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Missing and abducted children: A critical analysis of the Amber Alert system

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MISSING AND ABDUCTED CHILDREN: A CRITICAL
ANALYSIS OF THE AMBER ALERT SYSTEM

by

Michael John Smoll

Bachelor of Science
Emporia State University
2003

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment
of the requirement for the

Master of Arts Degree in Criminal Justice
Department of Criminal Justice
Greenspun College of Urban Affairs

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Missing and Abducted Children: A Critical Analysis of the AMBER Alert
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ABSTRACT

Missing and Abducted Children: A Critical Analysis of the AMBER Alert System

by

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Originally created from the reaction of a child abducted and murdered by a stranger, the AMBER alert system has since been utilized for a wide variety of child abduction episodes. The AMBER alert system has the potential to provide millions of citizens with descriptive information about a missing or abducted child in the hopes that the child can be successfully recovered by utilizing a wide array of communication mediums. This current study examined a sample of AMBER alerts issued in twelve states during the year 2005. Among the key findings include the fact that the vast majority of AMBER alerts concerned abductions by family members, rather than the stereotypical stranger abductions. This study discusses the findings and provides policy implications for future use of the AMBER alert system.

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

The AMBER alert plan was a concept that originated from the concerns of residents in the Dallas/Fort Worth, Texas area after the 1996 abduction and subsequent murder of nine-year-old Amber Hagerman. Amber had been riding her bike in her Arlington, Texas neighborhood when a stranger abducted her. Although residents of her neighborhood witnessed the abduction and heard her screams for help, they were unable to rescue her. A few days after her abduction, Amber's murdered body was found.¹

The tragic abduction and murder of Amber Hagerman sparked outrage throughout the local community. Citizens in the Dallas/Fort Worth area contacted local radio stations and suggested that they broadcast missing child alerts for abducted children. In July, 1997, the Association of Radio Managers in Dallas, Texas² devised a system to broadcast missing child alerts. This system or plan would eventually become known as the America's Missing: **Broadcast Emergency Response** (AMBER) alert system.

Since its conception, the AMBER alert system has evolved from a single city wide plan into a sophisticated and technologically complex missing child alert system. In the event a child is abducted or believed to be in danger, the AMBER alert system can be activated by law enforcement. Activating the AMBER alert system consists of utilizing various forms of mass communication to provide the general public with descriptive information about the abducted or endangered child in hopes that the child will be safely

recovered. AMBER alerts were first issued through television and radio broadcasts, but have since expanded to utilize a wide variety of mass media mediums. Zgoba (2004) writes that, "bulletins are posted with relevant information and communicated via changeable message signs on highways (CMS), radio, television and the Internet" (74). Along with the mass media mediums listed by Zgoba (2004), AMBER alerts can now be received via cell phones, pagers, PDA's, email accounts, and lottery machines.³

Once an AMBER alert has been issued, the system relies on the public's assistance in locating and recovering the abducted or endangered child. Burns (2001) believes that the AMBER alert system can be traced back several centuries to the "hue and cry" where English subjects were required to act if they witnessed a crime being committed. He further believes that, "The recent shift in community policing provides ample evidence of law enforcement relying on the public for help. From citizens on patrol to neighborhood watch, the public today is actively fighting crime" (2001).

In addition to requiring the public's assistance for help, the AMBER alert system's usefulness is contingent upon the ability to quickly issue and disseminate an AMBER alert. According to a 1997 study conducted by the Washington State Attorney General's office, 74% of children abducted by strangers are killed within the first three hours of being abducted.⁴ Based on this principle of a rapid response, Zgoba (2004) explains that, "the foundation of the alert system is embedded in the belief that as more time elapses, the likelihood of recovering a missing child decreases. Consequently, the notion of 'beating the clock' is of primary importance" (74).

Shortly after its creation in the Dallas/Forth Worth area, the AMBER alert system gained popularity, leading to the development and implementation of it across the United

States. Currently, 114 total plans exist, consisting of 50 statewide plans, 27 regional plans, and 37 local plans.⁵ These AMBER alert plans allow for alerts to be issued across an entire state or in specific regional or local coverage areas. In the United States, the majority of these state, regional, and local plans are known as AMBER alert plans although certain states such as Georgia and Arkansas have named their plans in honor of other missing or abducted children.⁶ The popularity of the AMBER alert system is due to a few successful cases in which it has been used to assist law enforcement in successfully recovering an abducted or endangered child. One of these successful recoveries includes the incident of two-teenage girls in California who were abducted at knife-point by a stranger and who were later rescued after the state's AMBER alert system was activated and an animal control officer spotted the abductor's vehicle.⁷ This popularity has also led to the creation of AMBER alert type systems in other countries like England.⁸

In April of 2003, President George W. Bush signed into law the Prosecutorial Remedies and Other Tools to End the Exploitation of Children Today (PROTECT) Act, which consisted of various child protection tools. The PROTECT Act "established a National Amber Alert Program and allowed for national coordination of state and local Amber Alert Plans" (USDOJ 2003) and subsequent funding. The National AMBER Alert Plan is administered through the Department of Justice by the National AMBER Alert Coordinator.

AMBER Alert Criteria

On the surface, a national missing children's alert plan appears to be a valuable law enforcement tool that can aid in the recovery of missing and abducted children. The

AMBER alert plan was created in memory of a child that was the victim of a media - depicted stereotypical stranger abduction. Various state AMBER alert websites warn that the effectiveness of the AMBER alert system may decrease if it is over-used or if the public feels that there is no real danger to the child. Consequently, activation of the AMBER alert system should only occur in the most serious child abduction cases. In April of 2004, the National AMBER Alert Coordinator, through the Department of Justice, released a set of suggested criteria for law enforcement to utilize in determining whether an AMBER alert should be issued. The suggested criteria include:

There is reasonable belief by law enforcement that an abduction has occurred.

The law enforcement agency believes that the child is in imminent danger of serious bodily injury or death.

There is enough descriptive information about the victim and the abduction for law enforcement to issue an AMBER Alert to assist in the recovery of the child.

The abduction is of a child aged 17 years or younger.

The Child's name and other critical data elements, including the Child Abduction flag, have been entered into the National Crime Information Center (NCIC) System. (Guidance on Criteria for Issuing AMBER Alerts April 2004)

The criterion suggested by the Justice Department is not mandatory, and as such, some AMBER alert systems have developed their own activation criteria which allow AMBER alerts to be issued for all episodes of missing and abducted children cases. While law enforcement may believe that AMBER alerts should only be issued when a child is in real danger, child rights advocates believe otherwise. Marc Klaas, whose daughter was abducted and killed by a stranger, believes that law enforcement does not

issue AMBER alerts fast enough and that, “Little girls are dying out there and somebody better be there speaking up for them.”⁹ Statements like these highlight the differing opinions about the activation of the AMBER alert system.

With the discretion to activate the AMBER alert system in the hands of law enforcement, some parents believe that law enforcement should be held responsible when they fail to activate it. After a 15-year-old Nebraskan girl was abducted and killed without the police ever activating the state’s AMBER alert system, her parents sued, claiming that the “police were not properly trained and supervised in the Amber Alert system and that officers failed to properly interpret the criteria for an Amber Alert and collaborate with other law enforcement agencies” (O’Hanlon, 2004).

