

## CASE REPORT

### GENERAL

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## False Allegation of Child Abduction\*

**ABSTRACT:** Cases in which a child has been falsely reported as missing or abducted can be extremely challenging to the law enforcement agencies responsible for their investigation. In the absence of a witnessed abduction or an obvious crime scene, it is difficult to determine whether a child has actually been abducted or has become a victim of a homicide and a false allegation. The purpose of this study was to examine falsely alleged kidnapping cases and identify successful investigative strategies. Sixty-one adjudicated false allegation cases involving 66 victims were analyzed. The mean age of the victim was 5 years. Victims came from generally unstable, high-risk family situations and were killed primarily by biological parents. Victims were killed because they were unwanted or viewed as an obstacle to a desired goal, or they were victims of abuse or maltreatment that ended in fatality.

**KEYWORDS:** forensic science, child abduction, filicide, homicide, child abuse, kidnapping, false report

When a child is reported as having been abducted or is missing under suspicious circumstances, there is an immediate and intensive response from law enforcement, the media, and the community in general. Child abduction cases are time-sensitive, resource intensive, emotionally exhausting investigations, which can be difficult to resolve successfully (1,2). Recent studies have provided the law enforcement community with a better understanding of the dynamics of nonfamily child abduction cases, including the motivations and activities of offenders, as well as information and recommendations on specific investigative practices, which have proven to be successful in these difficult cases (1–3). However, while the vast majority of reports of missing children are true, one issue confronting investigators in almost every child abduction case is whether the parent(s), or some other person with responsibility for the victim, actually played a role in the victim's disappearance (3). This is a logical question considering that the U.S. has the fourth highest of rate of child murder by a parent, relative to population size, of 21 developed countries (4).

In the first modern study of filicide (the killing of a child by his/her parent), Resnick (5) found that of the 126 victims where age was known, 67% were 3 years of age and younger. Younger children are very dependent and they compete for attention, affection, and resources of their primary caregivers (5,6). When a parent or other caregiver is involved in the death of a child, the homicide may be disguised or alleged to have been an accident (7). In other cases, the offender may hide the body of the victim and then falsely claim that the child has been kidnapped or that the child is simply missing. This false claim of abduction provides a means to explain the disappearance of the child and to shift the focus of the

investigation toward an unknown kidnapper and away from the offender. It also serves to preserve the image of the ill-fated "good" parent, garnering sympathy and attention (not unlike that of Munchausen Syndrome by Proxy). It is this latter type of case that is the focus of this study.

### Law Enforcement Challenges

False allegation of child abduction cases can be extremely challenging to the law enforcement agencies responsible for their investigation. In the absence of a witnessed abduction or an obvious crime scene, it is difficult to know for certain whether a child has actually been abducted or has become the victim of a homicide and a false allegation. Law enforcement investigators are forced to rely primarily on subjective assessments of whether the reporting party is being truthful, rather than on specific, identifiable criteria. One challenge involves a lack of witnesses. Because most of these cases occur in and around the home or in other private locations, there are generally no identifiable witnesses, outside of family members who are involved, compromised, or unable to disclose (i.e., preverbal siblings). A second challenge involves inconclusive forensic evidence which is either absent, limited, or insufficient. Common evidence, such as fingerprints, hairs, fibers, and blood, is often "reasonably" explained by the offender as unrelated to the incident and, therefore, generally irrelevant to the investigation.

A third challenge to law enforcement is often lack of experience with this type of case. Reported child abductions that end with the death of a child are relatively rare (1); thus, law enforcement agencies often do not have practical experience with these investigations. Consequently, they may find themselves unprepared to handle the task of developing a prosecutable case with little to no physical evidence.

Another possible challenge for law enforcement is the investigator's reluctance to confront a victim parent. Law enforcement resources are directed toward searching for a missing victim and conducting a kidnapping investigation. Even though his/her behavior may be suspicious, with no direct evidence to prove foul play,

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investigators may be reluctant to confront a reporting person who may be exhibiting all the signs of a grieving and emotionally upset parent.

One of the most difficult challenges in these cases is that victims' bodies are often well-hidden, enhancing the charade of a missing victim and delaying their discovery. Delays in body recovery allow what limited evidence may be present to decompose, deteriorate, or vanish entirely.

## Methodology

The purpose of this study was to identify characteristics specific to false allegation cases, based upon information that investigators would have readily available to them early in an investigation. The results of this study could assist the FBI and other law enforcement agencies in identifying potential false allegation cases earlier in the investigative process and discover or develop investigative strategies that are effective in resolving these unique cases.

The following criteria were utilized in identifying cases for inclusion in this project:

- The victim was under 18 years of age.
- The victim was reported to a law enforcement agency as missing or as having been abducted.
- At the time of the report, the victim had already been killed or had been left for dead.
- At the time of the report, the reporting party knew or believed that the victim was dead and knew that the victim was not actually missing.
- The case was adjudicated.

Cases fitting the above criteria were identified from FBI case files, National Center for Missing and Exploited Children (NCMEC) files, media searches, and other research projects (spanning the years 1979–2004). Once a case was identified, the investigating agency was contacted, and case materials were requested. Upon receipt of the case materials, each case was reviewed, a questionnaire completed, and the results coded into a database utilizing SPSS 17.0 software (SPSS Inc., Chicago, IL). Original investigators were telephonically contacted to address any data not obtained from the case materials.

