

**The Bill Blackwood
Law Enforcement Management Institute of Texas**

**Missing Children: Law Enforcement's Proactive Response in
Decreasing Child Abductions**

**An Administrative Research Paper
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ABSTRACT

In society today, missing children and child abductions are very significant issues that law enforcement agencies are confronted with on a daily basis. There have been many high profile child abduction cases in America that have brought national media attention to this particular problem. Child abductions are a concern and a relevant topic in contemporary law enforcement due to the fact that the popularity of the internet, in addition to cell phones, has given child predators new tools to utilize in their search for victims. The purpose of this research is to evaluate the need for more proactive measures for law enforcement agencies as it relates to decreasing child abduction occurrences. The method of inquiry used by the researcher included a review of articles, periodicals, internet sites, books, journals, and a survey distributed to 20 survey participants from 18 different law enforcement agencies from around the state of Texas.

The researcher discovered that there is a need for law enforcement agencies to be more proactive in their approach to dealing with missing children and child abductions. Law enforcement must seek out new technologies and form partnerships so they can keep up with technological advancements and work with other police agencies in addressing the issue of missing children and child abductions. In addition, law enforcement agencies must continue educational programs and utilize enhancements to programs like AMBER Alert in order to decrease the number of missing children and child abduction occurrences.

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INTRODUCTION

In society today, missing children and child abductions, in particular, are very significant issues that law enforcement agencies are confronted with. There have been many high profile child abduction cases in America that have brought national media attention to this particular problem. The issue to be examined will consider whether or not there is a need for law enforcement agencies to be more proactive in their approach in decreasing child abduction occurrences. The author acknowledges that most law enforcement agencies have policies and procedures in place for dealing with child abduction cases, but there is still a need for law enforcement to do more in the area of prevention (Allender, 2007).

Child abduction is a concern and relevant topic in law enforcement today due to many facts. According to a National Law Enforcement Corrections Technology Center (National Law Enforcement and Corrections Technology Center [NLECTC], 2006) article, a child is reported missing every 40 seconds in America, and 74% of abducted children who are murdered are dead within three hours of the abduction (NLECTC, 2006). In addition, there have been many high profile child abduction cases in recent years that have brought attention and great concern to this issue. The popularity of the internet has given child predators a new tool to utilize in their search for victims. Although there has been progress made in recent years on national, state, and local levels in the area concerning child abductions, there is still a need for improvements where law enforcement is concerned.

The purpose of this research is to evaluate the need for more proactive measures for law enforcement agencies as it relates to decreasing child abductions.

Many law enforcement agencies have procedures in place on how to handle child abductions after they occur, but do not have any measures in place within the area of decreasing the occurrences. Law enforcement agencies need to put in place more crime prevention programs that address this problem. This can be done by educating children and parents about safety measures for preventing child abductions. The America's Missing: Broadcast Emergency Response (AMBER) Alert is one tool that law enforcement has used in recovering missing children, but there is a need for enhancements to this particular program (Garrett, 2004).

The research question to be examined focuses on whether or not law enforcement agencies need to make improvements and be more proactive in their response to missing child cases in order to decrease child abductions. The intended method of inquiry includes: books, internet sites, journals, articles, and a survey. The survey will be distributed to 18 law enforcement managers from different areas all over the state of Texas.

The anticipated findings of this research will show law enforcement agencies that they need to seek out new innovative programs and be more proactive in the way that they address the problem of child abductions. Law enforcement agencies will become aware of new programs and computer software which they can add to resources that are already in place in decreasing child abductions. They will be able to add new technology to work along with AMBER Alerts. The implications of this research will influence law enforcement agency administrators to not only be reactive but also proactive in the area of child abductions in order to keep children safe.

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

In recent years, the media has brought social and political attention to the problem of missing children, child abductions in particular (Kimball, 2003). According to Forst (1990), missing children is a generic term with no standardized legal meaning. The term missing children as it relates to law enforcement can be divided into three separate categories: stranger abductions, parental abductions, and runaways (Forst, 1990).

