*. This statement best describes the challenges of families during the abduction episode and after it is over.

Appendix 1 – Perceptions of Harm Suffered by the Child

Did you feel your child suffered harm as a result of the abduction?

Answer: My kids saw their mother taken away in handcuffs by the police. They were separated from their grandmother and their circle of friends. The country to which they were abducted, the children were told that I, the father, was not interested in them. An accessory to abduction said in court at time of capture that my boy had referred to me as a “bastard.” These children would be better off with more contact with their mother but she is causing a situation of limited contact, which in turn affects the children negatively.

Answer: My three kids were abducted by their mother and her boyfriend. Subject 1 (age 13), Subject 2 (age 10), and Subject 3 (age 7). They left the province without my knowledge. They traveled across Canada to the West Coast, and were told they were on a vacation. Once in there they were then told the truth. They were told that they were staying in there for good.

Answer: I can only imagine that her being taken away from me has been difficult on her as well.

Answer: It is very scary to have a police officer walk into your grandparents’ house and remove you!

Answer: My son was raised by an individual who was an alcoholic and addicted to drugs. He had extreme violent tendencies. He was a well-known thief and a con man. He was also notorious for his compulsive lying. My son has revealed to me many of the lies he has been told. He has recalled many of the times he was abused physically, emotionally and verbally. He does not remember most of his childhood prior to his age of 10 years. He has suffered from many nightmares and flashbacks. My son was raised by a thief.

Answer: Separation from all family except mother, no long-term relationships, lack of activity in normal activity, constantly moving from one place to another—lived out of a back pack, periodic changing of identity and stories, he was isolated at times, lack of formal education and structure in his life.

Answer: He suffered physical abuse, because his mother’s boyfriend hit our child; emotional abuse because he was hidden from others, forced to dress as a girl, told many lies about me, and the list goes on; verbal because he has told me his mother swears at him numerous times.

Answer: Being removed from their father and taken to a foreign country. They were under the impression that they were on holidays. When they found out the truth, it caused them emotional stress.

Answer: He suffers from emotional stress. He frequently awakens through the night from nightmares or fear. He is constantly worrying and has the inability to deal with problems. He still talks to himself at times. My son alienates himself from others, and avoids large groups. He is hyper, jittery, and has angry outbursts at times.

Answer: We are in the process of dealing with the emotional stress. The children have a misconception of authority figures. Unfortunately, they see police officers as bad people. They are having difficulties in school. They find it hard to focus, and at times show forms of aggressive behaviour.

Answer: The girls have trouble sleeping at night, and require a light to be on at all times. It is necessary that their bedroom door be closed, as well as their closet door. If the door is open the girls are too afraid to close it themselves. The girls are very clingy.

Answer: The abductor used his experience in manipulating the facts to say adverse things to my son. A loving, smiling, happy child who was at one time affectionate, would not look me in the eyes now. My son never wished to live in the United States. He is confused and has been arguing with Canadian officials as to where he wants to reside. This is a total turnaround. He has been forced to live in the United States.

Answer: We visited a child psychologist when we returned to Canada. He said the children had every symptom of catastrophic trauma.

Answer: Reports from the children suggest they were abused. There were times when the mother's male companions had physically abused our child. The police have also arrested and jailed one of my wife's boyfriends for possession of child pornography. Pictures of our children were found in his collection.

Answer: Our child did not receive any medical care while she was gone. In the time being her health card had expired. Her mother and her mother's family had manipulated her with lies. They told her that her father was dead. This has caused emotional stress.

Answer: My child suffered physical, emotional, and verbal abuse from the mother's boyfriend.

Answer: The children were asked to help steal and lie to help their father financially. The children did not attend school and they lived in a tent in the United States. They did not wash nor did they have clean clothes. Both children lost a lot of weight, which led me to believe that they were malnourished. They were forbidden to contact me, when they knew I would be frantically searching for them. All of these factors have caused emotional stress.