The questionnaire was divided into four sections that highlighted victim, offender, offense, and investigation characteristics. The victim characteristics included the number of victims per case, age, gender, race, birth order, physical or sexual abuse, whether the victim experienced a prolonged separation from the caregiver, changes within the family structure, and whether the victim was classified by the offender as difficult or different.

Offender data included age, gender, race, relation to victim, whether the offender lived with the victim at the time of the offense, employment, education level, influence of drugs/alcohol during the offense, mental history, criminal history, domestic abuse, life stressors, and if multiple offenders were present. If there were multiple offenders, these same variables were captured for secondary (and in one case tertiary) offenders, in addition to the relationship between the primary and other offenders.

Offense characteristics included time of death, time reported missing, time recovered, how incident was reported to law enforcement, who reported the incident, where victim was reportedly abducted, cause of death, weapon type, intention of action that caused death, commission of the homicide, witnesses, postmortem injury, evidence of sexual assault, location of homicide, motor vehicle usage, various distance variables regarding abduction site, homicide site, body disposal, and general body recovery. Additional

offense characteristics included packaging of remains, whether the victim was clothed when the remains were discovered, condition of remains, whether the offender revisited the site, and familiarity of the site to the offender.

Investigation characteristics included key factors that led to the parent or caregiver, resolution of the case, polygraph issues, sentencing, who conducted the investigation, and primary motivation for the offense.

## Victim Characteristics

The total number of victims in this sample was 66. The average age of the victims in this study was 4.5 years, with the median age at 3.5 years. Victim age range was from 1 day to 17 years. There were slightly more female victims than male, with 44% male and 56% female. The victims were primarily Caucasian (70%), with an additional 18% African-American, 8% Hispanic, and 4% biracial.

Victim characteristics are of primary importance when evaluating the legitimacy of a reported abduction. Victims of actual nonfamily abductions are significantly more likely to be women, because the motivation is usually sexual (1,2,8). The average age of nonfamily child abduction homicide victims is 11 years (1). The victim characteristics in this study mirror those of the Department of Health and Human Services (9), which found that children younger than 4 years are at greatest risk of severe injury or death by their parents or caregivers. More than half of the victims in this study were 4 years old or younger.

There were five cases in our study in which two victims (siblings or half-siblings) were murdered during the same event. Three of the five cases were reported as a witnessed abduction, that is, carjacking.

## Offender Characteristics

There were 61 primary offenders responsible for the homicides of 66 victims in this study. Offenders were categorized as primary or secondary, according to their level of participation in the homicide. Primary offenders were directly responsible for the child's homicide; secondary offenders assisted in the homicide and/or cover-up. Most cases (75%;  $n = 54$ ) involved only one offender. There was one case that involved three offenders. About half of the primary offenders were men (51%). The average age of primary offenders in this study was 29 years. In contrast, in true, nonfamily abduction homicides, the average age of offenders is *c.* 28 years, overwhelmingly men with a motivation that was primarily sexual (1). In Table 1, the majority of the offenders were Caucasian (74%), with 20% African-American and 5% Hispanic. Primary offenders were unemployed in 56% of the cases, and slightly over half (53%) of those whose education was known, graduated from high school.

## Offender Criminal History

Primary offenders had a documented criminal history (either adult and/or juvenile) in 57% of the cases. There were adult arrests in 49% of the entire population of offenders. Although their criminal histories were diverse, half of those who had a criminal history were involved in serious offenses, including assaults, sexual assaults, or domestic violence. Twelve had been arrested and/or convicted of larceny or theft offenses, and 11 had prior alcohol- or drug-related convictions. Three had been arrested for crimes involving some kind of deception (bad checks, fraud offenses, impersonation, counterfeiting, forgery, etc.).

TABLE 1—Victim and offender age, gender, and race frequency.

	Sample size <i>N</i>	Age (years)	Gender <i>n</i> (%)		Race <i>n</i> (%)		
		<i>X</i> (SD)	Male	Female	Caucasian	African-American	Hispanic
Victim	66	4.5 (4.4)	29 (44)	37 (56)	46 (70)	12 (18)	5 (8)
Primary offender	61	29 (6.9)	31 (51)	30 (49)	45 (74)	12 (20)	3 (5)

TABLE 2—Relationship between victim and offender.

	Frequency	Percent
Biological mothers	26	39
Biological fathers	15	23
Step/foster/adoptive father	9	14
Mother's boyfriend	8	12
Step/foster/adoptive mother	5	8
Aunt	2	3
Family friend	1	1
Total	66	100

### Victim–Offender Relationships

The majority of the offenders in this study were biological parents of the victims, with the most common offenders being mothers (Table 2). This finding is consistent with other parental homicide literature (10). Most offenders acted alone, involving a secondary offender in 25% of cases. In cases where there were primary and secondary offenders, they were either married or in a relationship at the time of the offense. In nearly all of the cases (93%), the victim resided with the offender. The relationships reflected the custodial role of the offender, allowing the offender access, opportunity, and a measure of privacy in the commission of the homicide, as well as disposal of the victim.

