

Child Abduction Policy: Influenced by Media Coverage or Empirical Data?

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Abstract

Social problems, such as child abductions, are connected with policy initiatives, in that they often serve as the underlying rationale (or justification) for the policy. This paper analyzes both national news media and local Ohio news media's characterization of child abductions during the year following the Smart abduction, and compares that characterization with the social science evidence about the extent of the child abduction problem; and, examines the creation of child abduction policies during and around the study period and assess if these policies are supported by the empirical evidence. Findings suggest that child abduction policy initiatives during the study period reflected the media's conceptualization of the problem rather than the empirical conceptualization. Recommendations for extended research discussed.

Introduction

The kidnapping of Elizabeth Smart in the summer of 2002 sparked national interest from the media. Elizabeth Smart was abducted from her bedroom during the night in her Utah home, but wasn't recovered until approximately nine months later. During that one year period following the Smart abduction, news media agencies continued to cover this and many other child abductions. Noteworthy incidents of social problems, such as child abductions, may be connected with policy initiatives, in that they often serve as the underlying rationale for the policy. This article examines the connection between policy initiatives and two ways of characterizing the child abduction problem: news media coverage and social scientific research findings about the child abduction problem.

This paper describes an analysis of national news media and local Ohio news media's characterization of child abductions during the year following the Smart abduction, and compares that characterization with the social science evidence about the extent of the child abduction problem. In addition, this paper will examine the creation

of child abduction policies during and around the study period and assess if these policies are supported by the empirical evidence.

Literature

A common definition of social problems in the social science literature is that they are “the activities of individuals or groups making assertions of grievances and claims with respect to some putative conditions” (Spector and Kitsuse, 1977, p.75). In the emergence of new social problems, the mass media and social science researchers may play significant roles. This section explores the social science literature on the emergence and definition of social problems, with reference to the child abduction problem. Also, we briefly explore the relationship between social problem emergence and the institution of policy.

Use of Examples in the Child Abduction: Social problems, such as child abductions, emerge when sufficient grounds for their existence appear in the public discourse, and these grounds are the basis for discussing the problem itself (Best, 1987). Two types of grounds are as follows: *Examples* are what are assumed to be typical cases of the problem. While these cases might not be typical at all, they nonetheless act as a starting point for discussion of the problem itself. *Extent estimates* are statements about the extent of the problem, and they often take the form of official or scientific statistics about the scale of the problem and trends in its occurrence (Best, 1987, p.104-8). This article focuses on the examples and extent estimates of the child abduction problem.

The most common variety of examples tends to be *horror stories* which capture the public’s attention, and often these horror stories are perceived as typical cases (Best,

1987, p.105-6). “Sociologists recognize the relevance and importance of emotionally provocative mass media accounts for creating new social problems” (Johnson, 1995, p.17). Child abductions, like many other varieties of social problems, are strongly exemplified via news media coverage, which is often highly dependent the presentation of *horror stories* (Diamond, 1985 and Gentry, 1988). A number of high profile cases of child abduction, including the disappearance of Etan Patz in 1979 and the murder of Adam Walsh in 1981, sparked national attention, including hearings in the U.S. Congress (Gentry, 1988). More recently, there have been other high profile cases influential in defining the child abduction problem, including the 1996 abduction and murder of Amber Hagerman and the 2002 abduction of Elizabeth Smart.

Such high profile, horror stories have come to typify the child abduction problem in the contemporary public discourse. The public conception of the missing children problem is dominated by the notion of the typical nature of a relatively rare sub-category the problem: stranger abductions of children who are sexually exploited and/or murdered by their kidnappers. Because the stranger-type of kidnapping is understood as typical, these *horror stories* exert a high level of influence on the public conceptualization of the problem and subsequent efforts to fight it (Best, 1988). For example, the mass media focuses on stranger abductions of children, while ignoring more routine incidents such as abduction by non-custodial parents (Best, 1988 and Harrison, 1995). Defining the problem of missing children primarily in relation to pedophiles and murders is misleading and inaccurate. Children are more likely to go missing because they are abducted by a non-custodial family member.