Appendix 2—Perceptions of the Child’s Adjustment

How would you rate your child or youth adjustment after returning to you?

Answer: (Excellent) when they arrived home, they reconnected with friends.

Answer: At first things were great, but within four months things got quite bad. Within two years he returned to their former residence abroad, rather than being charged by authorities for theft and drugs.

Answer: Very poor, because he was away from home ages two years to four.

Answer: When he first came back, his adjustment was poor. Gradually with help, love, and caring he has become excellent.

Answer: The children seem to be back into their routines.

Answer: He is coping well at this time.

Answer: The adjustment has been very poor. The mother was granted access to the children, and has continued to brain manipulate their minds. She also had a network of friends that would harass them at school and on the streets. This forced me to tighten their security, which decreased their stability.

Answer: The adjustment was difficult at first. They were scared and upset that they were being separated from their siblings.

Answer: Her adjustment is fair. She had a hard time remembering where she came from originally.

Answer: The adjustment is excellent. She is very close to my family. My mother and my aunt are helping me raise her.

Answer: My daughter has been affected emotionally. Her mother was very controlling. She would monitor our phone calls and my daughter would be crying. When we were reunited my daughter told me her mother would swear at her, and make horrible remarks towards me.

Appendix 3—Current Status of the Child's Adjustment

Please let us know how your child is doing *currently*, and whether or not he or she is a child, youth, or adult.

Answer: Both of my kids are adjusted. They do well in school. They have a lot of friends. They participate in sports, band, and visit relatives of mine. They are loved by my family.

Answer: It has been three years since the abduction. The two oldest girls have been in group homes. One child has been in twice, and the other, once, due to violent behaviour. Over the past year there have been improvements; it is a slow process.

Answer: He has adjusted very well, and we as parents try to be as honest and explain to him how this may have happened. Now that he's a teenager we give him the power to say no to his father.

Answer: He is getting better because he is starting to understand. He is involved in school and has made friends. His aggressive behaviors have almost vanished.

Answer: We are doing very well. Hockey is back in season and the children are involved.

Answer: His academic performance is very good. However he becomes easily confused, frustrated and discouraged. He has constant support and positive encouragement from family.

Answer: All three children react differently. There has been progress, but there are lots of hidden problems. The children have lots of questions. They find it very difficult to understand the situation.

Answer: The girls appear to be well-adjusted. Academically they are both doing very well. They have maintained old friends and met new ones.

Answer: My child is doing extremely well. My child has difficulty bonding to her father. She has trouble forming relationships. Her thinking is very short-term, which causes problems in school.

Answer: The children are progressing quite well. There is still some insecurity present, but overall have settled into a normal setting. They have friends, school and stability.

Answer: She is doing very well at home and in school. Academically she does very well. She is very loving and helpful around me and her friends.

Answer: The transition is going very well. She is happy and healthy. She goes to school regularly.

Appendix 4—Selection Criteria

1. Select all your Canadian cases, domestic and international, 1995 to 2006.
2. Keep a list of your contacts for tracking and follow-up purposes.
3. If you think your selected case was handled by another Canadian missing children searching agency, follow up with the agency to prevent duplication of efforts.
4. After printing the questionnaires, check to determine all the questions are included, columns straight, and the pages are in order.
5. Allow at least two weeks for the participant to fill out the questionnaire.
6. Provide the participant with a stamped *return* envelope.
7. Check the mailing envelope to be sure the Consent Form and Letter to the Parents are enclosed.
8. If you wish, you may use your letterhead on the letter and consent form.
9. Please call the researcher or a committee member if you have any questions (Contact information below).
10. If you notice any mistakes, contact the researcher ASAP.
11. If you have any difficulty printing the consent form, letter, or the questionnaires, contact the researcher ASAP. Copies will be mailed to you.
12. A pilot test run revealed the questionnaires took about 30 to 45 minutes to complete.
13. Return all the questionnaires directly to the researcher.

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