

# America's Hidden Crime: When the Kidnapper is Kin

A Polly Klaas Foundation  
Report on Family Abduction:  
Public Opinion Insights and Best Practices



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## Executive Summary

This report takes a comprehensive look at the serious but rarely understood crime of family abduction—when a child is kidnapped by a member of his or her own family. The report includes a comprehensive review of existing research, statistics, and current legislation on family abduction, and introduces findings from an exclusive new national poll on the public's perceptions about the issue. Finally, it offers a number of solutions that can effectively reduce the harm caused by family abductions and, in the long term, prevent or discourage family members from kidnapping their children in the first place.

The poll, conducted by Harris Interactive, Inc. in January 2004 for the Polly Klaas Foundation, surveyed 1,021 adults nationwide and revealed that:

- Four of five Americans vastly underestimate the threat of family abductions. These 80 percent of respondents consider stranger abductions to be more dangerous than or equally as dangerous as family abductions. The most recent federal data indicate that in 1999, approximately 1,773 family abductions occurred for every one stereotypical stranger abduction.
- Eighty-one percent of Americans underestimate the percentage of children abducted by a family member out of all child kidnappings in the United States. The most recent federal data indicate that in 1999, 78 percent of all abducted children were taken by a family member.
- After being informed about the pervasive nature of the problem and the emotional damage family abduction can cause, 83 percent of Americans expressed support for federal funding of law enforcement training on family abductions and 81 percent supported prevention education among parents and families.

*(See pages 6-9 for complete poll results.)*

There is mounting evidence about family abduction that should serve as a sobering wake-up call to anyone who underestimates the importance of preventing family abductions. The evidence that family abduction is America's hidden crime includes:

- The number of people in the high-risk group for family abduction—families going through custody disputes and divorce proceedings—is on the rise. Divorce rates have tripled since 1960, and today 10 million children live with a parent who is separated or divorced.
- Approximately 70 percent of law enforcement agencies do not have an established protocol or guidelines for family abductions. Investigations often stall while agencies try to figure out how to handle the case. Some are dismissed altogether as civil matters.
- Psychologists now define family abduction as a form of child endangerment. Snatched from a familiar setting and away from loved ones, the abducted child is forced into a fugitive's lifestyle and taught to avoid and distrust authority figures. *(See page 5, Meet Aja Morse)* Even following reunification, abducted children have difficulties establishing trusting relationships with other people.

The good news is that we know how to prevent family abductions and make it easier to find and return children if they are taken by a family member. The Polly Klaas Foundation recommends the following solutions:

- *Prevent* family abductions by expanding prevention education and counseling programs for high-risk families.
- *Discourage* family members from kidnapping children by classifying family abductions as a felony and eliminating bureaucratic roadblocks to thorough investigations and prosecution of family abductors.
- *Increase* resources and training for law enforcement agencies to expedite search and recovery.

The statistics are clear: Every year, an alarming number of children continue to go missing due to a family abduction. The damages are impossible to ignore: Children suffer serious emotional and physical consequences as a result of family abductions. The source of the problem has been identified: the lack of knowledge and protocol on family abductions among agencies responsible for dealing with the problem is hampering investigation and recovery. The solution is clear: Increased funding for these agencies to equip themselves with the tools needed to battle the problem—training and education—can prevent or reduce the harm caused by family abductions.

### ***Meet Aja Morse***

“Many of you know me as ‘Katarina’ or ‘Kat Escada’ ‘Trisha’ or ‘Trish Wilcox’ or ‘Melissa Bleu,’ but my real name is Aja Morse. Eight years ago my brother, sister and I were abducted. We were found in March 1999. At the time, I didn’t realize how it was going to destroy my life and my brother and sister’s. I was always afraid that the police were going to find us or that I’d mess up on one of my new names. My brother and sister and I *never* went to a doctor, dentist or to school. I tried to homeschool my little brother and sister since we weren’t allowed to go to school. People think parents do this out of love. But they’re only causing their children damage.”

—Aja Morse, 15

## Poll Results

### Introduction and methodology

These findings are from a telephone survey conducted by Harris Interactive, Inc. for the Polly Klaas Foundation during the period January 2-4, 2004, among a nationally representative sample of 1,021 adults comprising 511 men and 510 women living in private households in the continental United States. The margin of error for the total sample is plus or minus 3.1 percent.