These findings replicate other child abduction homicide research in that younger victims are much more likely to be killed by family members than by nonfamily child abductors (1,2,8). Utilizing statistics from the FBI's Uniform Crime Report (UCR), Supplemental Homicide Reports (11), Fig. 1 demonstrates that both the frequency of homicides and perpetrators of homicides change as children age. Children are at a higher risk of homicide at the very early stages of life, and again, as teenagers, entering adulthood. As they age and become more mobile and independent, children are victimized less often by family members and more often by acquaintances and strangers (2,7,12).

### Domestic Problems

As with victims of other forms of child maltreatment, the victims in this study came from resource-deprived, higher-stress homes. The characteristics of the families in this study are consistent with child maltreatment research findings (9). The Centers for Disease Control identifies several risk factors for violence against children, including, but not limited to, poverty or other socioeconomic disadvantage; history of domestic abuse; lack of family cohesion; and substance abuse that may increase caregiver burden and parent's lack of understanding children's needs (13). Other problems identified in this study included medical concerns, multiple toddlers in the same household, and child custody issues. The majority (92%) of victim families in this study suffered from some type of domestic problem as detailed below in Fig. 2.

In addition to the above domestic problems, there was also evidence of instability within the victim families. In 58% of the cases,

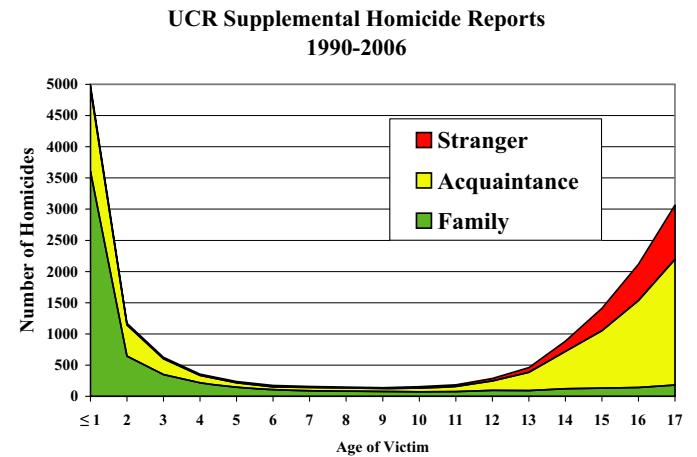


FIG. 1—The number of child homicides by age killed by strangers, acquaintances, and family members.

there was a change in the family structure within 6 months prior to the offense. Examples include the birth of a child, the victim or offender moving into the household, or another person moving into the household. Additionally, in 53% of the cases, there was a prolonged separation between the offender and the victim. For example, victims who lived with a separated parent, other relative, or foster home for a significant period of time prior to moving into the family unit in which they were killed appeared to be at higher risk. Further increasing victim risk, in 41% of cases, the victim had been described by the offender as being a difficult or different child and therefore potentially perceived by their caregiver as an excessive burden.

Absence of any mitigating factors, such as supportive family or community resources, children residing in family units exhibiting domestic problems as documented above are at a higher risk for victimization. Therefore, it is not surprising that 8% of victims in this study had official, documented histories of previous physical abuse, and another 36% were reported unofficially by family, neighbors, or other associates as previous targets of physical abuse.

### “Missing Child” Report

In 71% of the cases, the victim was reported missing/abducted by the primary offender. The report was made indirectly by the offender through a third person in 15% of cases. The fact the majority of calls to police were made by primary offenders presents investigators with a valuable opportunity from a statement analysis perspective. Through the collection of 911 recordings, investigators have the benefit of hearing the offender's first-hand “recital” of the incident. Analyses of 911 recordings can potentially provide investigators with insight and interviewing strategies to help solve homicide cases (14).

The offender reported the last-known sighting of the victim as their residence in 54% of the cases (42% inside and 12%