Stranger abductions, also known as kidnapping, is a crime punishable by imprisonment in every state. Stranger abductions arouse the greatest fears and anxieties in the hearts of parents and also the swiftest response on the part of law enforcement. The only thing more terrifying and traumatic for a parent than having a child abducted is the murder of an abducted child (Brown, 2007).

The second category that law enforcement officials are confronted with when it comes to missing children is termed parental abductions. In some states, this type of case is also known as custodial interference. According to Allender (2007), parental abductions have been on the rise in recent years due to divorce becoming more prevalent. Law enforcement, in general, views parental abductions less seriously than stranger abductions unless there is strong evidence that the abductor is likely to physically or sexually abuse the abducted child (Forst, 1990). A number of law enforcement officers view parental abduction cases as a civil matter because many of these cases are a direct result of a custody dispute between parents. Although the perception by many law enforcement officers is that parental abductions is a civil matter, in many states, this offense is classified as a felony.

The third category of missing children that law enforcement is confronted with is the child runaway. Although running away from home is not considered a crime, it is usually classified by juvenile, or children's, code as a status offense. The problem of runaway youths presents the greatest difference of opinions among law enforcement officers (Forst, 1990). The majority of officers who do not specialize in juvenile work believe that runaways are not a particularly serious problem. Many law enforcement officers perceive running away from home a social problem and feel it should be addressed by a child's parent or social service agency. In contrast, many juvenile specialists view the chronic runaway as a problem for the future, and the young adult has a good chance of becoming the adult criminal of tomorrow.

Throughout history, there have been many high profile missing children and child abduction cases, in particular, that have garnered national media attention. Charles Lindberg, one of America's most notable heroes, had his baby son abducted and murdered in 1932 (Allender, 2007). Although the suspects were caught and convicted, there was an outcry by the public demanding that the federal government do more about the problem of child abductions. The government responded later that year by passing the Federal Kidnapping Act of 1932, which allowed the use of federal agencies as a resource in solving all kidnapping cases. According to Allender (2007), little modification occurred in the investigation phase of missing children cases from 1932 to 1968. In 1968, congress passed the Uniform Child Custody Jurisdiction Act, which assisted law enforcement officers in dealing with child custody disputes and parental abductions.

Two other high profile cases in America that caused public outcry over concern for missing children were the abduction of seven year old Ethan Patz in New York and the 1981 abduction and murder of six year old Adam Walsh in Florida (Brown, 2007). These cases persuaded congress to establish the National Center for Missing and Exploited Children (NCMEC) in 1984. Although there has been much legislation passed to assist parents and law enforcement in decreasing the occurrences of child abduction as well as the recovery of missing children, the implementation of the AMBER Alert early warning system in 1996 has been one of the most significant. As stated before, time is the greatest enemy of an abducted child because a majority of abducted children are murdered within three hours of the abduction (NLECTC, 2006).

The abduction and murder of Amber Hagerman in Arlington, Texas initiated the formation of the AMBER Alert system in the Dallas-Fort Worth area (Allender, 2007). The name was created as a legacy to Amber Hagerman. The AMBER plan served as a model for the entire country; however, from 1996 to 2001, only three other states, besides Texas, had statewide plans in existence. Today, all 50 states have statewide plans (NLECTC, 2006). There have been more than 240 missing children successfully recovered through AMBER Alert plans nationwide. The AMBER Alert has proven its value, but it does not preclude enhancements and improvements (NLECTC, 2006). According to Garrett (2004), AMBER Alerts are just one tool for law enforcement to utilize when a child is missing, but they are not the complete toolbox to spread the word about a missing child. In addition to AMBER Alerts, law enforcement agencies can also utilize emails, fax blasts, and the internet pop-up windows as part of their toolbox for spreading the word about a missing or abducted child.