The intent of the poll was to measure the public's perception of family abduction and to gauge support for federal policies to prevent family abduction.

### Poll results

A total of four questions were included as part of this omnibus survey. The polling results are as follows:

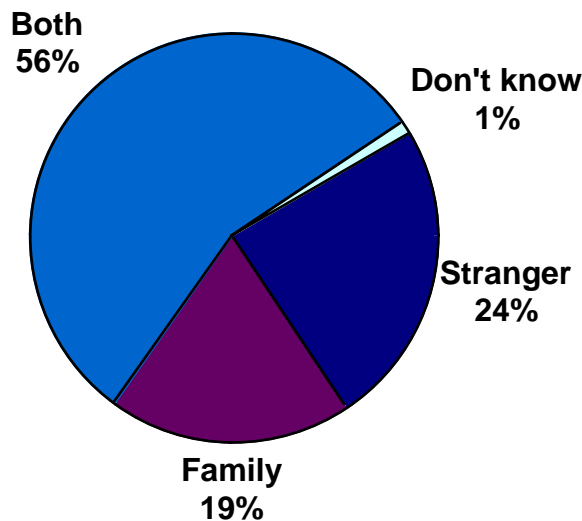
Question 1. Which one of the following do you believe to be the greatest danger for American children?

Response:

Abduction by a family member	19%
Abduction by a stranger	24%
They are both equally dangerous	56%

**Total responding that stranger abduction is more dangerous or equally as dangerous as family abduction**      **80%**

Don't know (volunteered response)      1%

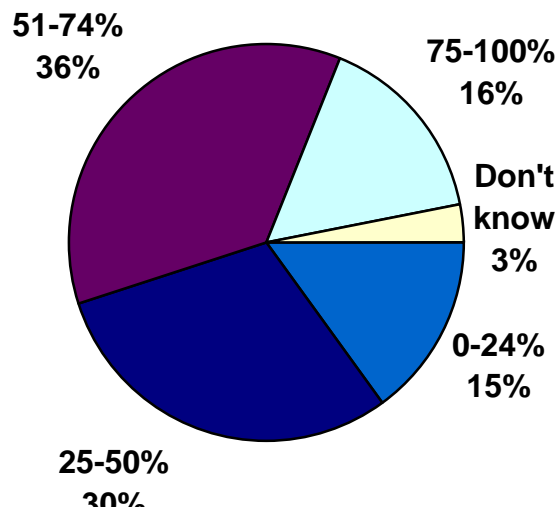


***Fact: In 1999, approximately 203,900 children were abducted by a family member. Stereotypical stranger abductions accounted for only 115 cases. Less than one-fifth of respondents were correct.***

**Question 2:** Based on everything you know, what percentage of children abducted in the U.S. are taken by a family member?

**Response:**

0 to 24%	15%
25% to 50%	30%
51% to 74%	36%
<b>Total Responding less than 75%</b>	<b>81%</b>
75% to 100%	16%
Don't know (volunteered response)	3%



***Fact: In 1999, family abductions comprised 78 percent of all child abductions in America, but only 16% of respondents were aware of the true extent of family abduction.***

All survey respondents were then read the following statement:

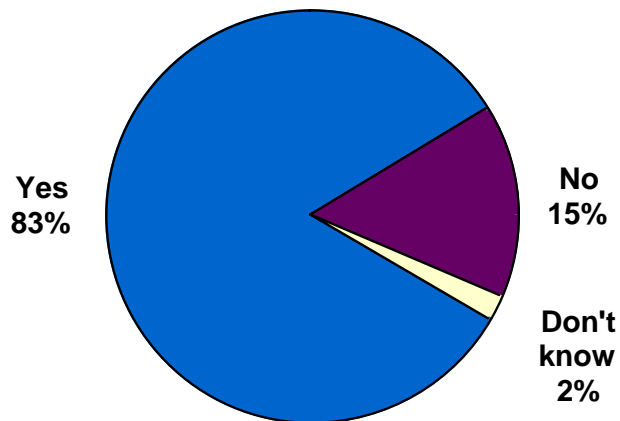
“The Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention estimates that approximately 203,000 children a year are abducted by a family member, which accounts for 78 percent of all child kidnappings in the U.S. Victims of family abduction are often deprived of

medical care and education, and psychologists now classify family abduction as child abuse because of the intense secrecy, isolation and separation of the child from their loved ones and the long-term emotional trauma.