Deciding which child abduction cases warrant an AMBER alert is not the only problem that has arisen with the AMBER alert system. False reports of children being abducted have led to the AMBER alert system being activated although no child was actually in danger. This has led lawmakers in at least two states to propose legislation making it a felony to falsely report a child missing that leads to the AMBER alert system being activated.¹⁰ Operational problems have hindered the effectiveness of the AMBER alert system. In California, AMBER alert information is not posted on changeable message signs during “peak travel hours” because “unnecessary congestion” has occurred¹¹ and in one state, “they do not use the term “AMBER Alert” on their CMS, for fear that motorists will confuse the text with a change in the national security threat level.”¹²

Corporate and Government Involvement

The rapid expansion of the AMBER alert system has led to the involvement of corporations such as ESRI, INTEL, Lime Light Networks, Protus and Symantec.¹³ Other corporations such as Sprint have allowed AMBER alerts to be sent through their various communication mediums with the possibility of reaching up to 68,000 employees.¹⁴ The Internet service provider, American Online (AOL), has also allowed AMBER alerts to be issued through its server to 26 million members.¹⁵

Individuals and businesses have also been able to capitalize on the popularity of the AMBER alert system by incorporating the AMBER alert acronym into a variety of missing and abducted children products. The website www.preamberalert.com allows for individuals to keep data about their family, including pictures, on a server that can be quickly accessed in case their child is abducted.¹⁶ The website www.amberwatch.com sells children's watches for \$49.95 that, when activated by the child both emits a 115 decibel noise and lights up. The watch also keeps time and, if it is removed by the abductor, it is automatically activated.¹⁷

Like corporations and businesses, the government has also promoted the AMBER alert system. Each year, January 13, the day that Amber Hagerman was abducted, is observed as AMBER Alert Awareness Day. In May 2006, the U.S. Postal Service will release the AMBER alert stamp, featuring a woman's face wrapping her arm around a child's face. It is inscribed with the words "AMBER ALERT saves missing children". The government, through the US Department of Justice, maintains the website (www.amberalert.gov) that provides various pieces of literature on the AMBER alert system.¹⁸

History of Missing and Abducted Children

The AMBER alert system is only one component of the complex social problem of missing and abducted children. Beginning in the early 1980's, the public's attention was directed towards the growing concern over missing and abducted children. Tragic stories of strangers abducting, molesting, and killing children gained considerable media attention. The media portrayed these events as the norm in child abduction cases, thus creating a stereotypical image of the stranger abduction. In reality, each year a relatively small number of children disappear or are kidnapped and killed by strangers. The majority of child abduction cases involve circumstances where the child and abductor are known to each other, such as in cases of non-custodial parent abductions. Despite the low frequency of stereotypical child abductions, the public perception of this problem is ingrained with these stranger abductions.

The current media and public reaction following cases of strangers abducting children is part of a continuous cycle throughout the history of the United States. The first stranger abduction in 1874 received extensive media attention when a four-year-old boy from Pennsylvania was abducted by a stranger and held for ransom (Fass 1997). In 1932, the kidnapping of the son of Charles Lindbergh, the famous aviator, was considered the crime of the century (Kappeler and Potter 2005; Forst and Blomquist 1991) and fueled a national media circus (Newton 2002). Eventually the child's decomposed body was found. The result of the Lindbergh baby's abduction was the passing of the 1932 Lindbergh Law, making it illegal to kidnap a person across state lines (Newton 2002). The Lindbergh baby abduction exemplifies what has developed into the typical response

of a concerned public followed by the reassurances of government officials through the passing of legislation.

Like the Lindbergh Law, the AMBER alert system was part of a popular legislative effort by the public and politicians to protect children from danger. These efforts have encompassed a variety of social problems that have been deemed threats to children and that have required a legislative response. Kappeler and Potter (2005) write that, "In the eighteen-month period from 1997 to mid-1998, more than 50 laws were passed with names like Jenna's Law (New York) and Stephanie's Law (Kansas)" (73). Various examples exist of tragic abduction cases that have led to new forms of child protection laws. In the 1990's, the abduction and murder of Megan Kanka by a convicted sex offender living in her neighborhood led to greater community awareness and the creation of community notification laws. In regards to Megan's law, Terry and Cling (2004) write that it "mandates registration and community notification of individuals who commit any type of sexual offense against an adult or child" (246).

The recent public response to strangers abducting children began in the late 1970's and early 1980's with a few cases of children being harmed. In 1979, a six-year-old boy named Etan Patz left for his school and was never seen again. As part of the media campaign to find him, Etan became the first child to have his picture placed on a milk carton (Kappeler and Potter 2005 citing King 2004). In 1983, President Ronald Reagan declared May 25th, the day that Etan disappeared as National Missing Children's Day (Fass 1997). Less than two years after the disappearance of Etan, the public would be outraged by another tragic stranger abduction and murder of a child.

In 1981, six-year-old Adam Walsh was abducted by a stranger from a Sears retail store in Hollywood, Florida while his mother shopped. Adam's decapitated head was found floating in a river over one hundred miles away from where he had been abducted (Walsh 1997). Fueled by a fearful public and the assertions by child rights advocates, politicians, and the media that children everywhere were in danger of being harmed, the missing and abducted children movement received considerable attention. Kappeler and Potter (2005) explain that, "From milk cartoons to flyers in utility bills to television documentaries, Americans were made aware of the child abduction 'epidemic'" (53,54).

This "epidemic" has continued well into the new millennium. Cases of missing and abducted children still garner considerable media attention and are able to influence the public's perception of children in danger. The media attention was never more present than in the summer of 2002. A few cases of stereotypical child abductions across the country were portrayed as a crisis. Among the cases highlighted was the story of Elizabeth Smart who was abducted by a homeless man who had once worked on her house and subsequently held her captive until a successful rescue (Smart 2003). Although there was not necessarily an increase in abductions that year (Smart 2003), it was referred to in the media as the "summer of missing children" (Smart 2003) and the "summer of abductions" (Zgoba 2004). This media depiction served to reinforce the notion of rampant abductions by strangers.

The parents of Elizabeth Smart were ardent supports of the AMBER alert system and they, like other parents of abducted children, thought that legislation was necessary to prevent stranger abductions. Unfortunately, the social problem of missing and abducted children is more complex than what reactive legislation can fix. The majority of

missing and runaway children cases have occurred because of problems within the home and family structure rather than from the stranger abduction of a child. Considerable resources and effort have been spent in trying to reassure a concerned public that appropriate laws and regulations exist to protect children. Unfortunately, these legislative efforts have yet to address social issues within the home.

The AMBER alert system can be used by law enforcement when a child is in danger. After a few successful recoveries of abducted children, the AMBER alert system was deemed a useful tool in the recovery of children. Recently, though, the effectiveness of the AMBER alert system in assisting in the recovery of missing and abducted children has come under closer scrutiny. In a study conducted by the Scripps Howard News Service, 233 AMBER alerts that were issued during the year 2004 were analyzed. Among the major findings were that 48 AMBER alerts were issued for children who had not been abducted and that 46 AMBER alerts were “made for children who were lost, had run away or were the subjects of hoaxes and misunderstandings” (Hargrove 2005).

Research Question

The broad criteria of the AMBER alert system allows for an AMBER alert to be issued in various situations where a child may be in danger. The research question will focus on being recovered alive when an AMBER alert is issued. The first section of the following chapter examines the related literature regarding the amount and types of child abductions and the conditions that are associated with these abductions. The second section of Chapter Two examines social construction and its relation to missing and abducted children, including the existence of a moral panic within this social problem.

Chapter Three will discuss the methodology used for the analysis of the AMBER alert system. Chapter Four will discuss the findings and results. Chapter Five will discuss the results, study limitations, policy implications and recommendations for future research.