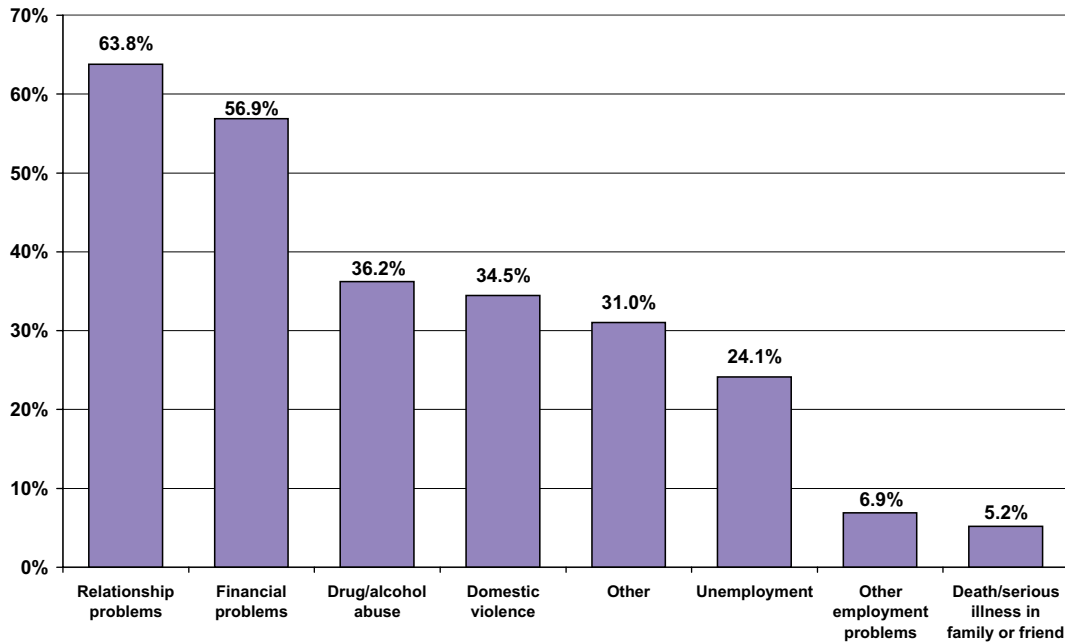


FIG. 2—Domestic problems within household during time of the offense.

immediately outside). Offenders also reported victims missing from vehicles (15%) and shopping areas (12%). This characteristic is similar to nonfamily child abduction homicides, wherein 40% of the victims were last seen within 199 feet from their homes (1).

### Staging

Staging is generally defined as the intentional manipulation of physical evidence, to redirect the investigation away from the offender, or mischaracterize the crime. Staging is often accompanied by false or misleading statements by the perpetrator in false allegation of child abduction cases, in an effort to bolster the offender's false report. Staging is often utilized in cases of a reported abduction (rather than reports of a "missing child"). For example, in reported car-jacking abductions, offenders have moved their vehicles to other locations prior to calling the police and reporting the abduction. When an abduction is alleged to have occurred at a location other than the victim's residence (e.g., shopping mall, park, flea market, etc.), it is especially important to conduct neighborhood canvasses and collect area surveillance camera video to determine the accuracy of the reports. Other cases in which staging was apparent involved reports of children abducted from their bedrooms. Staging in these cases often included the movement/manipulation of physical evidence or the planting of fabricated evidence prior to the offender making the report. Reported abductions from victims' homes sometimes involved missing, manipulated, or cut window screens; broken windows; open doors; etc. In one case (not part of this study), an offender mailed a mitten to herself in an effort to legitimize the reported disappearance of her 2-year-old child.

The successful determination as to whether a crime has been staged is dependent on the investigator's ability to recognize and document inconsistencies that center around the victim and the geographic locations involved in the crime (15). Investigators should be aware of the concept of staging and ensure that alleged crime scenes and evidence are properly documented, photographed, and processed as soon as possible to preserve for future analysis.

### Offender Motivation

Offender motivation is often difficult for investigators to determine. There may be multiple reasons for the commission of a single criminal act. In this study, there was ample information to assess motivation for killing 59 of the 66 victims. Offense motivation categories included: (i) victim unwanted, (ii) punishment/abuse, (iii) spousal revenge, (iv) sexual, (v) mental illness, and (vi) other. Motivations were evaluated by witness and offender statements, forensic evidence, autopsy reports, and additional case materials.

The study found two primary reasons false allegation victims died at the hands of their parents or caregivers. Of those where motivation could reasonably be determined (Fig. 3), most of the victims were killed because they were unwanted (37%) or as a result of a fatal child abuse incident (34%). Children who were killed because they were unwanted were often viewed as obstacles to the offenders' sexual relationships. These sentiments were often expressed in confessions or by witnesses who had interactions with the parent/caregiver prior to the offense.

Evidence of sexual assault was found in only five cases involving female children (ranging in ages from 4 to 12) victimized by nonfamily members. These findings reflect the low incidence of sexual motivation in false allegations of child abduction (8.5%), which may be attributed to the study's young average age of 4.5 years. These homicides, in general, appear to be a means for an overwhelmed parent to get "rid" of a burdensome child, rather than as a result of sexual motivation. The small number of sexual assault cases that occurred within this sample is significant compared to the high incidence of sexually motivated cases involving nonfamily abductors, especially among school-aged children (2).

### Intent to Kill

In 52% of the cases, the action that caused the victim's death was clearly intended to do so; meaning at that moment in time, the offender wanted the child to die. Additionally, evidence of planning

