



Psychiatry & Behavioral Sciences Section – 2003

I16 Preliminary Analyses of Nonparental Child Abductors Who Murdered Their Victims: Victimology and Offense Characteristics

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The goals of this presentation are to provide the forensic science community insight into the modus operandi, victim selection, and background history of child abductors who murder their victims. Analyses may also help to enhance investigative strategies for child abduction cases.

The presentation will focus on findings from the child abduction/homicide: interviews with incarcerated offenders and child abduction/homicide archival research studies currently being conducted by the FBI. These studies have been underway since April 2000. However, there have been significant delays in the progress of the research due to the 9/11 terrorist attacks.

To date, 25 interviews with child abductors who murdered their victims have been conducted within various prison facilities throughout the United States. Inclusion criteria for the studies include 1) victim was less than 18 years of age, 2) offender was convicted of the murder or linked by police investigation and evidence accumulated, and 3) victim was "abducted" by offender. Abduction was operationally defined as "the coerced, unauthorized, or otherwise illegal movement of a child for the purpose of a criminal act." Exclusion criteria included parental abductions and cases wherein the offenders were processed through the juvenile system. The face-to-face interviews, conducted by Supervisory Special Agents and professional support from the FBI's National Center for the Analysis of Violent Crime (NCAVC) staff, utilize a protocol developed by members of the NCAVC. The protocol covers numerous content areas including offender socio-demographic information (e.g., marital/dating history, IQ level, education, employment, military experience, family structure and environment, and religion), offender psychiatric history, offender criminal history, victimology, and offense information (e.g., distances, media involvement, arrest information, and sentencing). The data obtained has been supplemented by review of related and available case documents from various federal, state, and local agencies. In addition, approximately 55 archival cases have been thoroughly reviewed and subsequently analyzed. The archival research utilizes a modified protocol in which interview only questions have been eliminated.

Nonparental child abduction/homicides have a low base rate of occurrence despite the significant media attention these types of cases often attract. Recent cases such as Danielle Van Dam (San Diego, CA), Samantha Runnion (Anaheim, CA), Cassandra Williamson (St. Louis, MO), and Elizabeth Smart (Salt Lake City, UT) are emotionally charged cases that quickly overwhelm and exhaust law enforcement resources and traumatize the general public. The purpose of the present research is to glean data on offender background, victim-offender relationships, offender approach to victim, victimology, and detailed offense characteristics including factors such as location of abduction, means of transportation, type of weapon, and distances between various locations. Data for the study were obtained through both face-to-face interviews and archival review of case records.

Some of the preliminary analyses of the archival research indicate that the victims had a mean age of 10.8 years, ranging from 4-17 years. Approximately 78% of the victims were Caucasian, 15% Hispanic, and 5% African American (2% unknown). The majority of the victims were female (87%). The nature of the relationship between the victim and offender indicated that 41% of the offenders were considered strangers to the victim while 24% were considered acquaintances, 20% were neighbors, 9% friends, 2% relative (non-parent), and 2% client/ customer. Therefore, over half of the offenders had some degree of familiarity with the victim.

The location of the abduction site was somewhat varied. In highlighting only the higher percentages, 26% of victims were abducted from a street/highway, 20% abducted from their residence, and 13% abducted from the offender's residence. Approximately 53% of the offenders were driving as a means of transportation to the abduction scene while 22% of offenders reported walking. The offenders' initial approach to the victim was again somewhat varied such as 28% of offenders exploited a position of friendship or authority with the victim, 28% capitalized on a normal situation or interaction, 15% physically attacked the victim, 7% used a ploy of providing service or assistance to the victim, 7% used a pretext of seeking help or assistance from the victim, and 7% bribed the victim or offered reward, money, toys, or candy. Approximately 30% of the abductors brought a weapon (e.g., firearm, knife, ligature, bludgeon/club) to the abduction site while 11% reported obtaining a weapon at the abduction site. Approximately 18% of the offenders used a knife as a primary murder weapon while 15% used a ligature, 13% multiple weapons, 9% firearm, 9% bludgeon/club, and 3% asphyxiant. Approximately 65% of the cases reviewed indicated the abduction scene and the murder scene were no more than ten miles apart: 20% occurred at same location, 15% less than ½ mile, and 28% over 1 to 10 miles. Approximately 67% of the cases indicated the abduction scene and the body disposal scene were within ten miles: 11% occurred at same location, 22% less than ½ mile and 32% over 1 to 10 miles. Approximately 67% of the cases indicated that the abduction scene was within a mile of the victim's



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residence. In addition, 68% of the records indicated the offender's residence was within 10 miles of the victim's residence.

The goal of the present research is to provide insight into offender background history, victim selection, and the modus operandi of child abductors who murder their victims. Analyses of these results may help to enhance the investigative strategies of law enforcement agencies. Limitations of the study will also be discussed including offender selfreport issues, analyzing available data, small sample size, and lack of gender representativeness.

Child Abduction, Homicide, Child Homicide