The federal government currently makes limited training available to state law enforcement, and nearly 70 percent of law enforcement agencies do not have guidelines or the resources to respond to family abduction.”

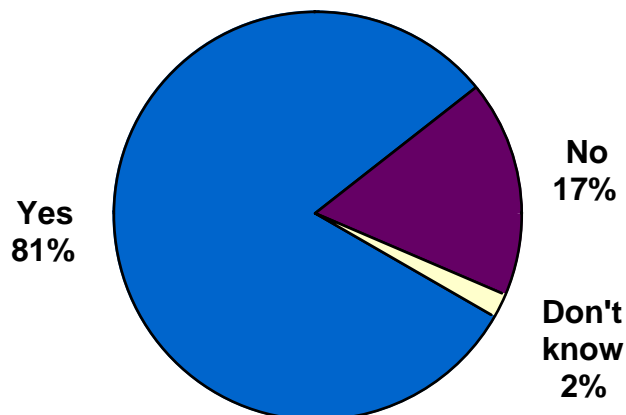
**Question 3:** Based on what you have just heard about family abduction, do you believe the federal government should do more to support state training of law enforcement regarding family abduction and investigation of those crimes?

Yes	83%
No	15%
Don't know (volunteered response)	2%



**Question 4:** Based on what you have just heard about family abduction, do you believe the federal government should assist states in informing parents on how to prevent family abductions?

Yes	81%
No	17%
Don't know (volunteered response)	2%





## **Analysis**

The results point out what is arguably the biggest hurdle in discouraging and preventing family abduction: the false belief that family abductions are less frequent than stranger abductions, and are not a common occurrence in America.

The vast majority (80 percent) of respondents consider stranger abductions to be the more or equally dangerous crime of the two, and continue to underestimate the pervasiveness of family abductions—only 16 percent of respondents were able to estimate an accurate percentage range of missing children abducted by a family member.

However, upon being informed about the true extent of the problem respondents expressed an overwhelming support for increased funding for law enforcement training on family abductions and prevention education among parents and families.

**If a short 45-second statement can muster up such a strong recognition that family abduction is a problem in need of effective solutions, the possibilities of a targeted outreach and education program leave much room for hope.**

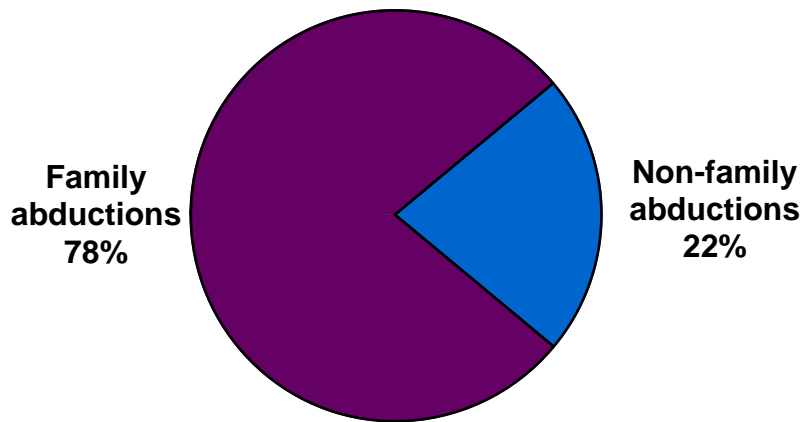
## Facts and Findings

The Polly Klaas Foundation undertook a comprehensive survey of the existing research about family abduction. The results were startling. Simply put, when it comes to family abduction, the problem is pervasive, the impact on victims is monumental, and the solutions are clear and within reach.

Laws define family abduction as when, in violation of a custody order, a decree, or other legitimate custodial rights, a member of the child's family, or someone acting on behalf of a family member, takes or fails to return a child, and the child is concealed or transported out of State with the intent to prevent contact or deprive the caretaker of custodial rights indefinitely or permanently.

According to the nation's most comprehensive data on missing children, the Second National Incidence Studies of Missing, Abducted, Runaway, and Thrownaway Children (NISMAART-2) published in October 2002, out of the approximately 262,100 child abductions in 1999, family abductions comprised 78 percent—a shocking 203,900.

