



Vanished Children's Alliance

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Missed or Dismissed?

The Truth About Family Abductions



Each year hundreds of thousands of children fall victim to family abductions. While many believe these children are perfectly safe because they are with a family member, nothing could be farther from the truth. The National Incidence Studies on Missing, Abducted, Runaway, and Throwing Children (1990) provides the following information about missing children:

Of the approximately **355,000 family abductions** annually, 46% involve concealment of the child(ren), transporting them out of state, or an intent by the abductor to keep the child indefinitely or to permanently alter custody. A little over half of the family abductions are perpetrated by men, noncustodial fathers and father figures. The study also reveals that half of the family abductions involve unauthorized takings and half involve the failure to return the child after an authorized visit or stay.

15% of family abductions involve the use of force or violence, while 75% to 85% of the 354,100 family abductions involve interstate transportation of the child. About half of family abductions occur before the relationship between the parents ends. On the other hand, half do not occur until two or more years after a divorce or separation, usually after parents develop new households, move away, develop new relationships, or become disenchanted with the legal system. Sadly, over half occur in relationships with a history of domestic violence. An estimated 49% of abductors have criminal records, while most, according to NISMART, also have a history of violent behavior, substance abuse, or emotional disturbance.

It is not uncommon for child victims of family abductions to have their names and appearance altered, to experience medical/physical neglect, unstable schooling, homelessness, or frequent moves. These children are often told lies about the abduction and the left-behind parent; even that the left-behind parent is dead.

Many of these children live like fugitives: taught not to trust anyone; told to keep secrets about their past; unable to establish relationships with friends; and always on the run from the law. As a result of this form of child abuse, many child victims of family abductions experience substantial psychological consequences and emotional distress with

trauma symptoms evident for many years thereafter.

Children involved in family abductions are typically taken by the noncustodial parent as an act of revenge against the ex-spouse/custodial parent. In these situations, children are used as a weapon--rarely taken because the abducting parent loves the child and fears for the child's safety. However, even in the best situations, where an abducting parent loves his/her child, the ability to provide a safe, stable home environment is unlikely due to the psychological trauma created by a fugitive lifestyle. In more threatening situations, hostility, bitterness, and vengeance toward the ex-spouse/custodial parent motivates the abductor to physically or psychologically harm his/her child(ren).

Family abductions are usually easily accomplished, particularly if visitation rights have been granted to the non-custodial parent. A parent, for example, could pick up the child for a weekend, and not be required to disclose the whereabouts for the entire time, thus allowing ample time

to take the child thousands of miles away. Complicating the situation is the fact that police sometimes have no legal grounds to begin tracking the child until after the noncustodial parent does not return the child at the designated time and location. Even then, it's incumbent upon the custodial parent to produce the court

documents proving who has custody of the child and that visitation has been violated. Cases are further complicated when no custody order exists and both parents have a right to child custody.

In an effort to eliminate family abductions that originate from school grounds, schools should consider developing clear, explicit student pick-up policies that outline circumstances in which parents or their representatives are or are not permitted to take children from the school grounds.

VCA helps left-behind parents with this ordeal by offering its services free of charge, including search, location, and photo dissemination assistance; guidance throughout the court/criminal justice process; and emotional support. For additional information on VCA's family reunification program, please call our National Casework Management office at (408) 296-1113.

81% of family *abduction* victims are taken by a *parent*; the remaining **19%** are taken by other *family* members.