



# Family Abductions: What We've Learned

## An In-Depth Analysis by the National Center for Missing and Exploited Children

### EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

*A family abduction is defined as the taking, retention or concealment of a child, younger than 18 years of age, by a parent, other person with a family relationship to the child, or his or her agent, in violation of the custody rights, including visitation rights of a parent or legal guardian. Between 2008 and 2017, the National Center for Missing & Exploited Children® (NCMEC) received 16,264 children with 11,761 known abductors who were involved in family abductions cases. Children and abductors were analyzed for demographics, and missing and recovery information. This report also presents information pertaining to missing duration, as well the amount of time taken to obtain a state warrant or enter the child in the National Crime Information Center (NCIC).*

*The majority of these cases involved children who were abducted by a biological parent (89.9%). Family abductions are more likely to occur when the child(ren) are younger and the abduction takes place most often during the summer. Children abducted by family members were most likely to have a mean age of 5 years old. Almost a third (32.2%) of these children were abducted in the summer months (June, July, August). In the past decade, there has been an overall decline in the amount of time in which the child is separated from their custodial parent/guardian when they are abducted by a family member. Cases with an international component had longer missing durations than domestic cases, but the durations of both were on the decline. This report found significant correlations between the time it took to issue state warrant and the missing duration of a child.*

### WHAT WE LEARNED

#### OVERALL CHILDREN

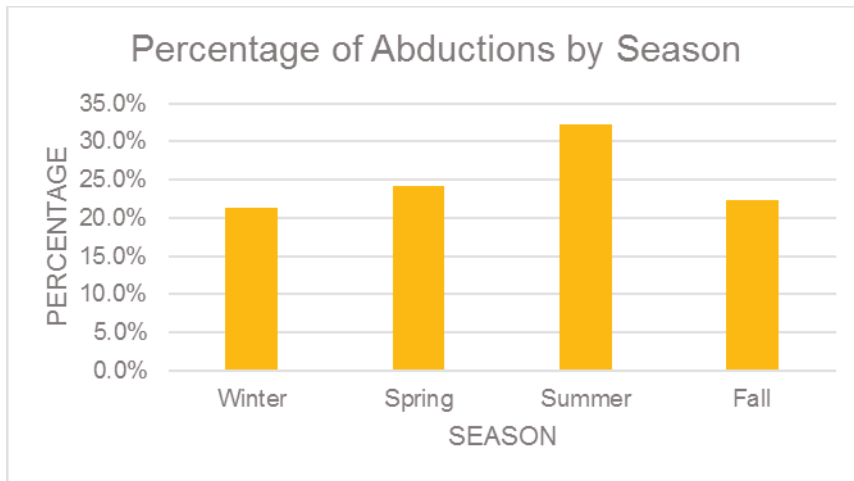
Between 2008 and 2017, NCMEC received 11,581 cases of children who were abducted by a parent or family member. There were 16,264 children with 11,761 abductors who were known to NCMEC. The majority (94.9%) of those children have cases that have been resolved, but 5.1% of these cases remain active. The highest number of children involved in the same familial abduction case was nine. In cases where there was more than one child abducted by a family member, there was a mean number of 2 children abducted at the same time. A little over a quarter (25.9%) of the cases had an international component<sup>1</sup>.

A plurality (40.6%) of family abductions involved children who were white, followed by black (22.1%), and Hispanic (18.0%). Gender did not play an obvious role in whether a child was more likely to be

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<sup>1</sup> A case with an international component is defined as any case marked as "outgoing" and/or missing/recovery locations listed as outside the United States of America. Outgoing cases are cases in which the child is or is believed to have been taken outside the United States to a foreign country.