**Child Abductions by Case Type, 1999**



### A growing problem

Among the most heavily afflicted groups are couples going through divorce proceedings and child custody disputes. (*See page 11, Family Abductions and Family Structure.*) According to the NISMAART-2 study, family abductions occurred most frequently in families where children were not living with both parents—families often scarred by bitter divorce and custody disputes. (*See page 12, Motives Behind Family Abduction.*) In fact, even in the presence of frequent parental visitation or joint custody arrangements, children in families with a high level of ongoing parental conflict remain at a high risk of family abduction.

Trends in divorce rates indicate that family abduction is indeed a growing problem—divorce rates have tripled since 1960, and today 10 million children live with a parent who is separated or divorced. That number is constantly increasing—more than a million children experience parental divorce each year. Experts tell us that the period of vulnerability for family abduction extends up to 4 or 5 years after a separation or divorce. Since children whose parents are married, or whose parents never married, are also at risk, the number of children in the risk pool for family abductions ranges from 5 to 10 million children.

	Estimated Number (n=203,900)	Percent
Two parents	7,200	4*
Single parent	85,500	42
One parent and partner	35,300	17
One parent, partner unknown	800	1*
Relative or foster parent	30,300	15
No parent	3,700	2*
No information	41,000	20

\*Estimate is based on too few sample cases to be reliable  
 Source: Finkelhor, D., Hammer, H., Schultz, D.J., and Sedlak, A.J. *National Incidence Studies of Missing, Abducted, Runaway, and Thrownaway Children*. Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Justice, Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention, 2002.

Also fueling the problem is increased geographic mobility and ability to quickly change community and lifestyle—critical to family abductors who need to constantly change identities and escape the notice of law enforcement authorities.

### **Family abduction as child endangerment**

The reality of family abduction is that it is a form of child endangerment. Children abducted by family members are often forced into the nomadic, unstable lifestyle of a fugitive: they are taught to hide their real identities under a false name, and to avoid and distrust law enforcement and authority figures. Family abductors often deprive their

children of education and medical attention to avoid being tracked down via school or medical records.

### ***Motives Behind Family Abductions***

While many abducting parents claim that they were driven by love and concern for the child, studies have found the following as the primary motives behind family abductions:

- To force a reconciliation or to continue interaction with the left-behind parent;
- To blame, spite, or punish the other parent;
- Out of fear of losing custody or visitation rights;
- In rare cases, to protect the child from a parent who is perceived to molest, abuse, or neglect the child.

Source: Chiancone, Janet. *Parental Abduction: A Review of the Literature*, U.S. Department of Justice, Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention.

The abusive nature of family abductions goes much beyond the already devastating damage caused by a lack of education and medical attention. The trauma of being torn from familiar settings away from loving family and friends carries on long after recovery and reunification. Even after coming home, children have difficulties establishing trusting relationships with other people.

Numerous studies have documented the emotional scars caused in children by family abductions. In a 1983 study, 89 percent of sampled children who suffered or were threatened with family abduction showed symptoms of grief and rage toward the left-behind parent, as well as “mental indoctrination” perpetrated by the abductor.

Another study revealed that the majority of recovered children experienced symptoms of emotional distress, often in the form of anxiety, eating problems, and nightmares, as a result of being abducted.

Studies have also found that the degree of trauma increases with the duration of the child's kidnapping. In light of such findings, the need to minimize delay and expedite investigations becomes painfully clear. For every minute, hour, and day that a child is missing while law enforcement and other agencies figure out what to do, the psychological impact takes a larger toll on the child.

Furthermore, more than half of abducting parents have a history of violent behavior, a criminal record or a substance abuse problem. Physical and sexual abuse can and have occurred during family abductions.

### ***The Story of a Family Abduction Survivor***

I was born in 1977. My parents couldn't work things out, so in 1979 they went through a common law divorce in Illinois. My father got custody of all the children. My siblings were old enough to testify and say who they wanted to live with, and they chose my dad. But I was too young to choose, so I was the only one who had mandatory visitation with my mother every other weekend.

This went on for about a year until one weekend, when I was 4 years old, my mother picked me up and never came back. She fled to Texas with me. She had all of her moles and distinguishing marks removed from her body and she had fake birth certificates made for me. She changed my name to Heather and my birthday. She just added a "1" to the "7" and I was now a different person with a different life.

As I grew up she told me my dad didn't love me and that he took my siblings and never wanted to see me. I of course believed her lies and grew up until I was 11 with hatred for my father and an unstable life. There were nights I would wake up and she was not there.

In 1989 we moved to California. We lived there for about 5 months until one day I was taken out of class by my principal and escorted to his office.

