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J U V E N I L E J U S T I C E B U L L E T I N

Second Comprehensive Study of Missing Children

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The Missing Children's Assistance Act (Title IV of the Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention Act of 1974, as amended) requires the Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention (OJJDP) to periodically conduct studies of the scope of the problem of missing children in the United States. The purpose of the studies is to determine, for a given year, the actual number of children reported missing, including the number of children who are victims of abduction by strangers, the number of children who are the victims of parental kidnappings, and the number of children who are recovered (Sec. 404(b)(3)).

The current National Incidence Studies of Missing, Abducted, Runaway, and Thrownaway Children (NISMART 2) is the second national study to measure the incidence of each category of missing children. The first study, originally known by the acronym NISMART (hereafter NISMART 1), was conducted in 1988 with results published in 1990. Thus, what were the best and most comprehensive data available on the incidence of missing children are now 10 years old.

In NISMART 2, currently underway, researchers are:

- ◆ Surveying approximately 16,000 households by telephone to determine how many children are missing on an annual basis.

- ◆ Surveying approximately 8,000 youth in a related telephone survey to determine what happens during missing child episodes from the perspective of the children involved.
- ◆ Interviewing law enforcement officers about child abductions that took place in their jurisdictions in the past year and about cases that are still open.
- ◆ Interviewing directors of residential facilities and institutions for youth to determine how many residents run away from such settings.
- ◆ Analyzing data on thrownaway children (youth who have been abandoned or forced from their homes) from a related survey of community professionals.

Data collection was completed in late 1999, and analyses will take place in 2000. The findings from these surveys and analyses will be used to:

- ◆ Update estimates of the number of children who are missing or abducted or who have run away or been thrown away during the 12-month period prior to the date of the interview.
- ◆ Update information on the characteristics of the children involved in missing child episodes and the nature of these episodes.

From the Administrator

The disappearance of a child is a traumatic event that demands immediate attention from the entire community. However, if we are to respond effectively to each missing child, we must have sound data regarding the nature and scope of the missing children problem.

Conducted in 1988, the first National Incidence Studies of Missing, Abducted, Runaway, and Thrownaway Children (NISMART 1) provided the first nationally representative, comprehensive estimates of the incidence of missing children.

More than a decade has passed since this landmark study was completed, necessitating a new look at the number of children reported missing and the circumstances surrounding those disappearances. The NISMART 2 study, described in this Bulletin, will provide vital data on the incidence of missing children in eight categories: runaway/throwaway, nonfamily abduction, family abduction, custodial interference, lost and involuntarily missing, missing due to injury, missing due to false alarm situations, and sexually assaulted.

It is my belief that the information to be derived from NISMART 2 will benefit both policymakers and practitioners in their efforts to address missing children's issues.

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Acting Administrator

- ◆ Update estimates of the number of these episodes reported to police, the number of children known to be missing, and the number of missing children who are recovered.
- ◆ Develop an aggregate estimate of missing children from all categories that is methodologically sound and meaningful for interpretation and policymaking.
- ◆ Estimate the incidence of sexual assault and exploitation of children by both family and nonfamily perpetrators.
- ◆ Analyze any significant changes in the numbers of missing, abducted, runaway, or throwaway children since 1988, the focal year for NISMART 1 data collection.
- ◆ Improve criteria for the identification and classification of missing child episodes.
- ◆ Permit the identification and counting of children involved in certain categories of episodes (e.g., lost children) whose importance was first recognized during the data analysis for NISMART 1.

The information provided by NISMART 2 will enable parents and the public to better understand the dimensions of the problem and identify those factors that place children at the greatest risk of becoming missing. Practitioners and policymakers can use this new information to design programs and policies that will ensure the safety of the Nation's youth.

NISMART 2 is being conducted for OJJDP by the Institute for Survey Research at Temple University in Philadelphia, PA; the Family Research Laboratory at the University of New Hampshire, Durham; and Westat, Inc., of Rockville, MD.

Background

Before NISMART 1, there was no single reliable source of information about episodes involving missing children. NISMART 1 provided the first nationally representative, comprehensive data on the incidence of missing children events. It also made other important contributions to the scientific measurement of the problem. For instance, it provided clear, multilayered definitions of the missing children problem (e.g., how to define episodes of various types and how to distinguish serious from nonserious cases) resulting in five major categories and provided detailed

estimates of the numbers for each type of episode.

No single research strategy can provide all the data needed to generate a comprehensive picture of the problem of missing children. Therefore, NISMART 1 included seven distinct data collection and data analysis efforts: a large telephone survey of households, a study of family networks, a survey of youth residential facilities, a study of returned runaways, a survey of police records, a reanalysis of Federal Bureau of Investigation data on child homicides, and a reanalysis of data from the Study of the National Incidence and Prevalence of Child Abuse and Neglect, conducted by Westat in 1986. The results of this work are discussed in many of the documents in the list of references at the end of this Bulletin.