Extent Estimates for the Child Abduction Problem: Despite the fact that atypical examples seem to dominate the public discourse about social problems, there are nonetheless efforts to look beyond the importance of noteworthy examples, and to estimate the extent of the problem, using more reliable methods. Early extent estimates of the child abduction problem came from activists, who often seriously overestimated its extent. In the late 1970's and early 1980's when the missing children problem first received high levels of attention, these activists were viewed as experts on the problem. Those in the public forum often provided data according to their definition of missing children, their group's agenda, and their limited knowledge of the incidence and prevalence of missing children (Best, 1990, Gentry, 1988). Consequently, misleading and often conflicting figures on the number and types of incidents were widely publicized. Subsequently, these estimates were criticized by researchers (e.g., Best, 1987 and 1988; Forst and Blomquist, 1991) and journalists (notably, Griego and Kilzer, 1985).

Gelles' (1984) exploratory study was the first methodologically rigorous attempt to estimate the extent of the child abduction problem. One of the things that Gelles (1984) argued for was the creation of an initiative to study the problem at more depth. That year, Congress mandated through the 1984 Missing Children's Assistance Act that the Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention [OJJDP] periodically conduct studies to determine the national incidence rates for categories of missing children. Researchers from the OJJDP developed the National Incidence Studies of Missing, Abducted, Runaway, and Thrownaway Children [NISMART] (Sedlak et al., 2002).

NISMART estimated the varieties of the missing children problem in 1988 (Finkelhor, Hotelling and Sedlak, 1990). While the NISMART added methodological

rigor to the incidence estimates of child abductions, they nonetheless received criticism from social scientists (e.g., Best and Thibodeau, 1997). Approximately a decade later, the researchers produced a second study, NISMART-2, comprised of four component studies measuring the missing children problem in the years 1997-1999 (Sedlak et al., 2002). The NISMART-2 data are currently the most comprehensive and methodologically sound data available for the missing children problem in the US.

At the state level, Ohio established in 1993, the Ohio Missing Children's Clearinghouse, which in part was to collect state incidence data from local law enforcement (Montgomery, 1999) and to educate the public on how to prevent stranger abductions. The Clearinghouse served as the reporting agency of NISMART data for the state of Ohio and is charged with maintaining those records.

Policy-Making and Social Problems:

The most noteworthy policy designed to combat the child abductions problem has been the institution of AMBER Alert Systems. Within the past decade, motivated by the 1996 abduction and murder of Amber Hagerman, all fifty U.S. states and numerous cities/counties have passed AMBER Alert laws. On February 18, 2005, Hawaii became the 50th state to implement an AMBER Alert plan. Following the abduction of a child, states will activate their AMBER Alert systems, which allow for the use of broadcast media, roadside traffic signs, and other types of media to alert citizens to be on the lookout for the snatched child and alleged perpetrators. The alerts are only issued if the case meets the AMBER Alert policy criterion, which often requires that law enforcement suspects that the child is in immediate danger.

The first AMBER Alert was established in July of 1997 in Texas as a response to Amber Hagerman's death at the hands of a stranger. Local broadcasters and law enforcement agencies developed the system to protect children from typical stranger abductions. Many local governments and regional collaborative groups soon adopted their own AMBER alert programs. A large number of states developed statewide AMBER Alert plans prior to the 2003 national legislation mandating such plans, many of which were developed during or shortly after our study period.

During the months between the Smart abduction and recovery, numerous states instituted AMBER Alert policies to address abductions. Ohio's statewide AMBER Alert plan was implemented during the study period in January 2003 (Ohio Amber Alert Plan: www.ohioamberplan.org/history.aspx). Ohio has the most extensive network of county, regional, and state AMBER Alert plans in the country, followed by Texas (National Center of Missing and Exploited Children: www.ncmec.org). Many of the local and regional plans were instituted prior to the statewide initiative.