When I walked in there were two police officers, a woman, and two FBI agents. They sat me down and pulled out a milk carton with a picture of me when I was four with my real name underneath it and asked me if I knew who it was. I naturally said no, and she explained it was me. She explained that my mother abducted me and that my father had been looking for me for eight years. I began to cry. I didn't know how to react, so I asked to see their FBI badges because I didn't believe them. They showed me, and I was taken to a foster home for the night until the morning where I would meet my dad for the first time in 8 years.

The next morning I was taken to a hotel restaurant where I met my dad. There was no pressure from him. He told me I could call him dad or Bruce, it was up to me. I got on a plane with him and met all of my family for the first time again at the airport. I remember everyone crying and staring at me. I didn't know what to do or how to feel; it was an alternative universe where I had a different name.

*-Rebekah, 24, Take Root member*

### **The current system's response**

Upon realizing that his or her child may have been abducted, 90 percent of frantic left-behind parents contact law enforcement for assistance before calling anyone else.

Unfortunately, many federal, state, and local law enforcement agencies and prosecutors cited a general lack of knowledge and protocol in dealing with family abductions as the Achilles' heel in their ability to quickly and effectively carry out their responsibilities. In

fact, 70 percent of law enforcement agencies reported that they did not have written policies and procedures governing family abduction cases, and 63 percent did not receive formal training on the handling of family abduction cases.

While some statutes are in place (*see right, Existing Criminal Laws and Civil Statutes*), law enforcement agencies cited difficulties in verifying custody orders between different states as one of the biggest roadblocks to solving parental abduction cases.

The current system, riddled with vague laws regarding custody and child abduction, is worsened by an uneven application of what few laws exist. For instance, only 35 states have passed the Uniform Child Custody Jurisdiction Enforcement Act (UCCJEA), a crucial piece of legislation ensuring that custody orders issued in one state are valid and enforced in another. (*See page 15, Criminal Status of Family Abduction.*)

With inconsistent enforcement of custody orders, investigating interstate family abductions becomes a bureaucratic nightmare.

The underlying problem, however, lies in the perception that family abductions are civil matters and do not require the immediate attention reserved for urgent crimes. Family abductions are not perceived by law enforcement agencies as an urgent problem, but rather a civil dispute that should be dealt with by family courts and social workers. In many instances, police did not perceive family abductions as a criminal case and instead referred them to family courts, prosecutors, and social service agencies.

