

## Who Would Abduct a Child? Previous Cases Offer Clues

By MARY DUENWALD AUG. 27, 2002

Child abduction by strangers, the experts continue to say, is not a growing menace. The number of cases -- 115 or so a year, according to the most recent federal statistics -- has remained steady. Yet, the crime has been prominent this summer because of a few startling cases.

In one, Elizabeth Smart, 14, was reportedly led from her bedroom in Salt Lake City on June 5 and has not been found. On July 15, Samantha Runnion, 5, was pulled screaming from a courtyard near her town home in Stanton, Calif., and abused and murdered. Two 10-year-old friends in Soham, England, disappeared on Aug. 4 and were found dead in the woods two weeks later. Similar atrocities have occurred in recent months in Missouri, Texas, Virginia, Oregon and Wisconsin.

What kind of person does such a thing?

After studying hundreds of cases, scientists can provide at least a partial answer. The broad population of child molesters, most of whom do not abduct their victims, is too diverse to fit a single psychological profile, but the far smaller group of those who abduct and keep children for sexual abuse share common traits.

At least 95 percent are men, and they tend to be unmarried and have few friends.

"In general, as everyone suspects, these people are losers," said Kenneth V. Lanning, a retired Federal Bureau of Investigations agent in Manassas, Va., who is a consultant for the National Center for Missing and Exploited Children.

"They are the seedier, more unattractive, socially outcast kind of individuals," said Dr. David Finkelhor, a professor of sociology at the University of New Hampshire.

Many abductors harbor sexual fantasies that involve children, and may exercise

these fantasies by using child pornography. Many others pick on children only because they may be easier or more convenient, said Mark Hilts, a supervisory special agent for the F.B.I. who specializes in child abductions for the National Center for Analysis of Violent Crime.

"Their preferred partner might be an adult female," Mr. Hilts said. But because of their poor social skills, they may not feel comfortable with that. Or they have tried to restrain an older woman but were unsuccessful, so they progress younger until they're finally able to find someone small enough to bring into their vehicle."

Abductors usually have very little, if any, contact with children in their daily lives.

That distinguishes them from a great majority of child molesters who are able to coerce victims by winning their trust and friendship.

"Why do these particular child molesters abduct?" Mr. Lanning asked. "Because they lack the interpersonal skills to attract, befriend and seduce their victims."

For that reason, they are more likely than other molesters to use guns, knives or other force to commit their crimes.

About 40 percent of the time, abductors who take children for sexual purposes kill the victims, said Dr. Finkelhor, who compiles child abduction statistics for the Justice Department. In 32 percent of the cases, the children are seriously injured.

A fourth of abductor-molesters are sadistic, deriving pleasure from their victims' suffering, according to a study by Dr. Robert A. Prentky, of F&P Associates, a forensic psychology practice in Boston. Eight percent of child molesters over all are considered sadistic.

No statistics exist to show how many abductors are repeat offenders, but based on his observations, Dr. Finkelhor said, he suspects the number is significant.

Socially bereft, sexually fixated on children and willing to use violence, the portrait is clearly incomplete, the experts acknowledge. What makes such men dream up their schemes in the first place? What leads them to be so callous about the welfare of children? Why are they violent? The answers are more likely to be found in the psychological characteristics of individual abductors.

"What motivates these people are their thoughts, their fantasies," Dr. Ann W. Burgess, professor of psychiatric nursing at Boston College, said. "They have it in their heads that they want to have sexual contact with children, and they look for

the opportunity to get that. What we aren't so clear on is, Where do these fantasies come from? And now you have to look at the individual person."

Most abductors are not actually pedophiles, Dr. Prentky said. "Pedophile is a very technical term," he explained. "And it literally means love of children. Pedophiles choose children not just for sexual gratification, but for social companions, as well. A pedophile would be mortified at the thought that his actions would be harmful to the child."

Because most abductors are not sadists either, but commit violence only because they are so desperate to abduct a child, they are able to rationalize the violence, Dr. Prentky said. Because the abductors feel so compelled to force themselves on children, they are able to convince themselves that their victims wanted to have sex or that some other person forced them to use violence.

Some abductions may begin as less complicated crimes, more like the thousands of child molestations each year in which victims are lured into cars or alleys for such short times that they are never even really considered missing, Mr. Lanning said. But in some cases, events go wrong. Someone interrupts the crime, perhaps, and the molester panics.

"What can happen then is analogous to the story of Lennie in 'Of Mice and Men,' " Dr. Prentky said. "If a powerful 200-pound man is trying to subdue a frightened, screaming 40-pound child, he may seriously injure the child unintentionally."

Even those abductors who are sadists exhibit differences. Some men abduct children for sexual purposes and end up killing them, Mr. Lanning said, while others abduct children for the thrill of killing them, and end up having sex with them.

It is often said that abductors are people who themselves were abused as children. A study by Dr. Prentky found that 71 percent had experience with sexual assault in childhood or adolescence. Yet the percentage of nonabductor molesters who were abused as children approached 100 percent, Dr. Prentky said.

One-third of abductions are carried out for a purpose other than sexual assault, Dr. Finkelhor said. Sometimes, children are abducted for ransom or because they are caught up in another crime like carjacking, when an abductor drives off with a child in the back seat. On other occasions, children get trapped in gang violence, sometimes as acts of revenge.

Last month in Philadelphia, Erica Pratt, 7, was abducted by men who

demanded \$150,000 in ransom. The police suspected that the abduction might have stemmed from a feud between drug dealers. Erica escaped after chewing through the duct tape that bound her hands and feet.

Each year, about 10 abductions are committed by women who desire children of their own, Mr. Lanning said. One case occurred two weeks ago, when a 1-month-old girl was taken from her mother in a Wal-Mart parking lot in Abilene, Tex. The child was returned the next day.

Women who abduct babies usually do it to preserve a relationship with a man, Mr. Lanning said.

"The woman will try to convince the man that the baby she suddenly has is his," he said.

A boyfriend of the woman suspected of committing the abduction in Abilene reported that she brought the baby to him and told him it was his.

Psychologists often warn against focusing on the small number of crimes in which children are abducted by strangers, because it draws attention away from the larger problem of child sexual abuse -- by family members, coaches, priests and others. "A couple hundred thousand cases of sexual abuse of kids are reported to authorities every year," Dr. Finkelhor said, "and more are not reported."

In particular, the public tends to focus on cases involving children under the age of 12, only about a third of the total abductions by strangers.

"These stories tap into the primal fear in human beings that somebody's going to take their kid," Mr. Lanning said. "But it's a voice that keeps calling us back from the reality that 90 percent of child abuse is committed by family members and acquaintances."

The larger issue of missing, exploited and runaway children will be the subject of a daylong conference on Oct. 2 at the White House.

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