Government sources of information on AMBER Alert plans, such as The Department of Justice run website, www.amberalert.gov, and The National Center for Missing and Exploited Children's website, www.ncmec.org, provides links and contact information for state and regional AMBER Alert plans and specifically indicate that the plans are a response to stranger abductions similar to the Amber Hagerman story. For example, most of the individual state AMBER Alert websites provide the same rationale for the development of the program and the image provoking story of Amber's abduction.

In January 1996, nine year old Amber Hagerman was riding her bicycle when a neighbor heard the girl scream. The neighbor saw a man pull Amber off her bike, throw her into the front seat of his pickup truck, and drive away at a high speed. The neighbor called police and provided a

description of the suspect and his vehicle, but couldn't recall much else. Arlington, TX police and the FBI interviewed other neighbors and searched for the suspect and vehicle. Local radio and TV stations covered the story in their regular newscasts. Four days later, Amber's body was found in a drainage ditch four miles away. Her throat had been cut. Her kidnapping and murder remain unsolved.

A concerned citizen contacted a Dallas, TX radio station suggesting the idea that Dallas radio stations should repeat news bulletins about abducted children just like they do severe weather warnings. The idea was presented to the general managers of the radio stations in the Dallas/Fort Worth area. They agreed that such a program would provide an important public service and might help save the life of a child.

The Dallas Amber Plan was started in July 1997 to help safely recover missing children that police believe have been abducted. Since then, the program has successfully recovered eight children and expanded to other cities and states nationwide.

Although the Amber Plan is named after Amber Hagerman, this national program is dedicated to all children nationwide who've been abducted. According to the U.S. Department of Justice, up to 4600 children are abducted by strangers every year (about 12 children nationwide every day).

The AMBER Alert Plan was launched in Ohio on January 1, 2003 (<http://www.ohioamberplan.org/history.aspx>)

With the exception of the launch date, the Indiana AMBER Alert website provides the exact same history and rationale for the development of the Indiana AMBER Alert plan (Indiana Amber Alert Plan: <http://www.amberalertindiana.com/amberplan.shtml>). In addition, several state websites often provide the same graphic statistic always about grim stranger abductions and do not provide statistics about more common familial abductions.

Sadly, more than 2,000 children are reported missing every day across America. Tragically, many of these children are never returned to their caretakers, and many are victims of assault and murder. A 1997 study by the Washington States Attorney indicated that 74% of children abducted and murdered by strangers were killed within three hours of being taken (<http://www.mdsp.org/>).

Although, the information provided on the state websites are accurate, they do not reflect the entire scope of the child abduction problem focusing solely on the least common type of abduction, and inadvertently suggests that typical stranger abductions are of the most concern and are the primary type of abduction, which contradicts national child abduction data.

Social Science Research Findings about Child Abduction

The federally mandated NISMART studies are the most rigorous and reliable sources of national data on child abductions and missing children. At the time of its publication, the first NISMART study (Finkelhor, Hotaling and Sedlak, 1990) instantly became the most accurate and reliable data (Hanson, 2000). The original NISMART study established categories to distinguish between the types of missing children. Finkelhor, Hotaling and Sedlak (1990) defined those categories (episode definitions) as: family abductions, non-family abductions, runaways, throwaways, and lost, injured, and otherwise missing children. The second NISMART study modified the episode definitions. In the NISMART-2 Sedlack et al. (2002) maintained the non-familial abductions and familial abductions episode types, combined the runaway and throwaway types into one category, and replace the original episode type lost, injured, and otherwise missing children with two new categories missing involuntary, lost, or injured and missing benign explanation.

The NISMART-2 defines three major categories of child abductions: *family abduction*, *non-family abduction*, and *stereotypical kidnapping*, which are subsets of non-family abductions.