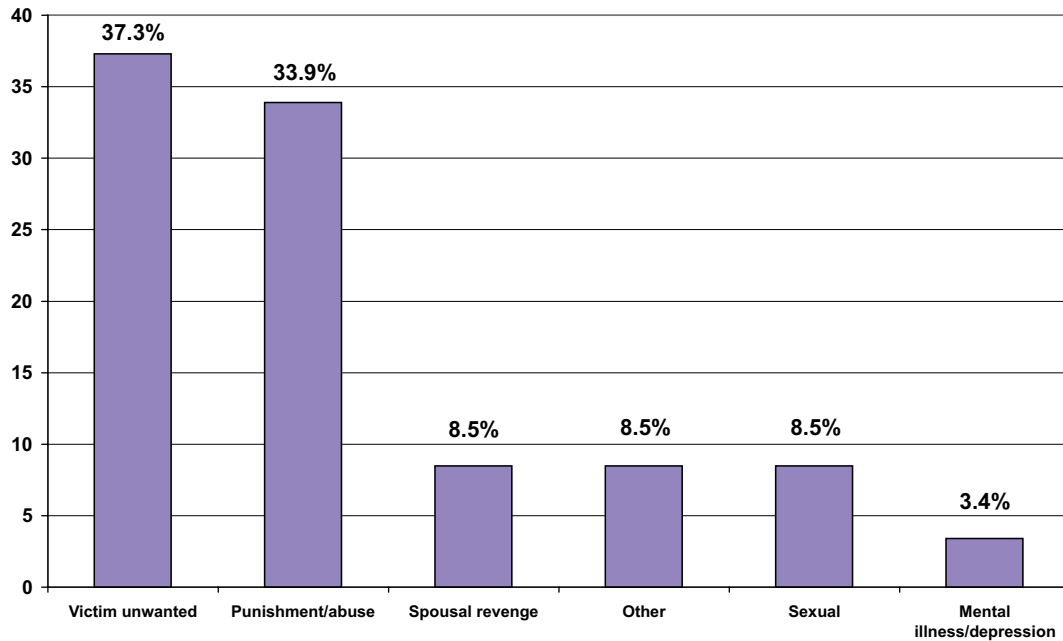


FIG. 3—Offender motivation.

was found in 18% of these cases. Examples include the purchase of items in preparation for body disposal prior to the homicide, the discussion of the homicide with a secondary offender prior to the event, the drugging of a victim's mother to gain access to her son, and the preselection of a weapon and method of killing. The causes of death in preplanned offenses included blunt force trauma, drowning, gunshot wounds, drug overdose, and suffocation.

In 34% of the cases, the victims' deaths occurred as a result of severe punishment/abuse. Children that died as a result of a fatal child abuse event were often victims of chronic child abuse. As mentioned previously, 44% of the victims in this study had a history (documented and undocumented) of physical abuse or maltreatment. Victims that died as a result of physical abuse were most often killed in conjunction with frustration on the part of an ill-equipped parent/caregiver who punished the child too severely. More than one-third of the victims (41%) were described as difficult or different by the offender prior to the incident. Research in child homicide has reflected that toilet-training accidents in young children are often the provocation for physical punishment, sometimes resulting in death (16,17). Several of the cases in this study revealed that toilet training and other issues associated with the victims' evacuation of feces or urine were precipitating factors in the their deaths.

The other cases in this study involved accidental or unexplained killings. For example, two cases involved the offender's physical attempts to silence the victim's incessant crying.

The primary cause of death could be determined in 80% of the cases in this study (Fig. 4). The three primary causes of death were blunt force trauma (41%), followed by suffocation/asphyxiation (28%), and drowning (11%). These findings were consistent with other literature concerning parental homicides of young children (10). When cause of death was known (Fig. 5), both men and women tended to use blunt force trauma and asphyxiation. All of the drowning deaths were committed by female offenders. The more aggressive causes of death were committed primarily by men, including gunshots, stabbing, and two ligature strangulations (telephone cord and jump rope).

A weapon was used by the offender in 29% of cases. The cause of death for 18% victims was unknown because either decomposition of remains was too advanced or they were never recovered. One child was recovered alive after being left for dead.

### Postmortem Injury

Given the family/caregiver relationship between the offenders and victims in this study, a somewhat surprising finding was the level of postmortem injury to victims. Ten of the offenders inflicted postmortem injuries to their victims. Seven of the 10 children murdered by these offenders were dismembered or set on fire to facilitate disposal and/or concealment. Three sustained postmortem cuts on various parts of their bodies. This figure contrasts with non-family child abduction homicide research concerning postmortem injury. In an ongoing study currently being conducted by the National Center for the Analysis of Violent Crime (NCAVC), preliminary results have shown postmortem mutilation in only three cases (2%) in a sample of 175 child abduction homicides. However, these cases show more of a ritualistic sexual component rather than body disposal facilitation. As discussed earlier, nonfamily child abductors are generally more concerned with expediency than efficiency in body disposal (18).

### Body Disposal

A significant characteristic of false allegations of child abduction is the time and effort spent by some offenders in disposing of the victim's body. Recognizing that investigators must first focus on family members and caregivers in a missing child investigation and that the investigation will involve extensive searches of the areas in and around the victim's home, offenders often go to great lengths to ensure that their victims are not found.

Although most of the homicides occurred inside a residence (65%), the majority of the victims were disposed of outdoors (73%). In this study, the primary method of body disposal was dumping above ground (29%), followed by placement in water