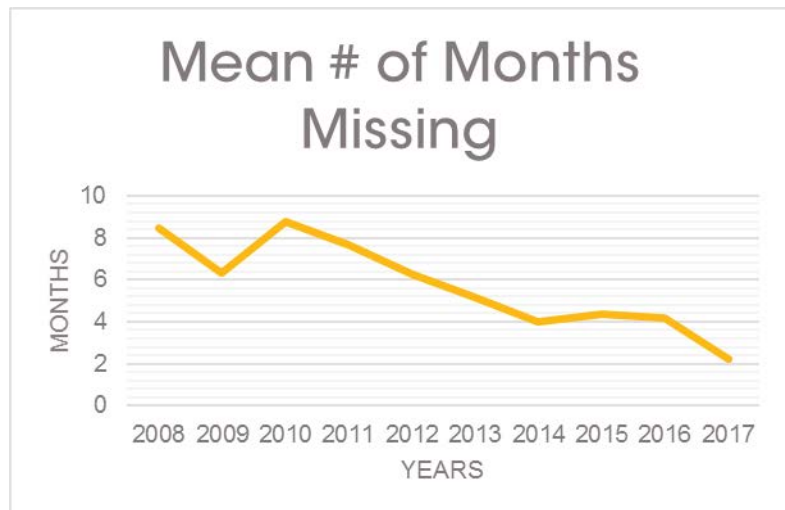
the victim of a family abduction. Children abducted by family members were almost evenly divided between female (49.2%) and male (50.6%) with a very small percentage of children with an unknown gender (0.2%). Children abducted by a parent or family member had a mean age of 5.2 years. Family abductions occur more frequently when the children are younger. Almost two thirds (65.9%) were between the ages of 0 and 6 years.



August was the peak month for family abductions (11.05% of all months). Summer (June, July, August) was the most common season for family abductions (32.2%), while winter (December, January, February) was the least common season for family abductions (21.4%). It is not uncommon for parents or

family courts to schedule summer visitation between a child and non-residential parent or for families to travel to a foreign country during the summer to visit family members abroad. Family abductions include cases involving a "wrongful retention" when a child is kept or not returned per a previous agreement or understanding.

A little over a third (33.6%) of all children were recovered by police investigation, while 29.7% were turned in by a family member or a friend. While not conclusive it's important to highlight that in almost a third of family abduction cases someone close to the abductor (family member or friend) reportedly knows where the abductor and child(ren) may be located. Children had a mean missing duration of 6 months, with over two thirds (68.3%) having a missing duration of 0 – 6 months.



In the past decade, the length of time in which the child is separated from their custodial parent/guardian has decreased. In 2008, family abduction cases had a mean missing duration of 8 months. In 2017, family abduction cases had a mean missing duration of 2 months.

An overwhelming majority of children abducted by family members were recovered alive during this time frame (99.7%). Furthermore, most children recovered alive were reported to NCMEC as being in good physical condition (96.0%). Cases with an international component were slightly more likely to involve children being recovered in good condition as compared to domestic cases (97.0% versus 95.7%).

However, that does not mean the child is not at risk for abuse and neglect or even becoming the victim of homicide or accidental death when they are abducted by a family member. A small minority (3.7%) of children were recovered in fair or poor condition. Of the children who were recovered in fair or poor condition, sometimes detailed information was available about their treatment by the abductor. At times, they were recovered injured (2.6%), sick (1.0%), abused or neglected (3.4%), or they were recovered in unsanitary and unclean conditions (3.2%).

Forty-seven (0.3%) children who were abducted by a parent or family member were recovered deceased. A plurality of these abductions involved children who were white (36.2%), followed by black (31.9%), and Hispanic (12.8%). Deceased children were almost evenly divided between female (48.9%) and male (51.1%). Deceased children were somewhat younger than the overall population of children abducted by a family member. They had a mean age of 4.2 years, and nearly three quarters (74.5%) of them were between the ages of 0 and 6.

Deceased children had a shorter missing duration than all family abductions intaked by NCMEC between 2008 and 2017. Nearly all deceased children (93.6%) were recovered within 0 to 6 months, and they had a mean missing duration of 3 months.