After NISMART 1 was completed, OJJDP began to plan for NISMART 2 by reviewing and revising the research methods, definitions, and concepts that were used in NISMART 1. The major planning activities for NISMART 2 included:

- ◆ A thorough review and evaluation of all aspects of NISMART 1.
- ◆ A survey of key respondents to understand what information should be gathered in NISMART 2 and what options exist for obtaining this information.
- ◆ A planning symposium of law enforcement, research, and government experts to make recommendations for NISMART 2.
- ◆ An exploration of additional data sources and research methods that could enhance NISMART 1.
- ◆ Development of draft definitions, screening questions, and survey questions for a new household survey.

This planning activity revised and extended the approach, methodology, and concepts used by NISMART 1 to improve NISMART 2. For example, NISMART 1 provided data on five main categories of missing children episodes—runaways, throwaways, children missing due to nonfamily abductions, children missing due to family abductions, and lost or otherwise missing children. These five categories of missing children were revised and expanded to eight in NISMART 2. The researchers combined the runaway/throwaway category; preserved the nonfamily abduction category, including stereotypical child kidnaping; distinguished custodial interference situations from more serious family abductions; distinguished episodes that result from a child being lost from those in which a child is injured; and added a category of missing episodes that result from a simple miscommunication in which the child was not, in fact, in any danger. In order to capture information on sexual exploitation, researchers studied children who were sexually assaulted. While children in this eighth category are not necessarily missing, they share important risk factors with missing children.

Who Is a Missing Child?

To the general public, the definition of a missing child may seem relatively simple: a child who is missing from home. However, the researchers conducting these studies realized that in order to measure "missingness" as accurately and as comprehensively as possible, they needed to define the concept more specifically. Based on the NISMART 1 experience and consultations with experts on the problem of missing children, the researchers developed the following working definitions for the eight main categories of children being studied.

Study Categories in NISMART 1 and 2

NISMART 1

Runaway
 Throwaway
 Nonfamily abduction
 Family abduction
 Lost or otherwise missing

NISMART 2

Runaway/Throwaway
 Nonfamily abduction
 Family abduction
 Custodial interference
 Lost and involuntarily missing
 Missing due to injury
 Missing due to false alarm situations
 Sexually assaulted

NISMART 2 Categories

- ◆ **Runaways/Throwaways.** Runaways are children who leave home voluntarily without the knowledge or permission of their parents or guardians and who stay away at least overnight. Throwaways are children who do not leave home voluntarily, but instead are abandoned; are forced from their homes by parents or guardians, and not allowed to return; or come and go totally unsupervised. Runaways can be distinguished from throwaways in theory, but distinguishing between them in practice is very difficult because many episodes of both result from some sort of family conflict.
- ◆ **Children missing due to nonfamily abductions.** Children who are taken or unlawfully detained by someone who is not a parent, relative, or legal guardian without the knowledge or consent of a parent or legal guardian are classified as missing due to nonfamily abductions.
- ◆ **Children missing due to family abductions.** Children who are taken from or not returned to their residence by a parent or relative, or some other agent acting for a parent, in violation of a legal or verbal custody agreement or other living arrangement are classified as missing due to family abductions. The perpetrator attempts to conceal what is happening, attempts to flee in order to make recovery more difficult, or indicates an intent to affect custodial arrangements indefinitely.
- ◆ **Children missing due to custodial interference.** Children who are taken from or not returned to their legal custodian by a parent or relative, or some other agent acting for a parent, in violation of a legal or verbal custody agreement or other living arrangement are classified as missing due to custodial interference. Unlike the category of children missing due to family abductions, this category does not require concealment or flight or intent to affect custodial arrangements indefinitely.
- ◆ **Children lost and involuntarily missing.** Children who are lost and involuntarily missing and fail to return home or make contact with a parent, guardian, or other caretaker are classified as missing if their caretaker becomes alarmed and makes some attempt to locate the children. These

children, or others with them, actively try to return home or make contact with the caretaker, but they are lost or stranded in an isolated place.

- ◆ **Children missing due to injury.** Children who are missing due to an injury fail to return home or make contact with a parent, guardian, or other caretaker, and their caretaker becomes alarmed and makes some attempt to locate the children. In these cases, the children fail to return or make contact because they have suffered serious harm or injuries that require medical attention.
- ◆ **Children missing due to false alarm situations.** Children who are missing due to false alarm situations fail to return home or make contact with a parent, guardian, or other caretaker, and their caretaker becomes alarmed and makes some attempt to locate the children. The caretaker contacts the police or another agency, but no actual harm comes to the children (e.g., failure to locate the children may result from a miscommunication or a mixup between caretakers), and no other definitional criteria are met.
- ◆ **Children sexually assaulted.** Children who are forced by an offender to display their sexual parts or have contact with the sexual parts of another person for the purpose of sexual gratification or arousal of the offender are classified as sexually assaulted.