- *Family Abduction* “occurs when, in violation of a custody order, a decree, or other legitimate custodial rights, a member of the child’s family, or someone acting on behalf of a family member, takes or fails to return a child, and the child is concealed or transported out of State with the intent to prevent contact or deprive the caretaker of custodial rights indefinitely or permanently” (Seldak et al., 2002, p.4).
- *Nonfamily Abduction* “occurs when a nonfamily perpetrator takes a child by the use of physical force or threat of bodily harm or detains a child for at least 1 hour in an isolated place by the use of physical force or threat of bodily harm without lawful authority or parental permission; or when a child who is younger than 15 years old or is mentally incompetent, without lawful authority or parental permission, is taken or detained by or voluntarily accompanies a nonfamily perpetrator who conceals the child’s whereabouts, demands ransom, or expresses the intention to keep the child permanently” (Seldak et al., 2002, p.4).
- *Stereotypical Kidnapping* “occurs when a stranger or slight acquaintance perpetrates a nonfamily abduction in which the child is detained overnight, transported at least 50 miles, held for ransom, abducted with intent to keep the child permanently, or killed” (Seldak et al., 2002, p.4).

The NISMART-2 study estimated the number of abduction incidence in 1999 by episode type. [Table 1 here.] Estimates were developed using two sources: first, a household telephone survey of caretakers and second, the examination of police reports.

Eighty percent of abductions were classified as familial; and 20% as non-familial. Only a small proportion, 0.08% and 0.13% in the caretakers and police studies respectively, where non-familial stereotypical kidnappings (Seldak et al., 2002).

The researchers actively sought to obtain child abduction incidence data for Ohio during the same study period as the NISMART-2 without success. The Ohio Missing Children Clearinghouse was unable to provide accurate data outside of their annual supplemental data, which is not representative of all reported abductions. However, given that Ohio has implemented extensive child abduction policies our analysis still maintains merit.

Coverage of Abductions in the *National and State Media*: In comparing the two varieties of grounds claims for the child abduction problem, this article applies the three applicable NISMART-2 categories to the incidents covered in the *New York Times*¹ and the *Columbus Dispatch*. The news media are important claims-makers in the social problems arena. At the national level, the *New York Times* is often cited as the most influential source, in terms of its ability to define social problems (Gitlin, 1980, p. 299). The *Columbus Dispatch* is a newspaper based in the state capital with a large readership. To examine the news media grounds claims for child abductions, the study examined this problem at the national level first with an analysis of 98 *Times* articles. A content

¹ Findings from the national news media coverage contained in the *New York Times* are drawn from an earlier study reported in Muschert, Glenn W., Melissa Young-Spillers, and Dawn Carr. (2005). "News Media Coverage of Child Abductions 2002-2003: A Comparison with NISMART-2." Minneapolis, Minnesota: Conference Paper, Midwest Sociological Society Meetings.

analysis of *New York Times* articles, gathered between June 1, 2002 and May 31, 2003, revealed a connection between the Elizabeth Smart abduction and the adoption of AMBER Alert policies at the national level and local levels. In an effort to understand the implications behind the findings from this initial exploration, results were compared with the 15 *Columbus Dispatch* articles that discussed the child kidnappings in the U.S. during the same one-year study period. This one-year period includes the following: the June 5, 2002 kidnapping of Elizabeth Smart and her subsequent return on March 12, 2003. Such a study period allowed for the examination of the immediate news media response to the Smart case, as well as a more extended discourse about the child abduction problem in general.

The *New York Times* articles were identified using the *New York Times Index*, which catalogs the thematic content of *Times* articles by topic, providing a brief description of the content of each article. The *Columbus Dispatch* articles, were identified using a Lexis-Nexis key term search. The terms used were consistent between both news outlets. In addition, the articles were further identified through an examination of the article abstracts, including headlines and article lead sections, which reliably indicate the thematic content of newspaper articles (Bell, 1991; van Dijk, 1988a, 1988b; van Dijk and Kintsch, 1983). While the *Times Index* references incidents outside the U.S. and incidents involving adult victims, both topics are excluded from the present study. Similar articles were also excluded from the *Columbus Dispatch* articles. Electronic copies of the all of included articles were downloaded from the Lexis-Nexis database, and the corpus of articles was managed and coded using the qualitative data analysis software, QSR NUD*IST 4. The primary unit of analysis employed was the paragraph.