CHAPTER 2

LITERATURE REVIEW

The broad criteria for activating the AMBER alert system have allowed law enforcement the ability to issue AMBER alerts for a variety of abduction episodes where a child may be in danger. Contrasting the media's view of stereotypical child abduction's numerous types of abductions can and do occur to children. The abductor may be a family member or family friend or even a complete stranger that is unknown to the abducted child.

The literature specially addressing the AMBER alert system is limited, but literature regarding the various issues surrounding missing and abducted children provides a valuable insight into this problem. Since the AMBER alert system can encompass a wide range of abduction episodes the nature and extent of missing and abducted children is examined first. The literature provides estimates on the different episodes of missing and abducted children cases.

The second part of this literature review examines the question of why cases of missing and abducted children occur, placing the problem in a broader context of the social construction of missing and abducted children. This social construction has led to a public that is fearful of stranger abductions and has allowed the AMBER alert system to expand greatly with little consideration given to the rational behind utilizing a missing children alert system.

The Nature and Extent of Missing and Abducted Children

Determining the actual nature and extent of the missing and abducted children problem is based primarily on estimates and has been a matter of great debate. Researchers have pointed out that the actual number of missing children is unknown (Forst and Blomquist 1991). Defining the concept of a missing or abducted child has been open to scrutiny, as no specific legal category of missing children exists (Forst and Blomquist 1991). Boudreaux, Lord, and Etter (2000) identified four reasons for the scarcity of accurate child abduction information: (1) the 1980's heightened concern and emotion for the safety of children, (2) the combination of different types of abductions in early statistics, (3) child abductions not being reported to police or the NCMEC, and (4) variations in state laws (64).

NISMART

A primary source for literature on missing and abducted children involves data collected from the National Incidence Studies of Missing, Abducted, Runaway, Thrown-away Children (NISMART). In an attempt by the United States Congress to understand the problems of missing and abducted children, the 1984 Missing Children's Act required the Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention (OJJDP) "to conduct periodic studies to determine the number of children reported missing and the number recovered in a given year" (Hammer et al. 2004, 2). NISMART-1 used data collected in 1988 and was published in 1990, while NISMART-2 used data collected in 1998 and was published in 2001. The problem with NISMART-1 was a, "lack of standardized definition of a 'missing child' made it impossible to provide a single estimate of missing

children” (Sedlak et al. 2002, 2). The NISMART-2 has been released in a series of bulletins available from the OJJDP website.

NISMART-2 utilized data collected from four sources. These sources included: (1) the National Household Survey of Adult Caretakers, a telephone survey conducted with adult caretakers; (2) the National Household Study of Youth, a telephone survey conducted with youth; (3) the Law Enforcement Study, a survey conducted with various law enforcement agencies that met pre-determined criteria pertaining to stereotypical child abductions; and (4) the Juvenile Facilities Study, which interviewed facility staff to determine the amount of children that had run away from “juvenile residential facilities” (Sedlak et al. 2002, 2).

For classification purposes of determining what constitutes a “missing child”, NISMART-2 used two definitions. The first definition was defined as “caretaker missing” which involved children that were missing from their caretakers. The second definition was defined as “reported missing,” meaning that caretakers reported them missing to an agency (Sedlak et al. 2002). The NISMART-2 study defined six different episodes of missing and abducted children: (1) Nonfamily Abductions were those abductions that the child was held for over an hour by force, threat, or harm; (2) Stereotypical kidnapping involved episodes in which strangers held a child overnight, transported them over 50 miles, held the child for ransom, or murdered the child; (3) Family Abductions involved incidents where a court or other related order was violated by interfering with custodial rights; (4) Runaway/Thrownaway episodes in which a runaway leaves without caretaker permission and does not return overnight, or thrown away episodes occurring when a child is asked or told not to return home; (5) “Missing

Involuntary, Lost, or Injured” occurs when a caretaker does not know where the child is and the child is lost, stranded or injured, or the child is unable to contact the caretaker because they are too young; (6) “Missing Benign Explanation” occurs when the caretaker is unaware of where the child is and the caretaker is alarmed, tries to locate the child, or contacts the police (Sedlak et al. 2002).

The results of NISMART-2 show that using the “caretaker missing” child definition resulted in an estimated 1,315,600 children missing from their caretakers in 1999. The 1,315,600 “caretaker missing” children were comprised of the following categories:

- 1,312,800 (99.9) were “returned home alive or located by the time the study data were collected” (Sedlak et al. 2002, 6).
- 48% involved caretaker missing episodes of runaway/throwaway children
- 28% were missing because of benign explanations,
- 15% were lost or injured,
- 9% involved family member abductions,
- 3% were the result of nonfamily perpetrators (Sedlak et al. 2002)

Utilizing the “reported missing” definition, NISMART-2 consisted of these percentages:

- 45% of missing children were runaway/throwaway children,
- 43% were missing for benign reasons
- 8% were lost or injured,
- 7% had been abducted by a family member, and
- 2% had been abducted by a nonfamily member (Sedlak et al. 2002)

Nonfamily Abductions

The episode of stranger abduction from which the AMBER alert system was originally created is discussed in a separate NISMART bulletin regarding incidences of nonfamily abductions. These nonfamily abductions were divided into two groups consisting of the stereotypical child abduction and nonfamily abduction. NISMART-2 defined stereotypical child abductions as a “nonfamily abduction perpetrated by a slight acquaintance or stranger in which a child is detained overnight, transported at least 50 miles, held for ransom or abducted with intent to keep the child permanently, or killed” (Finkelhor, Hammer, and Sedlak, 2002, 2). A stranger was defined as “a perpetrator whom the child or family do not know, or a perpetrator of unknown identity” (Finkelhor, Hammer, and Sedlak, 2002, 2).

The nonfamily abduction definition utilized two lengthy descriptions of a nonfamily abduction that can best be summarized as a nonfamily perpetrator that used physical force or threat of bodily harm, held the child over one hour and moved the child to an isolated area without permission or held a child younger than 15 by force and “conceals the child’s whereabouts, demands ransom, or expresses the intention to keep the child permanently” (Finkelhor, Hammer, and Sedlak, 2002, 2).

Utilizing data collected from the Law Enforcement Survey, NISMART-2 concluded that within nonfamily abductions, there are an estimated 115 stereotypical child abductions and an estimated 58,200 nonfamily abductions (Finkelhor, Hammer, and Sedlak, 2002, 2). In cases of nonfamily abductions, sexual assault occurred in half of the cases. Contrary to the media’s depiction of a young child being the victim of stranger abductions, NISMART-2 found that children over the age of 12 represented 58% of

nonfamily abductions and stereotypical abductions (2002 8). Because of the differing methodologies of the first and second NISMART, it is cautioned that data should not be compared although NISMART-1 found similar results of 200 – 300 case of stereotypical child abductions (Finkelhor, Hammer, and Sedlak, 1990 quoting Finkelhor, Hotaling, and Sedlak, 1990).

The data collected by NISMART show that situations that resemble the nonfamily abduction, and more specifically the stereotypical abduction, are rare events when the total number of missing and abducted children is taken into account.

Legal View and Stereotypical View of Nonfamily Abductions

Various studies have supported or provided more in-depth analysis of the data collected by NISMART in researching nonfamily abduction episodes. These studies have been intertwined with NISMART and provide a closer examination of the data. Finkelhor, Hotaling, and Sedlak (1992) provide insight into how the methodology was derived for episodes of nonfamily and stranger abductions in 1988. Data was collected from three sources that included a national survey of households with children, a national survey of police records, and an analysis of FBI homicide data (226).