Law enforcement agencies must form partnerships and add technology to their toolbox for missing child cases. For example, Pennsylvania State Police utilizes their state lottery system to help spread the message when a child goes missing (Garrett, 2004). Whenever the Pennsylvania State Police activates a statewide AMBER Alert, the Scientific Games and Lottery's Division receives the abduction information. The Pennsylvania state lottery then sends a message to all lottery terminals within a designated region. The lottery terminals are immediately reprogrammed to display the information and retailers can print copies of the AMBER Alert message to distribute to customers. In 2005, a new technology called Amber View was developed in West Virginia by the West Virginia High Technology Consortium Foundation (NLECTC, 2006). Amber View was designed to work in collaboration with the state and national AMBER Alert programs. The Amber View system has the ability to mass broadcast a digital image of an abducted child to law enforcement, the media, and private sector recipients via the worldwide web within minutes of an official AMBER Alert.

Other technologies that are available to law enforcement and parents are the Life Prints Child Safety software and the AMBER Stick software. Life-Prints Child Safety software is computer software that parents can purchase which allows them to store vital information about their child on their personal computer. This will enable parents to have their child's information readily available to law enforcement in case of a missing child emergency (Life-prints, 2007). The AMBER Stick is a self contained device that works independently without the need to install any software onto a computer. This device is similar to a flash drive and has the capability of holding information about a child and entire family. It also has the ability to create missing persons flyers, and the

device is password protected. The AMBER Stick is portable and can be carried in a person's possession at all times, so the information can be quickly submitted to law enforcement in case the child goes missing (Hoever, 2007). These technologies will enhance legislation and programs that are currently in place to prevent and decrease occurrences of missing children and child abductions.

METHODOLOGY

The issue of missing children and child abductions is a significant challenge that law enforcement officers are faced with. The research question to be examined will consider whether or not law enforcement agencies are proactive enough in their approach to decrease child abduction occurrences. The author will examine if there is a need for law enforcement to do more in the area of prevention as it pertains to missing children and child abductions. The researcher hypothesizes that new technology and partnerships need to be put in place in order to decrease the number of missing children. In addition, the researcher hypothesizes that enhancements to the AMBER Alert early warning systems will assist law enforcement agencies in the prevention of abductions and recovery of missing children.

The method of inquiry will include: books, internet sites, journals, articles, and a survey distributed to 20 law enforcement officers from 18 different agencies. The instrument that will be used to measure the researcher's findings regarding the subject of law enforcement's approach in decreasing the number of missing children and child abduction occurrences will include a survey consisting of six questions.

The survey will be distributed to 20 survey participants from law enforcement agencies from all geographic areas of the state of Texas. The response rate of the

survey resulted in a 100% participation. The information obtained from the survey will be analyzed by disaggregating the data.

FINDINGS

Missing children and child abductions are significant issues that law enforcement agencies are challenged with. There have been many high profile child abductions in America that have brought national media attention to this problem. In addition, the popularity of the internet in recent years has given child predators a new tool to utilize in their search for victims.

Statistics show that a child is reported missing every 40 seconds in America (NLECTC, 2006). Most law enforcement agencies have policies and procedures in place for dealing with child abduction cases, but there is still a need for law enforcement to do more in the area of prevention (Allender, 2007). Law enforcement agencies need to be more proactive in their approach in order to decrease the occurrences of missing children and child abductions.

The survey was administered to 20 different law enforcement officers from 18 different agencies across the state of Texas. The survey consisted of six questions relating to missing children and child abductions. The first question asked officers whether or not their agency had standard procedures in place for dealing with missing children and child abductions cases. For this question, 85% of the officers responded yes, and 15% responded no.

The second question asked officers whether or not their agency has implemented any proactive measures for decreasing child abductions. For this question, 45% of the officers responded yes, and 55% responded no. If an officer

answered yes to this question, they were asked to list some of the proactive measure that their agency has taken to decrease child abductions. Some of the measures listed in their responses were the following: child fingerprint programs, child identification programs, child safety programs, stranger awareness programs, and the use of media fairs for awareness.