The methodology of categorization used for both analyses derives from discourse studies of news texts (Bell, 1991) and applies the NISMART-2 categories of family and nonfamily abductions to the body of news text. Application of a formal analytical structure to the news texts allows the researchers to derive inferences about both the meanings contained in the stories and the structure of the stories themselves. “We cannot separate the news form from the news content” (Bell, 1991, p.155), and therefore in this study we applied a close approximation of the analytical model advanced by Bell (1991, p.171).

The coding was consistent at the local and national levels. Conceptually, it involved the application of the NISMART-2 categories for abduction to the stories reported in the *Times* and *Columbus Dispatch*, concentrating on the perpetrators, their actions, and victims for the 22 incidents identified in the *Time* and the 8 incidents identified in the *Columbus Dispatch* articles discussing kidnapping during the study period. Characteristics of the perpetrators coded included, age, gender, race, relationship to the victim, and other noteworthy details. The perpetrator’s relationship to the victim was crucial in determining the type of abduction, whether family or nonfamily. Characteristics of the victims coded included age, gender, race, and other noteworthy details. Finally, we coded the characteristics of the abduction incidents, including whether the child was transported 50 miles or more, whether the child was murdered or sexually assaulted, whether the child was returned, how long the child was missing, and whether the police were notified.

In all, the *Times* reported 22 specific child abduction incidents in 68 (69.4%) of the 98 articles analyzed in the study. The *Columbus Dispatch* covered 8 incidents, which

were discussed in all 15 articles [Table 2 here.] The coverage of the Elizabeth Smart case received the lion's share of coverage in the *Times*, as it was the primary topic of 39 (57.4%) of the articles, while modal number of documents per incident was one. The Smart case was the primary focus of 3 of the *Columbus Dispatch* articles (20%). When examining the volume of coverage, the similar comparison holds true. The Smart abduction was covered in 680 (65.1%) of the 1045 paragraphs of *Times* newsprint and 57 (22.4%) of the 254 paragraphs of the *Columbus Dispatch* newsprint. The second highest volume of coverage, in the *Times* was 57 paragraphs. The Farber incident, and many of the abductions are discussed in as few as two paragraphs of text. A stranger abduction case of an unnamed victim actually received more coverage than the Smart case accounting for over twenty-nine percent (74) of the paragraphs of the *Columbus Dispatch* newsprint.

When examining the types of incidents covered in both publications, the analysis indicates that reportage focuses heavily on nonfamily abductions, and particularly on its subcategory of stereotypical kidnappings. [Table 3 here.] The two measures examined indicate that 83.3% and 87.7% of the documents and 87.8% and 94.1% of paragraphs of *Times* and *Columbus Dispatch* newsprint, respectively, were about stereotypical incidents. Conversely, neither publication reported extensively on familial incidents.

Although the *Times* coverage of child abductions often focuses on aspects of the incidents themselves, there are also a significant number of articles about the policy implications related to the problem. Notably, 26 (26.5%) of the 98 included *Times* documents and 7 (46.7%) of the 15 included *Columbus Dispatch* articles discussed AMBER Alert policies. Of the *Times* documents, 26 articles were primarily distributed in

two periods, one in late summer 2002 and the other in spring 2003. Discussion of the AMBER Alert policies in the *Columbus Dispatch* also began in the summer of 2002. The final document that discussed AMBER Alerts was published on March 20, 2003 and reported that although the statewide system had been enacted in January, it had not yet been used. [Figure 1 here.]

Findings

Employing a triangular approach, this article examines three sets of associations: [Figure 2 here.] First, we compare and contrast news media claims about the abduction problem with those contained in social scientific research findings (Relationship A). Second, we examine the connection between the news media coverage and policy initiatives (Relationship B). Third, we examine the connection between the research findings and policy initiatives (Relationship C).