For over a third (34.0%) of deceased children involved in family abductions, the manner of death was either unknown or undisclosed to NCMEC. There were 31 children who had a manner of death that was known and disclosed to NCMEC. The clear majority of these deceased children with a known manner of death were the victims of homicide (87.1%). The remaining deceased children with a known manner of death passed away due to medical complications (9.7%), or an accident (3.2%).

Cause of death was undetermined, unknown, or undisclosed to NCMEC for over a third (36.2%) of deceased children. When cause of death was known, gunshots were the most common cause of death (43.3%).

### *Domestic Versus International*

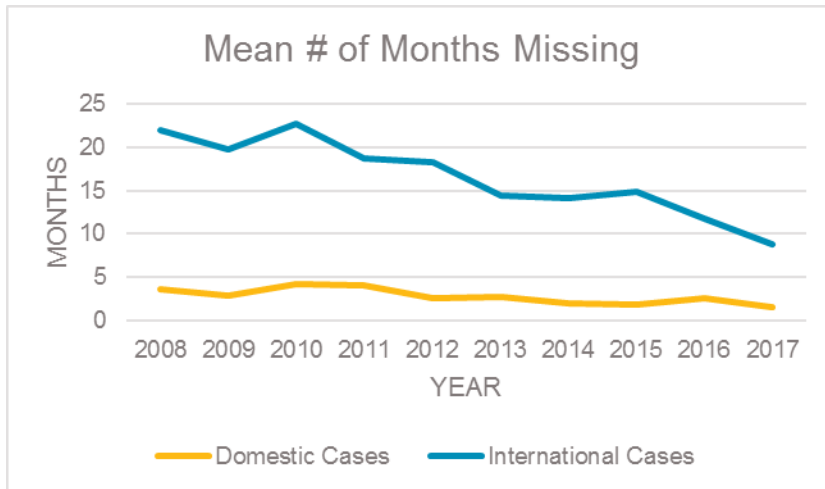
When there is an international component to an abduction, there are unique challenges that arise. Parents often face legal, financial, language and cultural barriers when trying to recover or gain access to their abducted child overseas. Those who attempt to proceed in the foreign court system may be at a disadvantage as family courts systems are different from the US, and foreign law enforcement may not enforce custody orders. Additionally, taking-parents often have a low incentive to voluntarily resolve or mediate cases as there may be no pressures placed on them by government or court officials

to do so.

As a result, the data differs between domestic and international cases. Between 2008 and 2017 there were 4,213 cases with an international component. Only 1.9% of all children involved in domestic family abductions had cases that remained unresolved. In comparison, children involved in international family abductions had a much higher percentage of unresolved cases (14.4%).

The two most common races of children involved in domestic family abductions were White (44.8%) and Black (27.8%). However, the two most common races for children involved in international abduction cases were Hispanic (39.4%) and White (28.6%). Gender did not differ between domestic and international cases. Male and female children were evenly divided. Likewise, two thirds of all children involved in family abductions were between the ages of 0 and 6 regardless of whether the case was domestic or international.

The difference between domestic and international cases was best exemplified by missing duration. The clear majority (82.5%) of domestic abductions were resolved within 6 months and had a mean missing duration of 3 months. By comparison, only 27.6% of international abductions were resolved in 6 months and they had a mean missing duration of 18 months. Only 0.6% of domestic cases took 5 – 10 years



to be resolved, while 3.6% of international cases were resolved within this time frame. When the additional challenging factors of an international family abduction are present the child is more likely to be kept from their custodial parent/guardian for a longer period.

However, there has been improvement in the missing

duration of international cases over the past decade. In 2008, international abductions had a mean missing duration of nearly 2 years (22 months). By 2017, they had a mean missing duration of 9 months.

As stated previously, police investigation was the most common recovery method for family abduction cases overall and this remained true for domestic cases (40.9%). However, international cases were most often resolved due through voluntary means or an agreement reached between the parents and family members (25.6%). Police investigation was the cause of children being returned in international cases 13.0% of the time.

