



Child Abduction T.I.P.S. (Training, Information, Practices & Strategy)

Volume 4

June 5, 2018

NiSmart

By Elaine Tumonis and Jim Bacin

How many children are affected by parental abduction? The best known national studies are known as the National Incidence Study of Missing, Abducted, Runaway, and Thrownaway Children Reports, or more commonly, NISMART. The most recent, NISMART-3, studied (1) the incidence of missing children, including family abductions, in 2013, and (2) stereotypical “stranger” abductions occurring in 2011.

NISMART-3 concluded that the family abduction rate in 2013 was not significantly different from the rate in 1999 (NISMART-2). In 2013, the family abduction rate was an estimated 3 children per 1000, or 230,600 children, compared to a 1999 rate of 2.7 children per 1000 in this category.

NISMART-3 also studied “stereotypical kidnappings” reported to law enforcement agencies in 2011. Stereotypical abduction is defined as a non-family abduction perpetrated by a slight acquaintance or stranger in which a child is moved at least 20 feet or held for at least one hour, and is detained overnight, transported at least 50 miles, held for ransom, abducted with intent to keep the child permanently, or killed. (The California Child Abduction Task Force colloquially refers to these as “stranger abductions.”)

The study found:

- An estimated 105 children were victims of stranger abductions in 2011, virtually the same as the 1997 estimate. (In other words, combining the two studies - and allowing for the fact that the studies were separated by two years - it appears that stranger abductions constituted approximately 0.5% of all child abductions.) Most stranger abductions involved the use of force or threats, and about three in five victims were sexually assaulted, abused, or exploited.
- Victims were, most commonly, ages 12 to 17, girls, white, and living in situations other than with two biological or adoptive parents. Half of all stranger abductions in 2011 were sexually motivated crimes against adolescent girls.
- Most perpetrators of 2011 stranger abductions were male, were ages 18 to 35, and were white or black in equal proportions. About 70% were unemployed, and roughly half had problems with drugs or alcohol.
- Fewer stranger abductions ended in homicide in 2011 than in 1997 (8% versus 40%).
- Most of these abductors were not violent at first contact with victims; instead, they lured almost 70% of victims through deception or nonthreatening pretexts.
- Stranger abductions involving 92% of child victims in 2011 ended in recovering the child alive, compared with 57% of victims in 1997.
- 2011 estimates of child victims being detained overnight were three times the 1997 estimates (80% versus 26%).
- Technologies, such as cell phones and the Internet, helped law enforcement to solve crimes involving two-thirds of the victims.

L.A. County’s ESCARS System: Ensuring That No Child Falls Through the Cracks

By Bradley L. McCartt, Deputy in Charge ESCARS Unit, Los Angeles County District Attorney’s Office

Whenever a mandated reporter suspects that child abuse or neglect has taken place, they must report the information to either the Department of Children and Family Services (DCFS) or law enforcement. For each report made, a Suspected Child Abuse Report (SCAR) is created. A SCAR is a Department of Justice standardized form which must be prepared in “every known or suspected instance of child abuse or neglect”. Once a written SCAR is created, that document is cross-reported between DCFS and the appropriate law enforcement agency. This procedure is mandated by the Child Abuse and Neglect Reporting Act (CANRA) which is part of California’s Penal Code.

In 2009, the Electronic Suspected Child Abuse Reporting System (ESCARS) was launched in Los Angeles County. This web-based system, which is maintained by DCFS, ensures that all reports of child abuse are cross-reported so that no child falls through the cracks. ESCARS was the nation’s first electronic system for instantly sharing suspected child abuse reports (SCARS). It links DCFS, the Los Angeles Sheriff’s Department, Los Angeles Police Department and forty-four other municipal law enforcement agencies as well as the Los Angeles District Attorney’s Office (LADA) so that they may instantly share information.

The system also allows law enforcement and DCFS to share new information during their parallel, but separate investigations. This sharing of information can be crucial when law enforcement is seeking to conduct a pretext phone call or DCFS is trying to locate an at risk child. Additionally, ESCARS has proven to be an invaluable investigative tool, as it stores all historical information for not only the victims of child abuse, but also the suspected perpetrators. This information often leads to the discovery of additional victims and the evidence necessary to prosecute these cases.

The Los Angeles District Attorney's Office led the way in implementing ESCARS and formed an ESCARS unit consisting of a Deputy in Charge and four paralegals that are dedicated to auditing suspected child abuse reports. This unit not only oversees and trains other agencies in the use of ESCARS, but also seeks to identify victims whose cases might need additional resources and investigation.

In 2014, the Los Angeles County Blue Ribbon Commission on Child Protection commended the L.A. County ESCARS system and determined it to be the best practice for addressing reports of child abuse. It recommended that ESCARS should be utilized fully by all relevant agencies and receive the necessary support to be maintained and enhanced. This June, a new and improved ESCARS system was launched. It allows real time flagging of current child fatality and critical suspected child abuse reports from the Child Protection Hotline. This flagging includes an audible alert to ensure that each agency prioritizes these cases. In order to address human trafficking, the site includes a new category for suspected commercially sexually exploited children. Additionally, it includes a category, "Crime Suspected - Not Child Abuse," so that domestic violence and other crimes may be documented to better show when a child may be living in a dangerous residence.

This summer in honor of the launch of the new ESCARS website, the Los Angeles County District Attorney's Criminal Justice Institute held the "ESCARS Summit: Child Abuse Reporting and Prevention". This summit brought together social workers, law enforcement officers and district attorneys for an all-day training dedicated to improving our county's response to child abuse allegations. Topics included best practices for parallel investigations between law enforcement and DCFS, proper utilization of pretext phone calls, an in-depth look at child abuse investigations and how ESCARS can be used as an investigative tool.

ESCARS has been so successful since its inception that the Governor's Office of Emergency Services has approved grant funding for additional California counties to develop their own ESCARS systems. Both Santa Barbara and Yolo counties have already been awarded grants and other counties continue to apply for funding to start their own systems. ESCARS truly demonstrates how multiple disciplines working together can help to save a child.

"Reprinted with permission from the Fall 2017 edition of The Consultant, newsletter of the California chapter of the American Professional Society on the Abuse of Children (apsac.org)."

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