Relationship A - Media Claims Compared to Empirical Evidence: Data indicate that there is a wide discrepancy between the mass media reportage about child abductions and the empirical evidence about the social problem. A comparison of the *Times* and *Columbus Dispatch* coverage of abductions during the one-year study period with the incidence estimates from the NISMART-2 study indicated a noted discrepancy between these two sources of information. [Table 4 here.] Looking at the sources of information about child abductions as different varieties of incidence estimates, it becomes clear that relying on one source or another would lead to very different pictures of the prevalence of the types of abductions that occur. The findings refer to a comparison of the NISMART-2 data about the three types of abductions (Sedlak et al. 2002) and the NISMART-2 abductions typology applied to the *Times* and *Columbus Dispatch* articles

during the study period. Specifically, both publications report more heavily on stereotypical kidnappings (59.1% and 73.3% respectively), while NISMART-2 reports that family abductions are far more common (78% to 82.4%).

The *Times* and *Columbus Dispatch* report primarily about nonfamily incidents, while nearly ignoring familial abductions. Of the 22 incidents reported in the *Times* and the 8 incidents reported by the *Columbus Dispatch* during the study period, the majority were nonfamily abductions (16 [72.7%] and 7 [87.5%] respectively), and of these most were stereotypical kidnappings, a subcategory of the nonfamily type (13 [59.1%] and 6 [75%] respectively). In comparison, NISMART-2 estimates suggested that 17.6% to 22% of abduction incidents are of the nonfamily type, and only 0.08% to 0.13% of total abductions are stereotypical kidnappings. Similarly, the publications did not report frequently about family abductions, as only 1 incident reported by each paper was of this type. In comparison, NISMART-2 data suggest that family abductions are the most common type, estimated at 78% to 82.4% of all incidents. In sum, a comparison of the *Times* and *Columbus Dispatch* reportage of child abductions indicates that it diverges greatly from the incidence estimates in the NISMART-2 studies.

Relationship B - Media Claims Compared to Policy Initiatives: A comparison of the *New York Times* and *Columbus Dispatch* data and the legislation of state-wide AMBER Plans suggests a temporal connection between the news media reportage and the subsequent policy initiatives. There are clear peaks in the implementation of statewide AMBER Alert plans during the study period. Twenty-eight states enacted state-wide AMBER Alert plans in 2002 and fourteen in 2003.

[Figure 3 here.]

In the February 2005 National AMBER Alert Progress report, the Department of Justice indicates that the AMBER Alert system had increased success in the fall of 2002.

Over 80 percent of the total number of successful recoveries to date has occurred since October 2002, when AMBER Alert became a coordinated national effort. This significant progress is attributable to better coordination and training at every level, increased public awareness, technological advances, and cooperation among law enforcement, transportation officials, and broadcasters. (U.S. Department of Justice, 2005).

Although, several states had regional or local AMBER Alert Plans prior to the push for statewide and national programs, we contend that the media attention given to high profile stereotypical cases, like Elizabeth Smart greatly contributed to the increased public awareness the Department of Justice describes above. In addition, the media served as an outlet for claims makers, like Ed Smart to lobby for the national coordination and federal mandated state AMBER Alert plans. Federal legislation was enacted in 2003.

Neither the *Times* nor *Dispatch* directly advocated the establishment of AMBER Plans, although they did publish pieces that supported such policies. Shortly after the recovery of his daughter, Ed Smart, advocated strongly for a National AMBER Alert System. Lawmakers responded quickly with their support (Hulse, 2003). Although the editors of both publications urged that lawmakers proceed slowly with AMBER Plans, the *New York Times* published a letter to the editor stating “AMBER Alert system and other highway notification systems should be augmented to help find missing of abducted children like Elizabeth Smart” (*New York Times* 2003: 28A). An editorial in the August

16, 2002 edition of the *Columbus Dispatch* (2002:12A) supported the use of AMBER Alert plans, but cautioned lawmakers to take care in implementing the policy.