Since child abductions can involve different types of abductions, a two view definition was used by the researchers. The first definition was the legal view of an abduction that could be legally defined and the second definition was the public stereotype of the stereotypical child abduction (228). The legal view of abduction allows for a wider interpretation in determining whether a nonfamily abduction has occurred. This type of abduction includes individuals that may or may not be known to the child and little force and movement is required (228). Contrary to this view, the stereotypical

abduction is more limited in scope and requires the involvement of a stranger in cases where: 1) the child was gone overnight, 2) transported a distance of 50 miles or more from the point of the abduction, 3) was killed, 4) was ransomed, 5) the intentions of abductor were to permanently keep the child (228).

The study found that when the legally defined view of a nonfamily abduction was applied, there were 3,200 to 4,600 incidences of these abductions. This number, as discussed earlier, was significantly lower when the stereotypical view of an abduction was applied. In that case, only 200 to 300 cases resembled these types of abductions (233). Cases that involved stranger abduction homicides were significantly lower, with only an estimated 43 to 147 cases involving these episodes (235).

Revisiting the data collected from NISMART-1, Asdigian, Finkelhor, and Hotelling (1995) examined issues surrounding nonfamily abduction episodes. 396 cases meeting a certain criteria and taken from police records of 83 law enforcement agencies were included in their sample. As discussed in the previous study, a two definition view including legally-defined abductions and stereotypical abductions was utilized. Of the 396 cases, 180 were defined as the legal view of an abduction, while 32 cases of abduction were defined using the stereotypical view (219). The major findings of the study included the following:

- There is a distinction in between the legal view of abductions and the stereotypical view.
- Pre-teen Caucasian children were more likely involved in stereotypical abductions by other Caucasians that did not involve a sexual assault.

- A connection exists between sexual assaults and the legally defined view of abductions.
- Episodes of the legal definition of abductions can involve other crimes (Asdigian, Finkelhor, and Hotaling, 1995, 215).

This study shows that nonfamily abductions can involve other components than just the abduction itself and shows the complexity of issues involved in nonfamily child abductions.

Characteristics of Strangers that Abduct Children

Although strangers that abduct and murder children are relatively few in number studying these individuals could lead to a better understanding and prevention of these nonfamily abduction episodes. Using FBI case files and the Violent Criminal Apprehension Program, Beyer and Beasley (2003) conducted in-depth interviews with nonfamily child abductors who killed their victims (1167). The criteria used to determine the sample was that the victim was under 18, the offender was convicted of the murder, and the victim was abducted by the offender (1172). The study found that the gender of the abductor in all cases was a male between the ages of 14 and 58, while 72% were under the age of thirty. The major demographics of the perpetrators included the following:

- Three-fourths were Caucasian
- 60% were married
- 56% did not have any children of their own
- 40% had less than a high school education

- 44% had unskilled jobs
- 76% had no military service
- 88% were raised in Christian households
- 20% had committed animal abuse or torture before the offense
- 36% had a psychiatric diagnosis
- 56% were raised by both biological parents
- 24% had had a parent incarcerated
- 40% were repeat offenders
- 24% used alcohol before age
- 28% had been sexually molested as a child (1167-1172).

Violence in Nonfamily Abductions

As discussed earlier, nonfamily abductions can involve various components within the abduction. One of these components is the use of violence in abductions. Baker et al. (2002) examined the use of violence within nonfamily abductions involving infants. 199 cases of nonfamily infant abductions were analyzed from the NCMEC that occurred between 1983 and 2000 (1218). The NISMART definition of a family abduction was used and violence was defined as “the display of a weapon, physical assault of the victim parent, and/or the death of the victim parent” (1219).

The results of the study found that violence was prevalent in 15% of the infant abduction cases, resulting in 18 homicides involving the mother, parents, and infants (1223). Among the major finding of the study where that:

- Since 1992 there had been a decrease in the number of hospital related abductions while the number of home and non-hospital locations increased

- Violence was used in 70% of the case where the home was the abduction site
- Violence against the mother in infant kidnappings involving Caucasians was more prevalent than other races
- The infant abductors had premeditated the abduction
- 48.1% of the violence cases involved a weapon (Baker et al. 2002)

While this study may not reflect violence in all nonfamily abduction cases, it provides some insight into the complexities of nonfamily abductions.

Family Abduction Episodes

As previously discussed the AMBER alert system originated from a stereotypical child abduction but the broad criteria allows for alerts to be issued in family abduction cases as well. These family abductions in general may include non-custodial parents or someone that is related to the child. Defining what constitutes a family abduction is debatable as Plass (1998) explains, “A single, clear, and uncontested definition of the concept of a family abduction appears to have eluded scholars in the field” (244). The concept of family abduction as defined by NISMART-2 is:

The taking or keeping of a child by a family member in violation of a custody order, a decree, or other legitimate custodial rights, where the taking or keeping involved some element of concealment, flight, or intent to deprive a lawful custodian indefinitely of custodial privileges (Hammer, Finkelhor, and Sedlak, 2002a 2).

NISMART-2 found that in 1999 there were 203,900 children involved in family abductions. As previously discussed, NISMART used two definitions for missing children that included “caretaker missing” and “reported missing” episodes. Using these

two definitions, there were 117,200 and 56,500 missing children, respectively (2002 2). Among the findings of the NISMART-2 section on family abduction episodes, children younger than 6 were involved in 44% of the abductions, the biological father was responsible for 53% of the family abductions, 35% of the abductions occurred during the summer months, and 46% of family abductions lasted less than a week (Hammer, Finkelhor, and Sedlak, 2002a). As with nonfamily abductions, the literature regarding family abductions is varied and utilizes some of the data collected from the NISMART series.

Finkelhor, Hotaling, and Sedlak (1991) identified three reasons why family abductions have gained increased attention. These reasons include the increase in divorces involving children, the increase in legal contest for custody, and a change in social attitudes and legal presumptions regarding the allocation of custody (805). The study used the Household Survey of NISMART. Previous to NISMART-2 family abductions like the nonfamily abduction counterpart used two definitions to determine a family abduction. The first definition was a broad-scope definition that involved episodes that occurred:

When a family member takes a child in violation of a custody agreement or decree or when a family member in violation of a custody agreement or decree fails to return or give over a child at the end of a legal or agree upon visit, and the child is away at least over-night (Finkelhor, Hotaling, and Sedlak, 1991, 808)

In contrast a policy-focal definition was defined as episodes in which:

An attempt was made to conceal the taking or the whereabouts of the child and to prevent contact with the child; or the child was transported out of state; or there was evidence that the abductor had intended to keep the child indefinitely or permanently affect custodial privileges (Finkelhor, Hotaling, and Sedlak, 1991, 808)

In 1988, there were 354,100 broad-scope family abductions, 163,200 policy-focal abductions, and 44,000 attempted abductions (809). The study found that in half of the family abduction cases, the location of the child was known. Additionally a majority of family abductions occurred after a considerable period of time and sixty percent of the abducted children were under formal custody order (815).

Hegar and Greif (1991) examined the issue of family abductions. They explain that in episodes of family abductions, the mothers and fathers that abduct their children are portrayed differently. Mothers that abduct their children are seen as escaping abuse, while fathers that abduct their children are portrayed as potential abusers or molesters (421).

Hegar and Greif's study was conducted as a survey to 371 parents who had been involved in a family abduction and who had contacted a missing children organization. The intent of the study was to understand the perceptions of the parent that did not abduct the child. Findings from the survey showed that the majority of marriages had domestic violence present and violence was associated in one of out eight cases (424). Additionally, most of the parents had been concerned about an abduction, stating, "that the abduction was intended to hurt them or to show the abductors anger" (424).