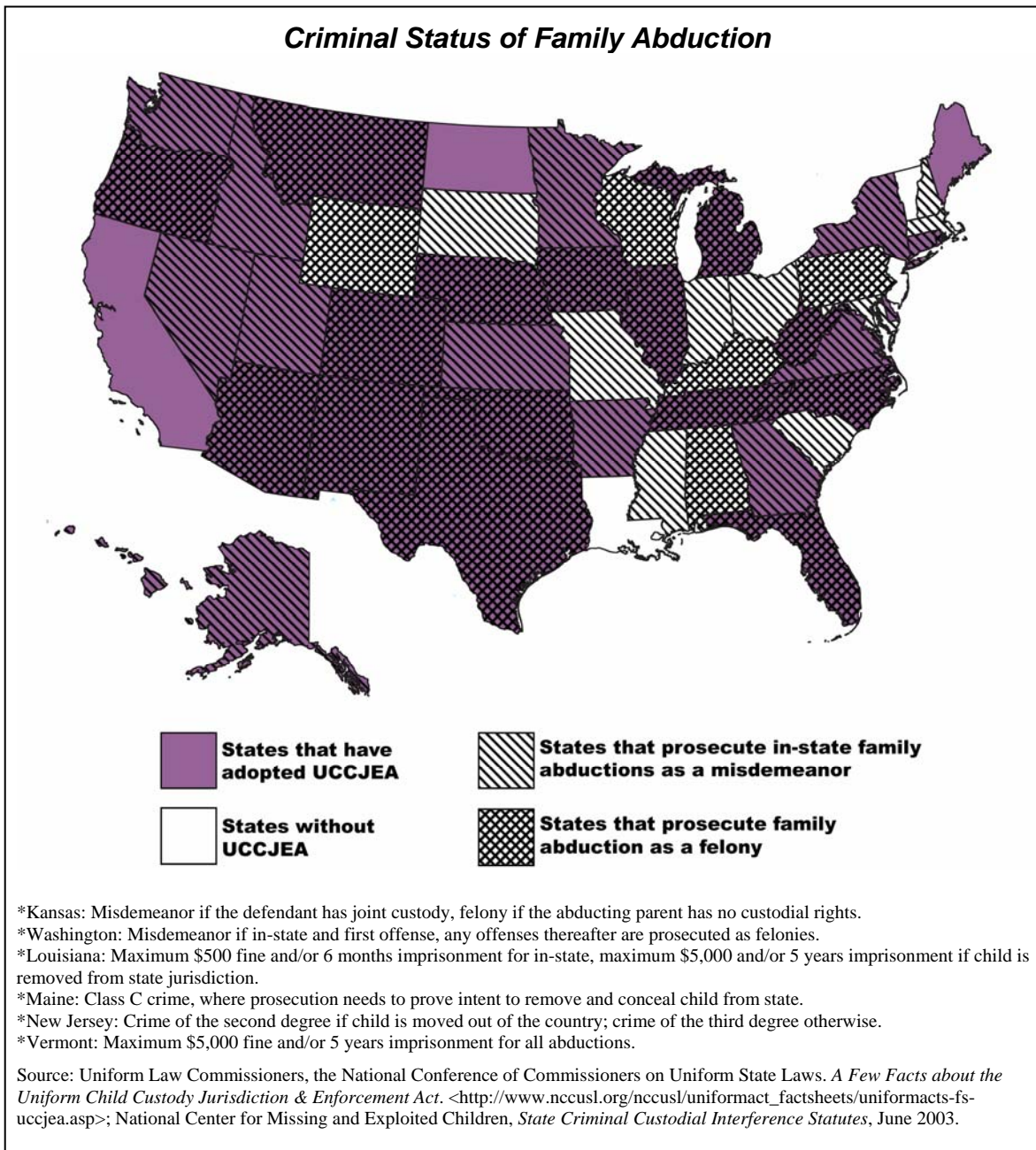
This trend is also reflected in the disparity between state statutes on family abduction—while family abduction is a crime in all 50 states, some classify the crime as a felony and

### ***Existing Criminal Laws and Civil Statutes***

- **Parental Kidnapping Prevention Act (PKPA):** Federal law passed in 1980 that gives jurisdictional priority to the child's home state in family abduction cases where conflicts arise between two states. In some cases, it also authorizes access to the Federal Parent Locator Service for purposes of identifying the whereabouts of a parentally abducted child.
- **Uniform Child Custody Jurisdiction and Enforcement Act (UCCJEA):** Adopted unanimously by the National Conference of Commissioners on Uniform States Laws in 1997 and approved by the American Bar Association in 1998, this legislation provides enforcement mechanisms preventing kidnappers from hiding behind divergent state laws and ensures that missing children return home even if they cross state lines. Only 35 states have adopted the UCCJEA.
- **The Hague Convention on the civil aspects of International Child Abduction:** This international treaty ratified by the United States in 1988 and currently in effect in 43 countries, simplifies and expedites the return process when children have been abducted internationally.



others as a misdemeanor. (See below, *Criminal Status of Family Abduction*.)  
 Classification as a misdemeanor diminishes law enforcement agencies' willingness to deal with family abduction as a serious crime and child endangerment.



## Conclusion and Recommendations

Education and assistance to all parties that can prevent family abduction—law enforcement personnel, prosecutors, family court judges and attorneys, social workers, counselors, and at-risk families—is critical. Protecting our children from this damaging crime will require the active involvement of everyone with the power to help. The Polly Klaas Foundation recommends adoption of specific, proven measures to prevent family abductions, discourage potential abductors, and reduce the damage of any family abductions that do occur.

### Preventing family abductions

The silver lining of the problem of family abduction is that it is a preventable tragedy, largely because, unlike stranger abductions, the perpetrator is usually identifiable—the kidnapper is kin.

Research from the U.S. Department of Justice shows that when parents understand that kidnapping their own child is a crime, they are less likely to follow through with abduction plans. Identifying potential abductors and informing them that kidnapping is not only a criminal violation of the law but also causes the child irreparable psychological trauma can significantly reduce the risk of family abduction.

Including requirements for counseling in custody orders can also help prevent the problem. Research shows that as little as 10 hours of intervention effectively reduces the likelihood of family abduction.