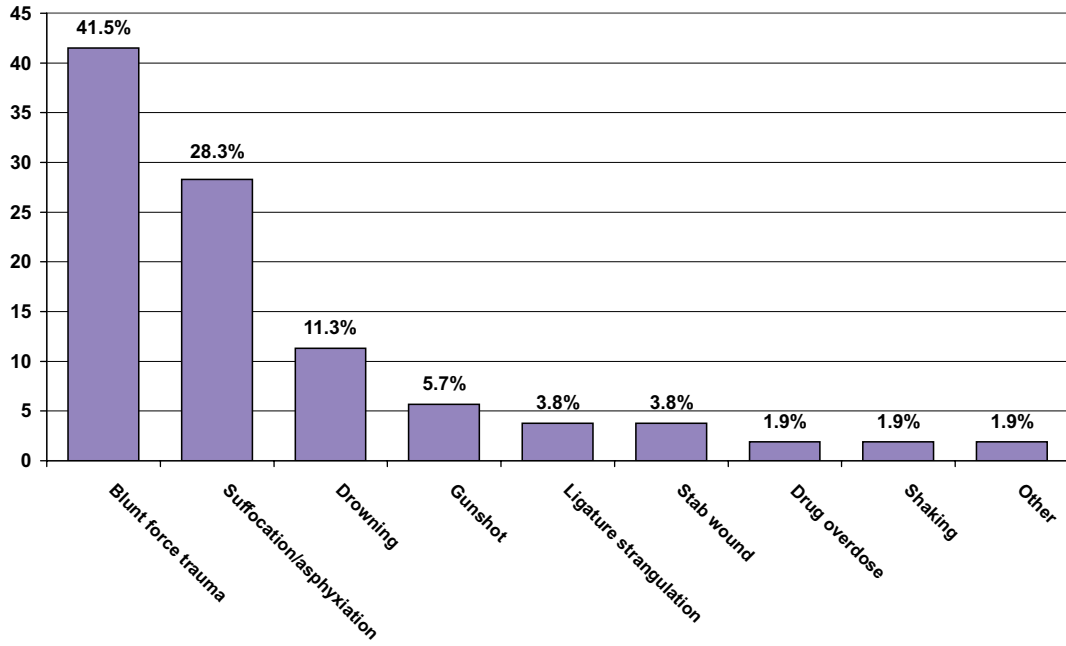


FIG. 4—Victim cause of death.

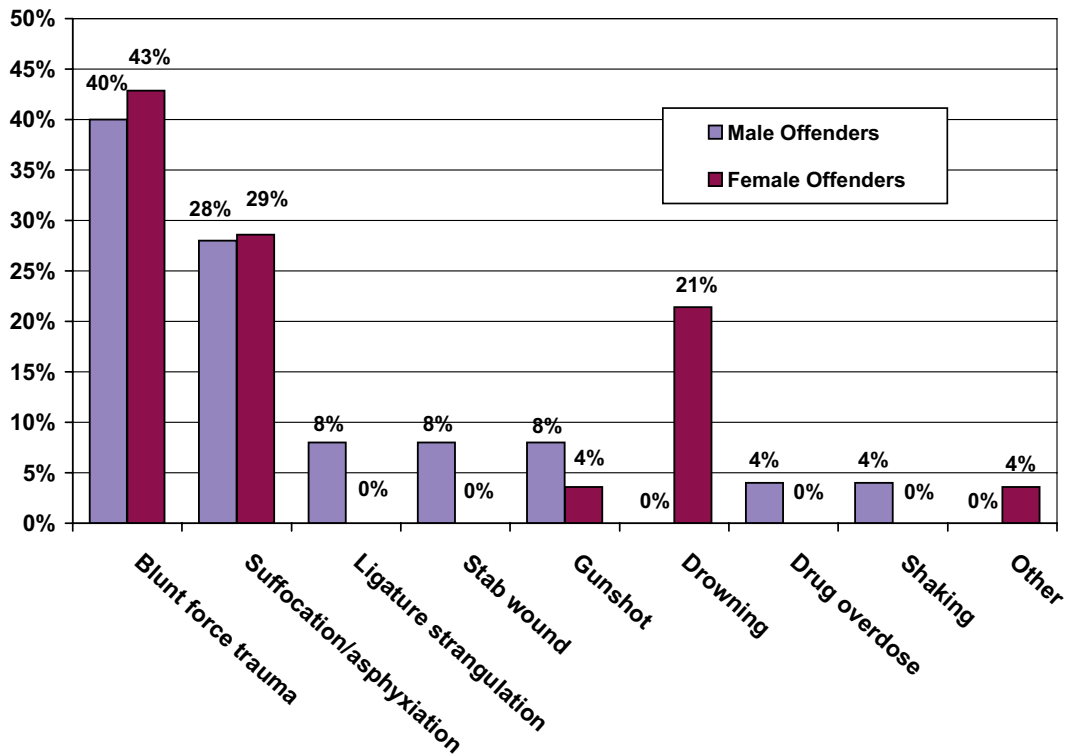


FIG. 5—The number of male and female offenders by victim cause of death.

(18%) with the majority of cases involving some implement to keep the body submerged. The vast majority (72%) of offenders who utilized water burials tended to be women.

Figure 6 depicts the various methods of body disposal utilized by offenders in false allegation cases when known (in 8% of cases, disposal method was unknown).

Body disposals in false allegations of child abduction are often effective, because the offender has time and privacy to prepare for and to carry out the body disposal. Two-thirds of the homicides occurred within the privacy of the offender's (and victim's) home, and in most cases, the primary offender reported the child as missing. Because the offender has control over his/her environment, and

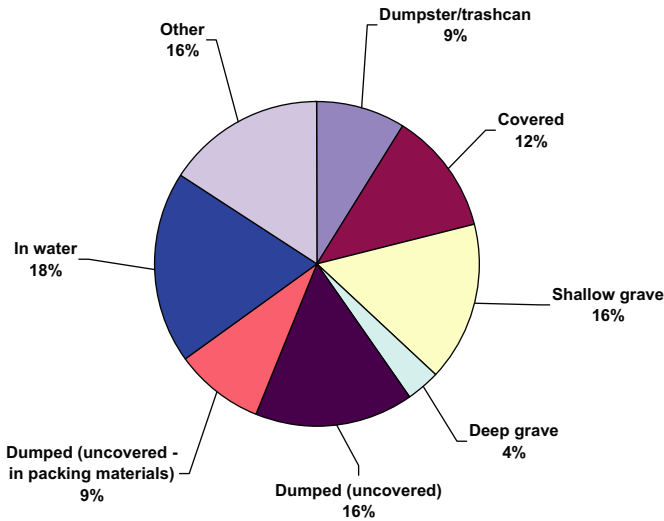


FIG. 6—Body disposal.