The third question asked officers whether or not their agency utilized AMBER Alerts when dealing with child abduction cases. For this question, 100% of the officers responded yes.

The fourth question asked officers whether or not their agency conducted educational programs for parents in reference to preventing child abductions. For this question, 50% responded yes, and 50% responded no. If an officer responded yes to this question, they were asked to list some examples of the programs for parents that their agencies use. Some of the programs listed in their responses included the following: McGruff houses, parent presentations, citizens Sheriff Academies, stranger awareness presentations, and distributing child fingerprint and DNA kits to the public.

The fifth question asked officers whether or not their agency conducted educational programs for children on not becoming a victim of abduction. For this question, 50% of the officers responded yes, and 50% responded no. If an officer responded yes to this question, they were asked to list some of the educational programs for children on not becoming a victim that their agency uses. Some of the programs listed in their responses were: operation identification programs, cyber crime presentations, safety fairs, and stranger danger presentations.

The final question on the survey asked officers whether or not they felt additional proactive measures put in place by law enforcement would decrease the number of child abductions. For this question, 85% of the officers responded yes, and 15% responded no.

The following graph provides a visual representation of the data collected in the survey. This confirms the author’s hypothesis that more proactive measures are needed to decrease the occurrences of missing children and child abductions.

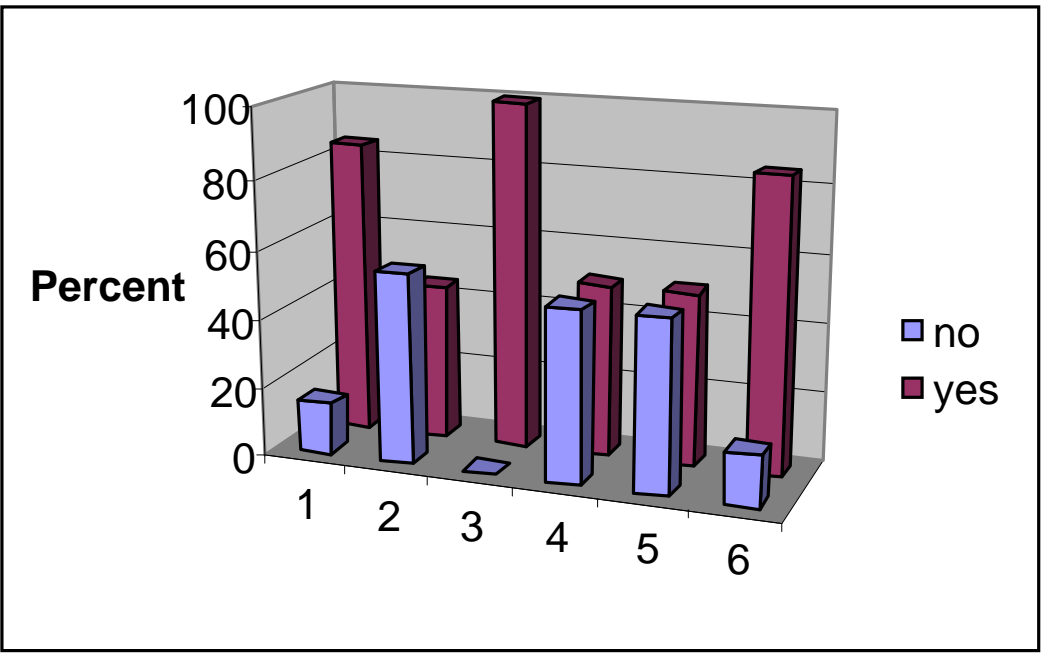


Figure 1. Law enforcement survey supporting the fact that law enforcement agencies throughout Texas feel that more proactive measures are needed to decrease missing children and child abduction occurrences.