Preventive measures such as targeted outreach and education to at-risk families—parents undergoing divorce and separation—not only save the state from costly expenses associated with search, recovery and prosecution, but can also spare the child from unnecessary pain and suffering caused by family abduction.

#### ***The Polly Klaas Foundation recommends:***

- Mandate counseling in custody orders;
- Educate at-risk families about the realities and dangers of family abduction.

### Discouraging the crime

Policymakers can play a critical role in deterring parents from kidnapping their children by raising the criminal standards of family abduction to a felony in all 50 states and passing custodial interference laws that facilitate the investigation and prosecution of family abductions.

There is also a need to pass the Uniform Child Custody Jurisdiction Enforcement Act in all 50 states to ensure that custody laws are applied consistently across the nation. (*See*



page 15, *Criminal Status of Family Abduction*.) Currently adopted in 35 states, UCCJEA is a critical tool in enforcing child custody laws between states and helping children return home even when they are taken across state borders. The more states that adopt this law, the fewer places family abductors can run and hide.

***The Polly Klaas Foundation recommends:***

- Raise the criminal status of family abduction to a felony in all 50 states;
- Adopt UCCJEA in all 50 states.

## **Reducing the damage**

Because abductions of longer duration cause greater emotional trauma, rapid recovery is key to reducing the damage suffered by children in family abduction cases. Well-trained law enforcement personnel with the appropriate tools to execute an effective investigation will improve outcomes for children abducted by family members.

State and local law enforcement agencies must institutionalize written procedures that specifically address the issue, as well as develop and incorporate initial and ongoing training material to ensure all personnel are equipped to handle family abduction cases.

There are also a number of tools that have been proven effective in fighting family abductions that are not being put to use due to a lack of resources. For example, federal funding can aid the implementation of a system among schools and medical facilities whereby law enforcement must be notified if an abducted child's records are requested.

Policymakers can also assist by helping law enforcement agencies allocate resources for sufficient staff and enhanced computer technology to make family abduction a case priority without compromising investigations on other violent crimes. Law enforcement agencies also need assistance with the costs associated with the investigation and extradition of suspected abductors.

***The Polly Klaas Foundation recommends:***

- Institute written procedures for law enforcement agencies;
- Develop and implement law enforcement training material;
- Provide federal assistance for proven, effective tools to fight family abduction.

## **About the Polly Klaas Foundation**

The Polly Klaas Foundation is a national nonprofit that helps find missing children and prevents children from going missing in the first place. We accomplish our goals by promoting public policies, educating the public, and providing families, law enforcement and communities with the ongoing support and expertise needed to protect our children. We have helped more than 5,000 families find missing children using our compassion, experience and professionalism.

Working together with the community, policymakers and law enforcement, we can make America safe for children by promoting public policies and educating kids, parents and the entire community on how to bring children home and keep them safe.

For general questions on family abduction, contact the Polly Klaas Foundation at 1-800-587-4357 or visit [www.PollyKlaas.org](http://www.PollyKlaas.org) or [www.StopFamilyAbductionsNow.org](http://www.StopFamilyAbductionsNow.org).

## Appendix A: Online Resources on Family Abduction

The following are Web sites with more information on how to stop family abductions and help find missing children.

### **Polly Klaas Foundation ([www.PollyKlaas.org](http://www.PollyKlaas.org))**

The Polly Klaas Foundation is a national nonprofit that helps find missing children and prevents them from going missing in the first place by providing families, law enforcement and communities with the ongoing support and expertise needed to protect our children.

### **Stop Family Abductions Now ([www.StopFamilyAbductionsNow.org](http://www.StopFamilyAbductionsNow.org))**

Stop Family Abductions Now is a campaign by the Polly Klaas Foundation, and offers resources for parents, policymakers, law enforcement and communities in addressing the problem of family abduction.

### **Amber Alert Now ([www.Amberalertnow.org](http://www.Amberalertnow.org))**

Help rescue kidnapped children by making sure the Amber Alert emergency response system is in place across the country.

### **Take Root ([www.TakeRoot.org](http://www.TakeRoot.org))**

Take Root speaks directly to those who were parentally abducted, to bring their voices forward and to make sure they do not remain among the missing.

### **Team H.O.P.E. ([www.TeamHope.org](http://www.TeamHope.org))**

The mission of Team H.O.P.E. is to assist families with missing children by offering counsel, resources, empowerment and emotional support from trained volunteers, who have had or still have a missing child.