Relationship C – Empirical Evidence Compared to Policy Initiatives:

Although few would argue that stereotypical kidnappings are not an important social problem, they do appear to be over represented in national and state policy initiatives addressing child abductions. Policy emphasis on stranger abduction policies is not serving the greatest number of victims. The number of children and families affected by familial abductions appear to warrant more policy attention than they are currently given. AMBER Alerts have sometimes been issued to find victims of familial abductions, but the system can only be enacted if law enforcement believes the child is in immediate danger. The disconnect between child abduction policy and the empirical data may be a reflection of the state's reluctance to interfere in the familial sphere, which has traditionally been "protected" as private. In addition, custodial legislation may vary widely among states making it difficult to decipher jurisdiction and work out legal differences, particularly if the parents reside in different states.

Discussion

Our findings suggest that abduction policy best reflects the media's conceptualization of child abductions, of ignoring the empirical data. The dominance of coverage of high profile stereotypical kidnappings in the media creates the appearance that these cases are the typical type of abduction. This is misleading in two respects. First, parents may overprotect their children from strangers, and ignore the potential for abduction by someone close to them. Secondly, the public, without accurate information

and exposure to only certain claims makers, may be more likely to engage in political or grassroots efforts to “solve” the social problem, thus excluding the majority of victims.

We cannot ignore the horrible experience that victims of stereotypical kidnappings face, and certainly support combating these crimes. We are suggesting that more attention both in media coverage and abduction policy is needed to address the entire child abduction problem. Specifically, we call for the further study and development of policy for familial abductions. The “correct” answer to solving all child abductions is complicated and murky at best. In order to begin to address the familial aspect of the problem, more social science research is needed. States cannot adequately craft policy without accurate longitudinal data. State specific abduction data by type is needed so that social scientists, and government agencies can conduct research that can help shape policy that is tailored to each state’s needs.

Finally, research focused on familial abductions is required to begin to formulate policy suggestions. The motives for familial abductions are of particular interest, as they may be the key to solving part of the problem. Because familial disputes over children can be extremely complex and vary greatly in nature, solid and extensive research is warranted. Furthermore, the complexity requires great care, as the familial abduction problem may also be related to other familial and social problems, such as domestic violence. Because familial abduction may be tied to other social problems, creating effective policy becomes more difficult. In addition, with stereotypical abductions the villain is clear, whereas with familial abductions this distinction may not be as evident. Both policy makers and child abduction would benefit from a more comprehensive examination of the familial abduction problem.

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Table 1: Annual Estimates of Abductions, by Type

Incident Type	National Data: NISMART-2 (Caretakers)	National Data: NISMART-2 (Police)	Ohio Data:
Family	117,200 (78%)	56,500 (82.4%)	Unavailable
Nonfamily	33,000 (22%)	12,100 (17.6%)	Unavailable
Stereotypical	115 (0.08%)	90 (0.13%)	Unavailable
Total	150,200 (100%)	68,600 (100%)	Unavailable (100%)

Source of NISMART-2 data: (Sedlak et al., 2002)

Table 2: Child Abductions in the Columbus *Dispatch*, June 2002 – May 2003

Incident	Victim	Incident Type	Incident Date	Documents	Paragraphs*
1	Smart	Stranger	6/05/2002	3	57
2	unnamed	Stranger	7/01/2002	1	17
3	Harrison	Stranger	7/17/1982	1	23
4	Strawser	Family	11/01/2002	2	15
5	Caudill	Nonfamily	4/02/2003	2	35
6	unnamed	Stranger	4/03/2003	4	74
7	unnamed	Stranger	4/16/2003	1	4
8	Penton	Stranger	1985-1988	1	29
Total				15	254

Table 3: Child Abductions by Type Columbus *Dispatch* Articles, June 2002 – May 2003

Incident Type	Incidents	Articles	Paragraphs
Family	1 (12.5%)	2 (13.3%)	15 (5.9%)
Nonfamily	7 (87.5%)	13 (87.7%)	239 (94.1%)
Stereotypical	6 (75.0%)	11 (73.3%)	204 (80.3%)
Total	8 (100%)	15 (100%)	254 (100%)