DISCUSSION/CONCLUSIONS

Missing children and child abductions are significant challenges that all law enforcement agencies are faced with. In addition, there have been many high profile cases in America that have garnered national media attention. In today’s society the

popularity of the internet has given child predators a new resource to use in their search for victims. The issue that was examined by the researcher considered whether or not law enforcement agencies were proactive enough in their approach in decreasing child abduction occurrences. The purpose of this research was to evaluate the need for more proactive measures by law enforcement agencies as it relates to decreasing missing children and child abduction cases.

The research question that was examined focused on current measures used by law enforcement agencies in decreasing child abductions and the need for improvement. The researcher hypothesized that law enforcement agencies needed to seek out new technologies and become more proactive in the way they address the issue of missing children and child abductions. Although the researcher acknowledged that most law enforcement agencies already had policies in place for dealing with child abduction cases, there was still a need for more to be done in the area of prevention.

The researcher concluded from the findings that missing children and child abductions are a significant issue that law enforcement agencies are challenged with on a daily basis. The researcher also concluded from the findings that law enforcement must continue educational programs and continue to utilize policies and procedures in relation to missing children and child abductions. In addition, the researcher concluded that most law enforcement officers felt that seeking out new technologies and enhancements to existing programs would decrease the number of missing children and child abduction occurrences.

The findings of the research did support the hypothesis. The reasons the findings did support the hypothesis were due to the research from articles, journals,

books, web sites, and a survey. Although many law enforcement agencies around the nation have implemented new programs in their attempt to decrease child abductions, the research supported the hypothesis that law enforcement need to be more proactive in their approach. The vast majority of survey participants agreed that law enforcement must do more in the area of prevention when it comes to dealing with missing children and child abduction cases. The research supported the hypothesis that law enforcement agencies must be more proactive in their approach to missing children and child abduction cases by seeking out new technologies and making enhancements to existing programs in order to decrease the occurrences.

Limitations that might have hindered this research resulted because of the lack of updated studies in the area of missing children and child abductions. The latest study conducted by the United States Department of Justice occurred in 2002. The study revealed that more than 797,500 children under the age of 18 are reported missing each year. In addition, it is estimated that 58,200 of the children that are reported missing annually are abducted by a partial or complete stranger, and 115 are kept for a period of time or killed. Furthermore, the Federal Bureau of Investigation Uniform Crime Reporting Program has no formal category for child abductions. A child abducted and raped would be reported as a forcible rape by most law enforcement agencies. There are also a significant number of children that go missing each year without ever being reported.

The study of law enforcement's proactive response to decreasing child abductions is a relevant topic to contemporary law enforcement because of technological advances in today's society. Technological advances, such as the cell

phone and internet, have given child predators new weapons that they can use in their search for victims. Law enforcement agencies proactive response by implementing new prevention programs and making the public aware of new technology such as Life Prints Child Safety software and the AMBER Stick will assist in decreasing the number of child abductions. The results of this research will benefit both law enforcement and the community. The proactive response will serve as a deterrent to the child predator, parents and children will feel more secure, and, ultimately, law enforcement will be able to decrease the number of missing children and child abductions.

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APPENDIX

**Bill Blackwood
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Module I**

Agency name: _____

Number of Officers/Deputies: _____

Position/rank: _____

Law Enforcement survey in reference to missing children and child abductions.

Please circle your answer to the following questions and return to Corporal Ivan B. Nelson with the Katy ISD Police Department.

1. Does your agency have standard procedures in place for dealing with missing children and child abduction cases? Yes No

2. Has your agency implemented any proactive measures in decreasing child abductions?

Yes No if yes please give examples:

3. Does your agency receive and utilize Amber Alerts in reference to child abductions?

Yes No

4 Does your agency conduct educational programs for parents in reference to preventing child abductions? Yes No if yes please give examples:

5. Does your agency conduct educational programs for children in reference to not becoming a victim? Yes No if yes please give examples:

6. Do you feel that additional proactive measures by Law Enforcement will decrease the number of child abductions? Yes No