In the event a child goes missing or is abducted, law enforcement must decide if an AMBER alert should be issued. That decision can have serious ramifications on the life or death of an abducted child. Plass, Finkelhor, and Hotaling (1995) looked at law enforcement's response to episodes of family abductions. Using family abduction episode data collected from NISMART, they analyzed 104 broad-scope episodes. While the researchers felt that police responded appropriately to a family abduction 62% of parents

reported feeling “somewhat” or “very” dissatisfied with the way that these cases were handled by the police (213). The majority of these family abductions lasted less than three days and 24% of the episodes involved some harm to the child.

Moral Panics

As shown by the NISMART series, the actual number of media-depicted stereotypical stranger abductions is limited. Despite the rarity of these episodes, much concern and focus is still placed on preventing these types of abductions. The result has been a fearful public that is constantly inundated with reminders of missing children so much so that this phenomenon has been deemed a “social problem”.

Best (1990) explains that throughout the past centuries various individuals referred to as child savers have brought forth issues that faced children. This had led to the portrayal of the rebellious child, the deprived child, the sick child, and the child victim (4-5). The child savers come from various fields and have gained prominence beginning in the 1970s and 1980s. Best (1990) writes that “The image of the child menaced by deviants has shaped public reactions to a surprisingly wide range of social problems” (6).

In understanding the concern for the child-victim, Best (1990) identifies two contradictory explanations within folk wisdom. The first explanation offered is the social decline in society which has led to greater dangers that face children therefore because there are more problems more attention needs to be paid to them (8). The second explanation offered is that society has progressed to a greater understanding of the dangers of facing children and so society is more aware of the problems dangers facing

children (9). In defining a social problem, two contrasting views have emerged. The first is the “objectivist” view which can be explained as:

A particular condition in society exists and constitutes a social problem because it threatens the quality or length of life of a substantial number of people (McCorkle and Miethe 2002, 11).

The second view of a social problem is the “constructionist view” which is:

A social problem is a product of claims-makers activities by groups regarding the existence of and threat posed by a certain condition. The objective threat posed by a condition is far less important than the persuasiveness of the claims made by activist groups with respect to a putative condition (McCorkle and Miethe 2002, 11).

One of the keys to understanding how social problems are constructed is to examine groups known as “claim-makers.” McCorkle and Miethe (2002) define these groups as those “who attempt to persuade the public, perhaps more importantly policy-makers, that a particular condition is deserving of the collective designation of a social problem” (11). Claim-makers have made assertions that have generated social concern over issues ranging from the general welfare of children to more specific issues including pedophile rings (Jenkins 1998), satanic ritual abuse in child day care centers (De Young 2004), and crack abuse by mothers during pregnancy (Humphries 1999). The fear generated from these incidents has generated concern within society that can be described as a “moral panic,” a term which was first introduced by British researchers in the early 1970s (Goode & Ben-Yehuda 1994; Thompson 1998; McCorkle and Miethe 1998).

One of the first researchers to examine “moral panics” was Stanley Cohen who used the concept to explain what happened following a relatively minor incident that occurred in 1964 in Clacton, England. Two groups of youth known as the “Mod’s and Rockers” were involved in a few altercations and acts of vandalism over a weekend but

posed no actual threat to the community. The subsequent reaction by those in power was over-exaggerated and portrayed the problem as a threat and growing epidemic, regardless of the fact that there was no real threat (Goode & Ben-Yehuda 1994). Cohen defined “moral panics” as when:

A condition, episode, person or group of persons emerges to become defined as a threat to societal values and interests; nature is presented in a stylized and stereotypical fashion by the mass media; the moral barricades are manned by editors, bishops, politicians and other right-thinking people; socially accredited experts pronounce their diagnoses and solutions; ways of coping are evolved or ... resorted to; the condition then disappears, submerges or deteriorates and becomes more visible. Sometimes the subject of the panic is quite novel and at other times it is something which has been in existence long enough, but suddenly appears in the limelight. Sometimes the panic passes over and is forgotten, except in folklore and collective memory; at other times it has more serious and long-lasting repercussions and might produce such changes as those in legal and social policy or even in the way society conceives itself. (quoted in Goode and Ben-Yehuda, 1994, 24)

During the past 25 years, numerous claim-makers that Best (1990) referred to as child savers have emerged to reinforce the public's perception of the stranger abduction “epidemic”.

Missing and Abducted Children Claim-Makers

As previously shown by NIMSART, the stereotypical child abduction is a rare event, yet garners considerable media attention. In the 1980's, after a few episodes of strangers abducting children, various claim-makers offered questionable statistics (Best 1990) as to the nature and extent of child abductions. Among the strongest claim-makers were parents of abducted children. After the abduction and murder of his son, Adam Walsh, John Walsh became an out-spoken child and victims' rights advocate. In his book, *Tears of Rage*, Walsh writes that eight weeks after his son's abduction he testified before

the Senate Subcommittee on Investigations and General Oversight of the Committee on Labor and Human Resources, telling them that:

since Adam's death, we had contacted nearly twenty small missing-children agencies throughout the country, and that there were estimates of over 150,000 missing children each year-100,000 runaways and victims of parental abduction-and perhaps as many as 50,000 stranger abductions (Walsh 1997, 169).

While these statistics were based on unsubstantiated claims and did not represent the true nature and extent of missing children as later shown by NISMART, they nonetheless, were seen as a Holy Grail (Fass 1997) which created conditions of fear about the safety and welfare of children. Fass explains that:

At the height of the missing children's furor in the mid 1980's, the NCMEC and other missing children organizations as well as children's advocates went beyond the numbers of abducted by strangers to merge all the missing into a single pool. In doing so, these organizations lost their most effective means to rally emotional support. Confusing numbers for children, they encouraged anxiety for one's own children, not assistance for others (1997, 253).

A large amount of the literature has looked at the social aspects related to the problem of missing and abducted children. Before the release of NISMART-1, Fritz and Altheide (1987) studied the social construction of missing children and the mass media. The study showed a video entitled "Child Find" to a denominational church forum and students in two upper-level college courses (482). The video offered counterclaims to the number and extent of missing and abducted children. Before viewing the video, participants were given a questionnaire to examine their fear that their children could be abducted (482). After viewing the video, participants were re-administered the questionnaire.

The results of the study found that before viewing “Child Find”:

- 61% felt that cases of missing children were a serious problem
- Only 7.3% felt that 1.5 million missing children was a statistically fallacy
- 68% felt that the missing children problem was a national crisis
- 73% had a moderate or greater fear of stranger abductions
- 37% thought a child had a 50/50 chance of stranger abduction
- 22% thought the majority of missing children were runaways
- 58% thought that in the last two years a drastic increase in the percentage of child abductions had occurred. (Fritz and Altheide 1987)

After viewing “Child Find” the study found that:

- Only 33% felt that cases of missing children were a serious problem
- Only 33% felt that abductions by strangers was a crisis
- 40% questioned the number of 1.5 million missing children
- 28% had a moderate or greater fear of stranger abductions
- 15% thought a child had a 50/50 chance of stranger abduction
- 28% had a concern for the issue of missing children (Fritz and Altheide 1987)

The study also found that 76% had learned about missing children from the mass media. In examining the mass media, the majority had learned about missing children from the local TV news, the docudrama “Adam”, newspaper articles, posters, and milk cartons (1987 484). The study concluded that the mass media plays a critical role in the

emergence of social problems (1987 488) and that “people’s perceptions can reflect the media message that they receive” (1987 488).