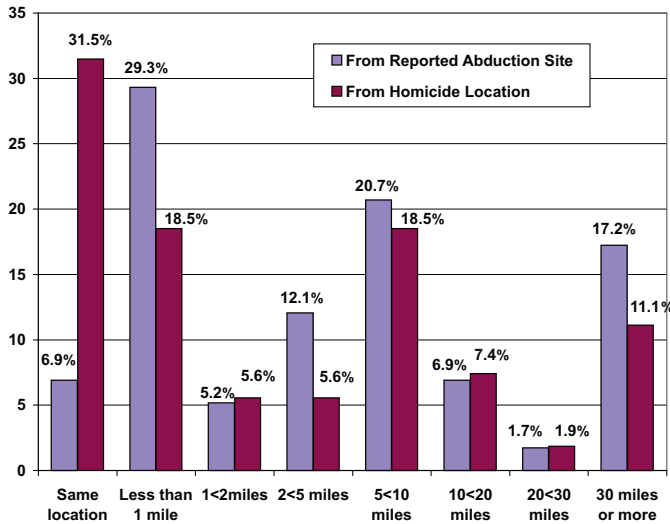


FIG. 7—Distance to body recovery from abduction site or home location.

to a certain degree, the response time by law enforcement, he/she will often allow ample time (sometimes days or even weeks) before reporting the event to police. In 11% of the cases (Fig. 7), the offender drove over 30 miles to ensure the victim would not be found. Although 88% of the victims in this study were recovered, it is worth noting that 19 of the 24 victims whose remains were recovered upon the offender's confession would most likely not have been found if the location had not been furnished by the offender. Remains were enclosed in some kind of packaging (plastic bag, sheet, blanket, box, duffle bag, etc.) in 45% of the cases. More than half (61%) were found fully clothed or partially clad.

In 73% of the cases, there were clear indicators the offenders were familiar with the body disposal location. Body disposal sites were in the routine activity zones of the offenders or were in areas visited or otherwise known to the offender. The distance between the reported abduction site and the recovery site was less than 1 mile in 36% of the cases and within 5 miles in 53% of the case. False allegation offenders returned to the site of disposal either to move the victim or to further conceal the victim's remains, in 15% of the cases. Based on this finding, the authors note a GPS tracking

device may be a useful investigative technique to track the postoffense behavior of these offenders.

The following false allegation case example illustrates the extent of effort spent in body disposal:

The victim, a 3-year-old boy, was reported missing from a WalMart by the offender, his mother's boyfriend. The offender had been babysitting the victim while he cut firewood earlier that day. The offender claimed that he drove to WalMart to purchase a spark plug for his chainsaw and left the sleeping child in the vehicle while he went shopping. Upon returning to his truck, the offender noticed that the victim was gone and notified WalMart security, who, in turn, called the police to report the child missing. First responders noticed that the offender was intoxicated. When interviewed, he offered three different versions of his last sighting of the victim. The offender was charged with felony child neglect after claiming that the child had died from injuries suffered when the child fell and hit his head inside the offender's vehicle. After offering an Alford plea, the offender led investigators to a local lake, where he had disposed of the child's body, which was c. 20 miles from the location of the homicide. The 35-pound victim had been placed inside an 18" x 18" x 8" brake drum, which was tied to the offender's vehicle with a towing strap. The 80-pound brake drum was then lowered 18 feet into the lake, where it remained for 17 months until the recovery. Despite the offender's inebriation and inability to provide a consistent story regarding the child's last-known location, he nevertheless managed to develop a fairly complex body disposal plan, gather the necessary equipment, and successfully carry out a water burial without detection.

### Crime Scene Searches

Organized searches for forensic evidence are of primary importance in any alleged child abduction and should include the victim's home, neighborhood, vehicles, area where he/she was last seen, and victim recovery area. In this study, 68% of the offenses occurred in or around the victim's home, which presents a challenge for search teams who, in typical nonfamily abductions, focus on finding fingerprints, hair, fiber, and DNA evidence belonging to the victim and the offender. In nonfamily child abduction homicides, the murder site is the most important site in terms of physical evidence associated with the killer (19). However, in false allegations of child abduction murders, this "evidence" is naturally occurring in the victim's home environment, making it difficult to distinguish evidence of a crime from artifact. The presence of blood can be argued as a remnant from a benign cut or nosebleed. Nevertheless, it is critical for investigators to conduct thorough, forensic searches in an effort to uncover evidence of a homicide. In 75% of the cases, the homicide location and reported abduction location were within 1 mile of each other. Extensive searches focusing within 1 mile of the reported abduction site conducted in tandem with an examination of the victim family background and interpersonal dynamics will substantially improve the odds of solving the case.