## OVERALL ABDUCTORS

Between 2008 and 2017, 11,761 abductors had a familial relationship with the child they abducted<sup>2</sup>. The clear majority (90.3%) of these abductors were the biological parent of the abducted child. Mothers were more likely to be the abductor than the father, comprising 53.9% of all family abduction cases. Fathers comprised 36.0% of all family abduction cases.

Even when the abductor was not the child's mother, the abductor in a family abduction was most likely to be female (60.3%). Abductors had a mean age of 33 years old. A plurality of abductors were White (38.3%), followed by Black (20.6%) and Hispanic (19.6%).

## RESPONSE TO FAMILY ABDUCTIONS

### *National Crime Information Center*

Although extensive training has been done throughout the years, there is still a lack of understanding and reluctance by some departments and officers to take reports on children involved in a family abduction. There is a temptation to treat family abductions as civil or private matter. Multiple studies and various state and national laws have recognized the harm family abductions can cause a child.

By federal mandate, information about a child whose location cannot be immediately confirmed by law enforcement must be entered into the National Crime Information Center (NCIC) Missing Person File within two hours of the report being made to that agency regardless of the alleged circumstances under which the child is missing. The value of this entry cannot be overstated. NCIC is an essential tool for location efforts involving missing children.

Over two thirds (69.2%) of children abducted by a parent or family member were entered the NCIC database. 40.8% were added to NCIC within a week following the abduction date. There was a mean duration of 83 days between missing date and entry into NCIC. Children who were recovered deceased - had a mean duration of 6 days between missing date and entry into NCIC and 19.1% of all deceased children had no NCIC entry. Cases with an international component tended to have a longer duration between missing date and date of entry into NCIC. Domestic cases had a mean duration of 2 months, while international cases had a mean duration of 6 months.

There was a correlation between the amount of time it took to enter the child into NCIC and the number of days a child was missing. The longer the time it took to enter the child into NCIC, the longer the missing duration.

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<sup>2</sup> Due to the nature of NCMC's database it was not possible to accurately count abductors who had a family-adjacent relationship to the child but were not formally related to the child. This includes abductors who were dating the child's relative at the time of abduction.

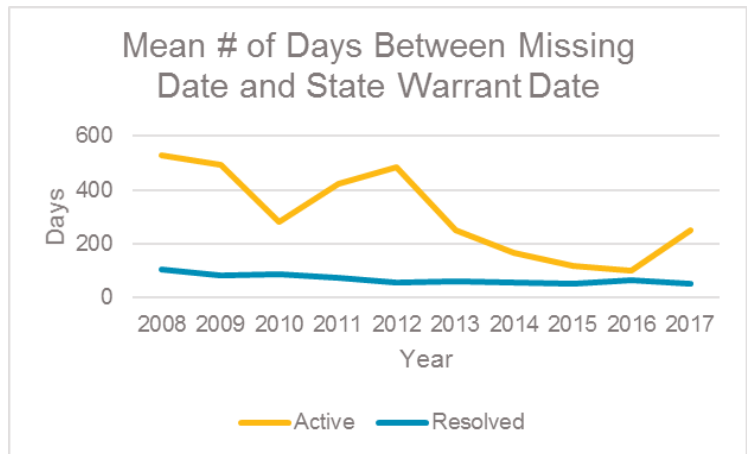
**State Warrant**

In some cases, state warrants were issued against the perpetrators of family abduction. These warrants could be issued for various related offenses related to a family abduction<sup>3</sup>. Between 2008 and 2017 there were 2,909 abductors who had state warrants issued against them. This means that, during this period, 24.7% of all family abductors had a warrant issued against related to the abduction in question.

The percentage of abductors having state warrants related to the family abduction has increased over the past decade. In 2008, 15% of abductors had a warrant issued against them, while from 2012 to 2016 over a quarter of all abductors had an abduction-related state warrant.