In another study, Lofquist (1997) performed a content analysis of a major newspaper in Rochester, New York examining media coverage and the construction of two different crimes over a three-month period. The study compared the coverage of a four-year-old girl who disappeared from her neighborhood with a corporate crime that involved a salt mine accident that led to the collapsing and eventual flooding of the mine.

The study found that 43% of the articles related to the kidnapping case were on the front page or editorial section as compared to 37% for the mine accident (1997 251). Lofquist examined the content categories of cause, harm, responsibility, focus, and sources. The kidnapping case was first portrayed as a crime that involved a stranger, while the cause of the mine collapse was an accident. The harm in the kidnapping case occurred to the victim, while in the mine collapse, the harm was done to the mine and the environment. In deciding who was responsible for the kidnapping, blame was placed on a stranger. Because the mine collapse was seen as an accident, the blame for responsibility was limited.

The focus after the kidnapping was on secondary events, whereas the mine collapse had only four secondary stories. Lofquist (1997) explains that the kidnapping case “fits into one of the most powerful and most pervasive hegemonic narratives of recent years: innocent, law-abiding individuals, particularly children, as the prey of pathological strangers” (1997 258). Both stories consisted of an equivalent number of sources, but the kidnapping case included child activists as sources, while “official” sources were used for the mine collapse (1997 255). Later, it was learned that the child

had been kidnapped and killed by a former neighbor which went against the media's depiction of the kidnapping. The mining company was not faulted for the collapse, and even received subsidies to open a new mine (1997 261).

Runaway Children

As shown by the NISMART series, a social problem within the issue of missing and abducted children is the high percentage of runaway/throwaway cases which has been constructed as a social problem. AMBER alerts have been issued in these runaway cases. As with the previous episodes of abductions, defining a runaway can be difficult. NISMART determined a runaway if one of the three following criteria was met:

A child leaves home without permission and stays away overnight

A child 14 years old or younger (or older and mentally incompetent) who is away from home chooses not to come home when expected to and stays away overnight

A child 15 years old or older who is away from home chooses not to come home and stays away two nights (Hammer, Finkelhor, and Sedlak, 2002b, 2).

A throwaway as defined by NISMART was:

A child is asked or told to leave home by a parent or other household adult, no adequate alternative care is arranged for the child by a household adult, and the child is out of the household overnight

A child who is away from home is prevented from returning home by a parent or other household adult, no adequate alternative care is arranged for the child by a household adult, and the child is out of the house-hold overnight (Hammer, Finkelhor, and Sedlak, 2002b, 2)

NISMART found that in 1999 an estimated 1,682,900 youth had been involved in a runaway/throwaway incident with the majority of the youth between the ages of 15-17 and had returned within one week of the episode (2002 6). Society's view of runaway children has changed. The United States, being a country built on individualism, has had

runaway children since colonial times (Forst and Blomquist 1991). Whitbeck and Hoyt (1999) explain that, “In the past we have tended to romanticize precocious independence calling up visions of Huckleberry Finn, the young cowboy, or later the young hobo of the Great Depression” (1999 5). In Colonial America and well into the 19th – century, it was not uncommon to find people as young as seven or less on their own leading independent lives. Typically, a boy between the ages of 7 and 14 would engage in minor jobs, such as running errands and chopping wood, while after that age, apprenticeship into some trade was taken up (Kett 1977 13-18).

Children who run away today find that street life is less romantic than it used to be. Whitbeck and Hoyt (1999) quoting Whitbeck and Simons (1993) in a study of runaway children in Des Moines found that, “Half the adolescent males reported having been beaten up on the streets, 57% had been threatened with a weapon, and 42% actually assaulted with a weapon” (1999 9). In that same study, “Adolescent homeless women reported more than twice the rate of sexual assault (37.5%) than adult homeless women (14.7%)” (1999 9). While children runaway for various reasons, Forst and Blomquist (1991) point out that a growing idea on runaway children is that it is a psychologically healthy reaction to a dysfunctional family situation (1991).

Runaway children have not always been considered a social problem. Staller (2003) looked at why runaway children are now considered a social problem. The study was a longitudinal qualitative case study that looked at the portrayal of runaway youth in the print media between 1960 and 1978 in the New York Times. Staller (2003) identified three stages of the construction of the social problem of runaways. The first stage between 1960 and 1966 was identified as “the unconsturtd runaway” (334). During this

stage running away was portrayed as normal and an adventure with no danger, with the child usually returning home within a short period of time (334). The second stage identified by Staller (2003) was the “runaway panic” in 1967 (336). It was during this year that the “hippies” became a recognized “problem” created by a moral panic. Staller (2003), writes that, “The crisis necessitated reconstructing a runaway ideological package that made sense under new social and rhetorical conditions” (2003 337). Running away during this period was soon viewed as dangerous. It was during this stage that attention shifted to female runaways (339). The third stage Staller calls the “Constructed Runaway problem” between 1968 and 1978 (340) as runaways were viewed as not returning home and were intertwined with prostitution as a means to survive (340).

Summary of the Literature

The review of the literature examines a variety of issues involving missing and abducted children. Determining the actual nature and extent of missing and abducted children has been complicated by numerous factors that have included issues with conceptualizing what constitutes a missing or abducted child. NISMART has become a major source for much of the data and has provided estimates and characteristics of missing and abducted children episodes. The data from NISMART found that the stereotypical child abduction that the AMBER alert system arose from, are rare events, and in fact the majority of missing children are the result of runaway/throwaway episodes.

The literature available on nonfamily abductions is diverse and includes attempts to understand the stranger abductor and violence in these nonfamily abductions. AMBER

alerts can also be issued in family abductions where the child may be in danger. Determining a family abduction has been complicated by the lack of a standardized definition. Studies have also examined family members that did not abduct their child and law enforcements response to a family abduction.

Because of the heightened fear of strangers abducting children, a moral panic has been created. Moral panics regarding the safety of children have occurred before with a wide array of social issues. In the 1980's, numerous claim-makers and child savers emerged that provided frightening statistics on the number of missing and abducted children. These statistics were greatly exaggerated and were widely accepted as fact. Although NISMART has shown that these claim-makers and child savers were, for the most part, incorrect, the truth is still blurred by the media's reinforcement of these dangers to children. Studies have shown that when presented with the accurate information of missing and abducted children, the public is not as fearful as before. With all the attention placed on preventing these relatively rare stranger abductions, the issues of runaway/throwaway children, although once not considered a social problem, are ignored.

The previous literature review has also shown that episodes of parental and runaway children comprise a large majority of missing and abducted children cases and that the abductor and child are known to each other. The media depicted stereotypical stranger abduction is statistically rare but is the most feared type of abduction by the public. The AMBER alert system originated from a child abduction that resembled the view of the media depicted stereotypical stranger abduction. The methodology is guided by the following hypothesis: the AMBER system is successful in recovering children

alive but the majority of these abductions will involve episodes where the child and abductor are known to each other not and not resemble the stereotypical child abduction.

CHAPTER 3

METHODOLOGY

This chapter discusses the methodology used to analyze AMBER alerts for this study. It includes a description of the data sources, sample procedures, content analysis and the coding of the variables.

Data Sources

Within the last seven years, the AMBER alert system has progressed in complexity and scope. Compiling a list of every AMBER alert issued since its inception in 1997 is complicated by numerous issues. An initial issue is the lack of access to a central government or non-government organization in charge of collecting and analyzing each AMBER alert that has been issued. Each State maintains its own AMBER alert website that provides information on their system. This information varies from state to state. An example of this is the state of Kansas. Among other things, Kansas maintains a detailed archive of each AMBER alert that has been issued in that state. On the other hand, states like Georgia do not maintain an AMBER alert archives section on their website and instead only provide information about their alert system.