The Household Survey

The foundation for most NISMART 2 estimates, like that for most NISMART 1 estimates, is a large household survey conducted by telephone. NISMART 2 includes a survey of youth residential facilities, a survey of police records, and a reanalysis of data from a more current Study of the National Incidence and Prevalence of Child Abuse and Neglect. The study of family networks, the study of returned runaways, and the reanalysis of FBI data on child homicides are not included in NISMART 2. Each of the research strategies included in NISMART 2 is discussed below.

Because not all missing child episodes are reported to the police or other agencies, researchers cannot rely solely on police records for data. Instead, they must gather information about cases of missing children directly from families. A household survey, consisting of two

main components, is being used to gather data for this survey.

Telephone Survey of Parents or Guardians

The first part of the NISMART 2 Household Survey is a random telephone survey of a nationally representative sample that is designed to yield interviews with parents or guardians in 16,000 households concerning 30,000 children. The household survey uses a large sample to provide suitably precise estimates of rare events such as nonfamily abductions. The NISMART 1 sample for the household survey yielded interviews in 10,367 households concerning 20,138 children. For NISMART 2, the researchers are increasing the sample size.

During the telephone interviews, respondents are asked if children have been missing from the household. Respondents who answer affirmatively are asked about the circumstances of the episode, the characteristics of the child and other individuals involved, and the recovery of the child—whether and how that occurred.

Telephone Survey of Youth

The second part of the NISMART 2 Household Survey is a series of telephone interviews with randomly selected youth ages 10 to 18 who live in the sample households. This important new data collection effort allows researchers to gather additional information directly from youth, who are able to provide detailed information about what happened during the episodes. The researchers then compare the information gathered from youth and their parents to see which kinds of events and which details are overlooked or underreported by either group. The researchers anticipate that almost half of the households providing an interview with a parent or guardian will also provide an interview with a youth.

Survey of Residential Facilities

In addition to households, researchers are telephoning an independent, random sample of 75 youth residential facilities and institutions in 30 counties to interview staff members about youth who have run away during the preceding year. Previous research indicates that running away from shelters, group homes, and other juvenile custody facilities is more

common than running away from home. Moreover, these youth may be at greater risk of becoming involved in criminal activity or becoming victims of crime while on the run. Therefore, it is important to collect information on these runaway episodes from respondents who are likely to know the youth involved.

Law Enforcement Survey

Although the household interview includes questions about nonfamily abductions, researchers expected to identify few such cases through this survey. Rather, they hoped to gather additional data on nonfamily abductions through a separate study of law enforcement records. While parents or caretakers do not always report a runaway or parental abduction to the police, they report almost all suspected nonfamily abductions to law enforcement agencies. Therefore, researchers are surveying a nationally representative sample of all law enforcement agencies in 400 counties, including those with large, medium, and small populations. Within each county, municipal police, sheriff departments, and State police are being surveyed using a mail survey designed to identify agencies that have handled nonfamily abduction cases in the past year.

Each agency reporting an episode in the past year is contacted by telephone and asked to provide details of the incident, including characteristics of the child and abductor, the eventual resolution of the case, any convictions or sentences, and any additional features that are important for determining whether a case meets the study criteria. In addition, information is being collected on open, unsolved cases of missing children to learn more about the characteristics of long-term missing incidents and their investigations.

Study of Throwaway Cases

Neither the household survey nor the survey of police records is expected to accurately identify cases of throwaway children, because parents or legal guardians may be reluctant to disclose throwaway situations. This group of children is included in the study of missing children because they are especially vulnerable to exploitation. This is particularly true for teenage throwaway children.

Researchers have determined that the best way to collect information about such cases is to analyze data from the Third Study of the National Incidence and Prevalence of Child Abuse and Neglect, conducted in 1997 by Westat, Inc., for the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. The study surveyed a nationally representative sample of local child protective services, police, juvenile court and probation, social services, welfare, and medical professionals to identify cases of child abuse. The neglect cases in this study included several types of mistreatment by parents, such as refusing to take custody of their children, abandoning their children, or forcing children out of the home without making alternate plans for supervision. By analyzing existing data, researchers can add to information on the number of throwaway children.