### Interviews/Family Background Development

Well-planned, patiently executed interviews of victim family members and caretakers are critical in any missing child investigation. In this study, statements made by the offender early in the

investigation led to them becoming suspects in nearly half (49%) of the cases. Confessions contributing to the resolution of the homicide occurred in 62% of the cases. When an investigator responds to a report of a missing child, he/she is often faced with emotionally distraught family members and a chaotic scene. After methodically collecting information from family members and caretakers, the officer must make an initial assessment that includes the following possible explanations: runaway, nonfamily abduction, mysterious disappearance, or falsely alleged child abduction.

The FBI's Child Abduction Response Plan (CARP; [3]) is an invaluable tool to assist investigators in making the initial assessment of the facts and circumstances of the missing/abducted child report. The CARP is a step-by-step guide, written by experienced investigators in the field of crimes against children. The CARP contains checklists, standardized forms, and practical suggestions for investigative practices, such as searches, roadblock canvasses, neighborhood canvasses, child victim background questionnaires, General Assessment Questionnaires, and interviewing witnesses.

To obtain an uncontaminated account of the events surrounding the child's disappearance, it is imperative at the early stages of an investigation to separately interview each member of the victim's household. If possible, a written statement or "free narrative" should be taken from each individual who had access to the child around the time the child went missing. The free narrative is an excellent tool to use in obtaining a first-hand account of the events surrounding the victim's alleged disappearance from individuals close to the immediate event. The free narrative can assist in identifying inconsistencies associated with the time line, the window of opportunity, and alibis, as well as suggest additional investigative avenues and possible themes for use in more directed interviews.

### Family Background

It is vitally important to obtain background information on the family of an alleged missing or abducted child. As referenced in this report, offenders who kill children in their care and report them missing often have histories of relationship problems, financial hardships, physical and/or emotional detachment from the victims, and other preincident stressors. Interviews of relatives, neighbors, acquaintances, and former intimate partners can provide investigators with valuable insight with regard to potential stressors and victim family dynamics. A thoroughly developed victimology is extremely beneficial in assessing the victim's life style and narrowing down the possible reasons for his/her disappearance. Information gleaned from this process, taken into consideration with the circumstances of the reported abduction and analysis of the crime scene, will aid investigators in making appropriate investigative decisions.

### Polygraph

Although polygraphs are not admissible in court, their value as an investigative tool should not be overlooked. In this study, 43% of the offenders agreed to take a polygraph. Of those offenders, 88% failed their polygraphs and 4% were inconclusive. Forty percent of the offenders were never asked to take a polygraph, and 14% refused to take it (data was not available in 4% of the cases). The fact that the majority of guilty offenders took the polygraph and failed it is reason enough to strongly consider using this investigative technique when faced with a possible false allegation of child abduction. The success of the polygraph in these cases is often aided by the community's expectation that a parent or

caretaker will take (and theoretically pass) a polygraph, when a child is alleged to have been abducted or has "gone missing." The pressure on an offender to agree to a polygraph, especially when a nonoffending partner takes and passes the test, is often the tipping point in a false allegation of child abduction investigation.

The FBI's CARP recommends polygraphs for parents, guardians, and individuals last to see the victim in cases of mysterious disappearances of children. Notwithstanding the value of polygraphs in these cases, serious consideration should be given to the timing of the tests and pretest interview questions. Sometimes, these "false positives" are the result of the parent or caregiver's emotional state during the interview. In other cases, parents or caregivers had a history of abusing the child and failed questions concerning harming the child. Detailed pretest questions should include the victim family's history of physical or sexual abuse. Additional research should be undertaken to address the issue of polygraphs of parents and caregivers in cases of mysterious disappearances of children.

### Conclusion

The key findings in this study were that most of the victims were under the age of five, and the cause of death was primarily blunt force trauma and asphyxiation. Most of the homicides were committed by the biological parents, and the offenses most often occurred in the victims' homes. More than two-thirds of the victims were killed inside or around their residence, while their bodies were primarily disposed of outside, in a concealed manner. The offending party was most often the reporting party, and there were preincident stressors and offender/victim attachment issues leading up to the child's homicide.

Factors that appear to hold the most potential to differentiate false allegations from true child abductions include the following: the age of the victim; prior criminal activity by the victim's parents/caregivers; periods of prolonged separation between the victim and the parents/caregivers; an unstable family structure; and/or a resource-deprived, stressful domestic environment. However, it is noted that information on the above factors for true child abductions (other than victim age and criminal activity) is not readily available. Therefore, additional research is necessary to develop and refine any potential predictive models.

From an investigative perspective, fully explored family backgrounds focused forensic searches of the victim's residence, and well-executed offender interviews were especially helpful, as were polygraph examinations. The FBI's NCAVC is a valuable resource for investigators, providing subject matter expertise in all aspects of missing/abducted child investigations.

False allegations of child abduction occur infrequently; however, law enforcement and community resources deployed to address these crimes are often significant. This preliminary research suggests that the characteristics of these offenses are more in line with domestic violence child homicides than nonfamily child abductions. Continued research is necessary to gain a better understanding of the dynamics of these crimes as well as the behavioral and personality characteristics of their offenders.

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