Another issue is the rapid expansion of the AMBER alert system over the last nine years. Numerous state, regional, and local plans exist and have developed their own criteria for issuing an AMBER alert. These various AMBER alert systems have become

operational at different points in time. In addition, numerous AMBER alert related organizations and businesses monitor and track AMBER alerts using their own criteria and own data sources. This leads to certain AMBER alerts being displayed only by a specific organization or business.

Given these problems and issues, the current study utilized multiple data sources to compile a list of AMBER alerts. In particular, six data sources were used to compile a sample for this study. These data sources include:

- AMBER alert issued through the Code AMBER website
- AMBER alerts issued through the Project Safekids website
- AMBER alerts issued through individual state AMBER alert websites
- AMBER alert success story narratives available from the NCMEC website.
- AMBER alerts available in the AMBER alert achieves from the America's Most Wanted website.
- AMBER alerts gathered from online newspaper and news achieves.

Sampling Procedures

For purposes of this study, AMBER alerts were analyzed in four regions of the United States. These regions included the Northeast, Midwest, South, and West regions. Within each region, the three most populous states based on the U.S. Census population estimates for 2005 were selected. Using this selected criterion, the Northeast region consisted of New York, Pennsylvania, and New Jersey. The Midwest region consisted of

Illinois, Ohio, and Michigan. The South region consisted of Texas, Florida, and Georgia while the West region consisted of California, Washington, and Arizona. The sample frame for this study consisted of AMBER alerts issued in the selected states between January 1, 2005 and December 31, 2005. The year 2005 was selected for the following reasons: (1) This year offered the most recent data available for analysis; and (2) during the year 2005, Hawaii became the final state to implement its state-wide AMBER alert system.

The ultimate sample size for this study involved 101 unique AMBER alerts occurring within the specified time frame. To increase the reliability of the variables, each AMBER alert was cross-checked through the six data sources. This process also guaranteed that AMBER alerts were not duplicated within the data set or issued by more than one state or organization. Only cases with complete information about the victim, alleged offender, and case outcome were included in the sample. A total of 91 AMBER alerts of the original 101 cases met this criteria for this study.

Content Analysis and the Coding of Variables

According to Maxfield and Babbie (2001), a content analysis is “the systematic study of messages and the meaning those messages convey” (329). Content analysis can be used on various communication mediums, including books, magazines, films, songs, speeches, television programs, letters, laws and constitutions (329). There are two distinct types of content analysis that include manifest and latent content analysis. Manifest content analysis examines the face value of the word, whereas latent content analysis examines the word for what it is suppose to mean (Berg 2004).

To analyze and understand the characteristics of an AMBER alert, a content analysis of the circumstances involving each AMBER alert in the sample was conducted. These AMBER alerts were analyzed by examining the manifest content of the recorded message. For this study dependent and independent variables were examined.

The major dependent variable utilized for this analysis was whether or not the child was recovered alive after an AMBER alert had been issued. This variable called "abductee recovered alive" was coded as 1= Yes and 0= No/Other outcomes. This particular contrast is used because the specific purpose of the AMBER alert system is to recover the child alive.

Two major independent variables in this study were examined. The first major independent variable examined was determining whether an abduction had actually occurred. This independent variable called "abduction occurred" was coded as 1=Yes and 0=No. The occurrence of an abduction was conceptualized as any episode that resulted in the issuance of an AMBER alert, but which did not fit into any of the four following categories: (1) the episode was later determined to be a hoax, (2) the episode involved a child who had left willingly or runaway, (3) the episode involved a child who was lost or missing, or (4) the episode was considered to be simply unfounded.

The second major independent variable was the type of abduction episode. Six abduction episodes were identified. The first abduction episode that was identified involved family members related to the child or family as the abductor (e.g. mothers and fathers). The second abduction episode involved those individuals who were not related to the child or family but were known to them prior to the abduction (e.g. babysitters and next door neighbors). The third abduction episode involved those individuals who were

previously unknown to each other or to the individuals responsible for the care of the child (e.g. stereotypical stranger abductions). The fourth abduction episode involved those cases where the child had not actually been abducted but was either lost, injured or missing. The fifth abduction episode involved those cases where the child had runaway willingly with absence of an abductor. The sixth and final abduction episode involved unfounded abduction episodes where no abduction had actually occurred. For purposes of analysis, these six abduction episodes were recoded into two categories to compare family abductions against all other abduction episodes. This variable is called "Family Member Abductor" and is coded as 1=Yes and 2=No.

Other variables in the analysis included whether multiple children were involved in the abduction (coded 1=Yes and 0=No) and the socio-demographic characteristics of the child and abduction site. These social demographics of the child included the sex of the abducted child (coded 1=Male and 0=Female), the child's race (coded 0=White, 1=Other, and 2=Unknown) and the child's age (coded 1=10 or younger and 0=11 or older). When multiple victims were involved, the demographic characteristics of the youngest child were coded. The place of the abduction was coded by region of the country (coded 1=Northeast, 2=Midwest, 3=South, and 4= West).

CHAPTER 4

FINDINGS AND RESULTS

This chapter provides the findings and results of the AMBER alert analysis. Two primary analyses will be conducted. The first analysis examines the frequency distributions for all variables in this study. The second analysis uses Chi-square tests to determine whether there are any statistically significant relationships between the dependent variable (i.e., outcome of abductions) and the independent variables.

Frequencies Distributions and Descriptive Statistics

As shown in Table 1, over 80% of the child abductees were recovered alive in this sample. The remaining 20% were either no abduction occurred (n=7), deceased (n=4), runaways (n=4) or lost/missing (n=1).

The primary independent variables were whether an abduction occurred and the characteristics of the abductor. Nearly 86% of all cases in this study were found to be abduction cases and the offender in the majority of these cases of missing children were family members (54%). Non-family but known individuals (like baby sitters, next-door neighbors) represented about 29% of the abductors. Contrary to what is the stereotypical image of child abduction, only 4% of the abductors were considered strangers.

Table 1 Coding of Variables, Frequencies, Bivariate Statistics

Variable Coding		% (N)	Recovery Status	
Abduction Related Variables			Other	Alive
Recovery Status	0= Other 1= Alive	18.7% (17) 81.3% (74)	—	—
Did Abduction Occur	0 = No 1 = Yes	14.3% (13) 85.7% (78)	13 (100%) 4 (5.1%)	0 (0%) 74 (94.9%)*
Family Abduction	1= Other 2= Family	46.2% (42) 53.8% (49)	14 (33.3%) 3 (6.1%)	28 (66.7%) 46 (93.9%)*
Code Amber Used	0= No 1= Yes	59.3% (54) 40.7% (37)	9 (16.7%) 8 (21.6%)	45 (83.3%) 29 (78.4%)
Multiple Children Abducted	0= No 1= Yes	83.5% (76) 16.5% (15)	61 (80.3%) 2 (13.3%)	15 (19.7%) 13 (86.7%)
Demographic Characteristics				
Sex of Child	0 = Female 1 = Male	64.8% (59) 35.2% (32)	14 (23.7%) 3 (9.4%)	45 (76.3%) 29 (90.6%)
Race of Child	0 = White 1= Other 3 = Unknown	30.8% (28) 35.2% (32) 34.1% (31)	8 (28.6%) 6 (18.8%) 3 (9.7%)	20 (71.4%) 26 (81.3%) 28 (90.3%)
Age of Child	0 = 10 and under 1= 11 and over	75.8% (69) 24.2% (22)	9 (13.0%) 8 (36.4%)	60 (87%)* 14 (63.6%)
Region Abduction Occurred In	1 = Northeast 2 = Midwest 3 = South 4 = West	9.9% (9) 23.1% (21) 35.2% (32) 31.9% (29)	2 (22.2%) 3 (14.3%) 9 (28.1%) 3 (10.3%)	7 (77.8%) 18 (85.7%) 23 (71.9%) 26 (89.7%)

Note: * denotes Chi-square significance value of < .05

When examining the socio-demographic characteristics of these missing children, Table 1 also reveals some differences in terms of their age, race, number of victims, and their location. Approximately 75% of the missing children in this study were 10 years old or younger. Children who were under 3 years old (n=34) were the single most common age group. Nearly two-thirds of these AMBER alerts involved female children (n=59) and the remainder were male (n=32).