Table 4: Comparison of Empirical Estimates and Columbus *Dispatch* Estimates

Incident Type	NISMART-2 (Caretakers)	NISMART-2 (Police)	Ohio Estimates	<i>Dispatch</i> Articles	<i>Dispatch</i> Paragraphs
Family	78%	82.4%	Unavailable	13.3%	5.9%
Nonfamily	22%	17.6%	Unavailable	87.7%	94.1%
Stereotypical	0.08%	0.13%	Unavailable	73.3%	80.3%
Total	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%

Source of NISMART-2 data: (Sedlak et al., 2002)

Figure 1: Articles about AMBER Plans June 2002 through May 2003, by Week

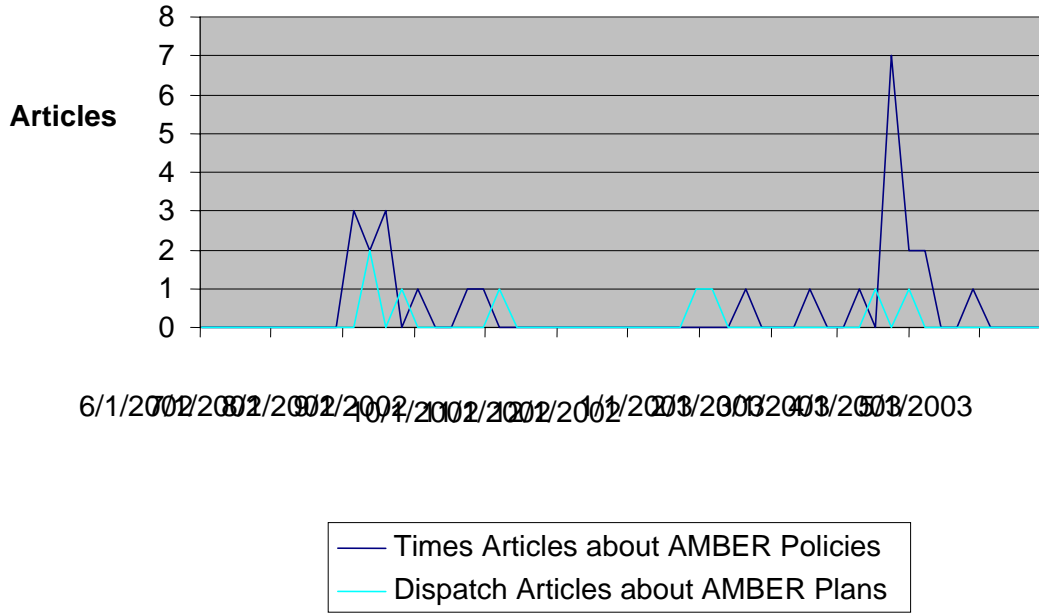


Figure 2: Application of the Triangular Approach

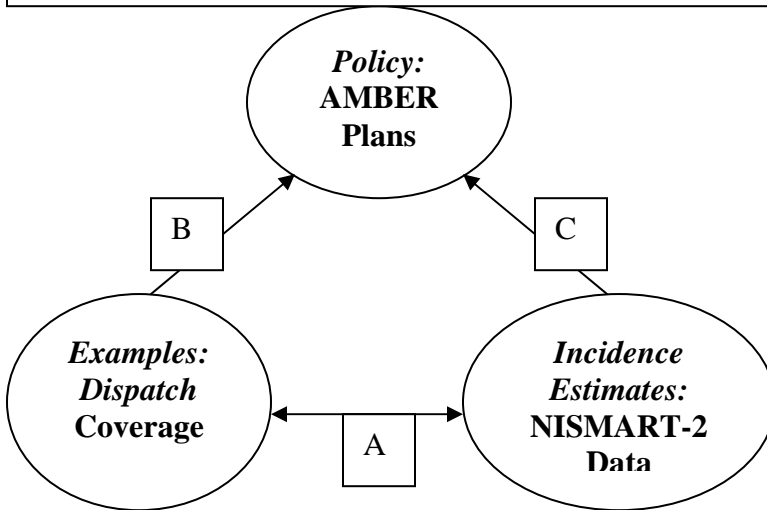


Figure 3: *Dispatch* Articles about Abductions and AMBER Plans June 2002 through May 2003, by Week