Over a quarter (26.8%) of these state warrants were issued within 48 hours after the child went missing. Nearly half (46.3%) were issued within a week. The mean time between abduction and the issuing of a state warrant was 84 days. Time between abduction and issuing of a warrant appears to be trending downward.

In cases where abductors had a state warrant issued against them, 71.7% of all children were recovered within 0 to 6 months. When there was no state warrant issued, 67.9% children were recovered within 6 months. In cases where abductors had a state warrant issued against them, children had a mean missing duration of 7 months, while children whose abductors did not have a warrant issued against them had a mean missing duration of 6 months.



There was a correlation between the amount of time it took to secure a state warrant against the abductor and the number of days a child was missing. The longer it took to secure the state warrant, the longer the child tended to be missing.

Most family abductions that occurred between 2008 and 2017 have been resolved; however, 5.1% of family abduction cases during this period remain active. Some of the abductors involved in currently-active family abduction cases have a state warrant issued against them. Over the past decades, state warrants were not issued as quickly in the cases that are currently active. Only 4.8% of all currently-active cases had a state warrant issued within 48 hours of the abduction and only 16.2% were issued within a week. The mean time between abduction and the issuing of a state warrant in a currently-

<sup>3</sup> The NCMEC database includes data on a small number of local warrants that were issued before the abduction (332). These were for crimes that were not related to the abduction. Consequently, these local warrants were not used in this analysis. State criminal laws vary and family abductions are categorized by a variety of offenses including, custodial interference, custody deprivation, child stealing, and parental kidnapping. The NCMEC database also includes a very limited amount of data on federal warrants. However, due to the scarcity of this data, it was not possible to analyze federal abductions.

active case was 10 months, while the mean time between abduction and the issuing of a state warrant in a case that has been resolved was 2 months.

### **AMBER Alerts**

The U.S. Department of Justice recommends that AMBER Alerts be issued when law enforcement has confirmed the abduction of a child, the child is at risk of injury or death, and there are sufficient descriptions of child, captor, or the captor's vehicle<sup>4</sup>. Between 2008 and 2017, 1,311 children were abducted by a family member under circumstances that triggered an AMBER Alert which involved 948 abductors. In cases where more than one child was abducted, the mean number of abducted children was 2. Six was the highest number of children abducted by a relative in which an AMBER Alert was activated. The mean age of the children was 4 years old. Approximately half of these children were female (49.0%) and half were male (51.0%). A plurality were White (44.7%). In over half (56.2%) of all these abductions the abductors were the child's father, while a third (33.4%) were the child's mother. The abductors had similar race and gender demographics when compared to the children.

Timeliness is crucial in AMBER Alert cases. Between 2008 and 2017, AMBER Alert cases had a mean duration of 23 hours between the missing date and the time an AMBER Alert was activated. There was a significant correlation between the duration between the missing date and AMBER Alert activation date and the child's overall missing duration. There was a correlation between the amount of time it took to secure an AMBER Alert and the number of days a child was missing. The longer it took to activate the AMBER Alert, the longer the missing duration of the child. The majority (88.7%) of AMBER Alert children were recovered within 72 hours, and nearly all AMBER Alert cases have been resolved (99.4%).

Between 2008 and 2017, twenty-one AMBER Alert children were abducted by relatives and recovered deceased. Fifteen abductors were associated with these cases. A majority (60.0%) of these abductors were the father of the child, and 80.0% of the abductors were male. A majority (71.4%) of the children were killed under the circumstance of a murder-suicide and the same percentage of children were abducted by someone in the possession of a gun. In over a quarter (28.6%) of these cases, the abductor committed an act of violence against another family member. Nearly three-quarters of deceased children (72.7%) were recovered in a vehicle.

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<sup>4</sup> <https://www.amberalert.gov/guidelines.htm>