The racial distribution of these missing children was equally dispersed among the White (31%), Other races (35%), and unknown categories (34%). The presence of multiple children in the AMBER alert accounted for less than 17% (n=15) of the cases. The South region of the United States comprised 35% (n=32) of the AMBER alerts issued, followed by the West (n=29), Midwest (n=21), and Northeast (n=9).

Cross-Tabulations of the Variables and Chi-Square Tests of Statistical Significance

A series of chi-square tests were conducted to assess whether there was a significant relationship between the outcome of the abduction (coded 1=alive and 0=other) and each of the independent variables in this study. The significant relationships are illustrated with an asterisk (*) in the last column of Table 1. The significance level of the chi-square test was set at the .05 level (i.e., χ^2 value of $p < .05$).

As shown in Table 1, there were three significant relationships between the abduction outcome and the independent variables. First, abduction status and outcome were strongly related. Nearly 95% of abductions resulted in an recovery of the child alive, whereas in all cases of non-abduction the victim was either missing, runaway or the case was a hoax. Second, the abduction outcome and characteristics of the abductor were also significantly related. About 94% of abductions by family members resulted in a live recovery of the victim compared to only 67% among non-family cases. Third, there was a significant relationship between the age of child and abduction outcome such that a smaller proportion of victims under 11 years old (64%) were recovered alive compared to

children 11 or older (87%). There were no other significant differences in the socio-demographic characteristics of missing children and their recovery status.

CHAPTER 5

CONCLUSIONS

Discussion of Results

As seen in the previous chapter's findings, the AMBER alert system can be an effective tool in recovering missing and abducted children alive. The vast majority of AMBER alerts issued in the sample involved an abduction that resulted in the child being recovered alive. Once an AMBER alert has been issued the potential exists for millions of people to become the eyes and ears of law enforcement. A sense of urgency can be generated within the community that one of their most vulnerable members of society is in danger. Members of society can relate to any parent or guardian whose child has been abducted that they too would want as much help as possible from the community in recovering their child alive.

What has emerged from this study is the finding that the typical AMBER alert does not involve a stranger that would resemble the stereotypical child abduction from which the system was conceived from. Instead the majority of AMBER alerts involved abductors that were family members or those individuals that were known to the child or family. In gauging the effectiveness of the AMBER alert system some evidence exists that the system may be effective but does target the stranger abductions. More importantly, it is impossible to determine what proportion of missing or abducted children were returned safely prior to the implementation of AMBER alert. Therefore,

when children are returned safely to their families, we cannot really know if it was because of the AMBER alert system or some other reason. In other words, it is impossible to know for certain if the AMBER alert system has a direct role in the child being recovered alive. It is impossible to know for certain if the AMBER alert system has a direct role in the child being recovered alive.

Study Limitations

Several limitations existed in this study. The primary limitation was the lack of official data on the types and totals of AMBER alerts issued in a given year which could affect the quality of the data. This problem was compounded by the lack of descriptive data and the variations of descriptions each AMBER alert system utilized. Secondly the lack of a standardized definition and variety of abduction episodes within the field hindered the process of establishing a conceptualization of each abduction episode within the study. Finally, only AMBER alerts where the outcomes of the abduction cases were known were included in the study. This limited the sample frame and reduced the sample population.

Policy Implications

Three policy implications can be drawn from this study. First, it would be beneficial if the AMBER alert systems or plans within the United States followed a uniform activation criterion and only under special abduction circumstances deviate from the established activation criteria. This uniform criterion could reduce the AMBER alert

confusion among the general public and lead to better communication among law enforcement personnel.

Secondly, the emphasis from missing and abducted children organizations and individuals along with society would be better suited if abduction education and prevention was more focused on fixing the breakdown of the traditional family unit while balancing the threat of stranger abductions. A great amount of concern and resources have been placed in trying to prevent the rare occurrences of stranger abductions while ignoring the significant problem of family member abductions and runaways. The general public has faced constant reinforcement of stranger abductions and the AMBER alert is one of these reinforcement tools. What this also shows is that the greatest danger to a child arises from family disputes, especially those where the parents are divorced or are in the process of getting a divorce. Citizens need to be made aware that children are not so much in danger of being harmed by complete strangers, but by members of their own family. Law enforcement personnel should be alerted if there is any indication that a divorce/separation could turn violent. This is important in cases where abuse was cited as a reason for divorce.

Future Research

As with the majority of topics as complex and sophisticated as missing and abducted children, numerous avenues exist for future research. This research should be directed to identifying if the AMBER alert system played a direct role in the recovery of an abducted child.

ENDNOTES

1. The story of Amber Hagerman's abduction and murder is described on numerous missing and abducted children websites including State AMBER alert websites.

2. <http://www.dfwamberalert.com/>

3. Lottery Machines Added to Texas Alerts
<http://kxan.com/Global/story.asp?S=1208694&nav=0s3dEX40>

4. http://www.atg.wa.gov/releases/rel_homicide_051397.html

5. www.missingkids.com

6. State of Georgia. "Levi's Call Georgia's Amber Alert Program"
<http://www.state.ga.us/gbi/levi.html>
Morgan Nick Amber Alert "Morgan's Story."
http://www.kthv.com/community/morgannick/morgans_story.asp

7. CBS "Girls: Captor Said He'd Kill Us." August 5, 2002
<http://www.cbsnews.com/stories/2002/08/01/national/main517161.shtml>

8. <http://www.childrescuealert.com/>

9. CNN.com "Amber Alert Timing Questioned." February 16, 2004
<http://www.cnn.com/2004/US/02/16/amber.alert.ap/>

10. ChannelOklahoma.com "Police Say Amber Alert Was Hoax." November 8, 2004
<http://www.channeloklahoma.com/print/3901229/detail.html>

Oklahoma House of Representatives Media Division. "Bill to Make False Amber Alerts Felonies Passes House." March 1, 2005 <http://www.lsb.state.ok.us/house/news7309.html>

Amber Alert Legislation Approved in Senate Judiciary Committee" March 9, 2005
http://www.migop.org.pressreleases/readarticle_printable.asp?type=press&id+2379

11. U.S. Department of Transportation Federal Highway Administration. "Final Report Amber, Emergency, and Travel Time Messaging Guidance For Transportation Agencies." May 27, 2004 <http://www.amberalert.gov/docs/AmberWHReport.pdf>

12. *ibid*

13. <http://www.amberalert911.com/>

14. http://www2.sprint.com/mr/news_dtl.do?id=1911

15. http://www.missingkids.com/missingkids/servlet/NewsEventServlet?LanguageCountry=en_US&PageId=326

16. <https://www.preamberalert.com/>

17. <http://www.amberwatch.com/>

18. <http://www.amberalert.gov/>

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