Keeping the Public Informed

One of OJJDP's goals is to give the public and juvenile justice professionals reliable, useful information. To make findings from the National Incidence Studies of Missing, Abducted, Runaway, and Throwaway Children widely available, OJJDP plans to release a series of reports. This series will include the following:

- ◆ A technical report discussing methodological and definitional issues that arose during the study design phase.
- ◆ A summary of the preliminary findings from the household survey.
- ◆ A report on the survey of law enforcement agencies that will focus on nonfamily abductions.
- ◆ A report on the long-term missing cases gathered from law enforcement agencies.
- ◆ A report on the survey of juvenile residential facilities.
- ◆ A report on runaways/throwaways based on the 1997 Study of the National Incidence and Prevalence of Child Abuse and Neglect.
- ◆ A final research report summarizing all aspects of the study and describing the work behind the generation of the single national estimate.

OJJDP anticipates that information from NISMART 2 will enhance knowledge about missing children in the United States and

help policymakers and practitioners make more informed decisions about safeguarding the Nation's children.

References

Listed below are background materials that summarize research and writing on missing children.

Collins, J.J., Messerschmidt, P.M., McCalla, M.E., Iachan, R., and Hubbard, M.L. 1994. *Planning the Second National Incidence Studies of Missing Abducted, Runaway, and Throwaway Children—Final Report*. Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Justice.

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National Center for Missing and Exploited Children

699 Prince Street
Alexandria, VA 22314-3175
800-THE-LOST (800-843-5678)
(hotline and child pornography tipline)
703-274-3900 (business number)
703-274-2220 (fax)
800-826-7653 (TDD)
www.missingkids.org

The National Center for Missing and Exploited Children (NCMEC) is a private, nonprofit organization that operates under a congressional mandate through a cooperative agreement with OJJDP. NCMEC's mission is to assist in the location and recovery of missing children and to prevent the abduction, molestation, sexual exploitation, and victimization of children. One of NCMEC's primary activities is its 24-hour multilingual hotline and child pornography tipline. NCMEC's CyberTipline (www.cybertipline.com) allows parents and children to report sexual exploitation by submitting an online form that is reviewed by an Exploited Child Unit information analyst and submitted to law enforcement including the FBI, the U.S. Customs Service, and the U.S. Postal Inspection Service. NCMEC also provides a wide range of free services to law enforcement, including technical case assistance; leads/sightings and information dissemination; photograph and poster preparation and rapid distribution; age-enhancement, facial reconstruction, and imaging/identification services; informational analysis; database searches; educational material and publications; and training.

The Jimmy Ryce Law Enforcement Training Center at NCMEC is a national training program that promotes awareness of FBI and other Federal resources that assist law enforcement agencies investigating missing children cases. The following courses are offered: Chief Executive Officer Seminars, which focus on broad coordination and policy concerns, comprehensive response protocols, liability issues, Federal resources, and the new National Crime Information Center (NCIC) flagging system; Responding to Missing and Exploited Children, which provides detailed information on lead and case management, child homicide solvability factors, the impact on victims, and Federal resources; and the NCIC Control Terminal Officer (CTO) Course, which trains State CTO's with regard to the NCIC flagging system and available Federal technical assistance.

NCMEC also coordinates child protection efforts with the private sector and provides information on effective State legislation to ensure the protection of children.

Please note: NISMART 2 uses different titles than does NCMEC to categorize missing children. NCMEC's "Endangered Missing" category corresponds to NISMART's "Lost and Involuntarily Missing."



Stephanie Crane

Missing from Challis, ID,
10/11/93 at age 9; currently age 15.

Nonfamily abduction.

Photograph is age-progressed to 11 years.

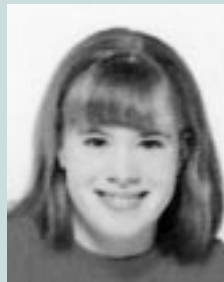


Shakeima Cabbagestalk

Missing from Dillon, SC,
7/22/93 at age 10; currently age 16.

Nonfamily abduction.

Photograph is not age-progressed.



Kimberly Chichester

Missing from Ramseur, NC,
8/9/98 at age 12; currently age 13.

Endangered runaway.

Photograph is not age-progressed.



Reuben Blackwell

Missing from Clinton, MD,
5/6/96 at age 3; currently age 7.

Endangered missing.

Photograph is age-progressed to 6 years.



Derrick Engebretson

Missing from Bonanza, OR,
12/5/98 at age 8; currently age 9.

Endangered missing.

Photograph is not age-progressed.

Washington, DC 20531

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For more information about this and other OJJDP projects, contact the Juvenile Justice Clearinghouse, Box 6000, Rockville, MD 20849-6000, call toll free 800-638-8736 (301-251-5500 in the Washington, DC, area), e-mail puborder@ncjrs.org, or visit the OJJDP Web site: www.ojjdp.ncjrs.org.

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