### **Child Find of America ([www.ChildFindofAmerica.org](http://www.ChildFindofAmerica.org))**

Child Find of America Inc. is a national nonprofit organization that prevents child abduction through education and resolves incidents of parental abduction through mediation.

### **National Conference of Commissioners on Uniform State Laws ([www.nccusl.org](http://www.nccusl.org))**

NCCUSL is now in its 112th year. The organization comprises more than 300 legal professionals, who draft proposals for uniform and model state laws where uniformity is desirable and practicable, and work toward their enactment in legislatures.

### **Abduction of Zachary and Chelsea Smith ([www.zacharystrattonsmith.com](http://www.zacharystrattonsmith.com))**

Zachary and Chelsea were abducted by their non-custodial mother, Elizabeth Ann Stratton. A FBI warrant for Unlawful Flight to Avoid Prosecution was issued for the abductor on January 12, 1998.

## **Appendix B: Family Abduction Prevention for Parents**

### **HOW TO PROTECT YOURSELF AND YOUR CHILD**

- Are you in the middle of a custody battle?
- Do you argue with your child's other parent about visitation?
- Do you worry about your child when he or she is with the other parent?

If you answered yes to any of these, you and your child may be at risk of family abduction.

Family abduction happens when a family member, usually a parent, kidnaps and conceals a child for any length of time. It is a serious crime that happens to over 203,000 families a year. Life on the run for a child abducted by a family member offers many dangers: over half of family abductors have a history of violence, substance abuse, or a criminal record. In addition, children are often deprived of schooling and medical care, and learn to distrust the very authorities who could help them. The potential for harm is so great that many states prosecute family abduction as a felony.

The Polly Klaas Foundation can help you avoid the trauma and despair of family abduction. By learning more about family abduction and taking preventive steps, you can protect yourself and your child.

### **WHY DO PARENTS KIDNAP THEIR OWN CHILDREN?**

According to family abduction experts, parents cite the following reasons for kidnapping their own children:

- To force a reconciliation or continued interaction with the left-behind parent;
- To spite or punish the other parent;
- From fear of losing custody or visitation rights;
- In rare cases, to protect the child from a parent who is perceived to molest, abuse, or neglect the child.

### **ARE YOU AT RISK FOR FAMILY ABDUCTION?**

A direct threat of abduction should always be taken seriously, but often the warning signs are more subtle. Here are the most common signs that your child may be in danger of being kidnapped by a parent or family member:

- Your relationship with the other parent of your child is volatile and you argue often over visitation;
- A parent has a history of threatening abduction or has actually abducted the child in the past;
- A parent suspects or believes abuse has occurred and his/her friends and family support these concerns;
- A parent is paranoid delusional or severely sociopathic;
- A parent is a citizen of another country and is ending a mixed-culture marriage;
- A parent feels alienated from the legal system and has family/social support in another community;
- A parent has no strong ties to the child's home state;
- A parent has no job, is able to work anywhere or is not financially tied to the area;
- A parent is engaged in planning activities such as quitting a job, selling a home, terminating a lease, closing a bank account or applying for passports, birth certificates or school and medical records.

If any of these warning signs are present in your family, the Polly Klaas Foundation recommends following the steps described below. If you feel you need urgent intervention, please call 9-1-1 first and then contact the Polly Klaas Foundation at 1-800-587-4357.

### **KEEPING YOUR CHILD SAFE** **Tips to Prevent Family Abduction**

Most parents who fall victim to family abduction are not aware that something like this can happen to them. While most people think strangers are to blame in child kidnappings, national statistics reveal that abductions by family are much more common than by strangers.

Michael Smith, whose children were abducted by his ex-wife in December 1997, says, "While it is devastating to know that the risk of family abduction is much higher than stranger abductions, parents can take comfort in knowing that there are preventive measures they can take to reduce the risk of family abduction, precisely because they know who the potential abductor is."

The Polly Klaas Foundation recommends taking the following cautionary steps:

- Respect the other parent's custody and visitation rights. Anger, frustration and desperation are leading causes of family abduction.
- Attempt to maintain a friendly relationship with your ex-spouse and his/her family. This may be difficult, but it can save you from experiencing the far greater trauma of family abduction. The family will be less willing to aid in an abduction if they have a relationship with you. If an abduction does occur, you will need the support of the kidnapper's family to bring your child home safely.

- Consider counseling. As little as 10 hours of intervention can effectively reduce the likelihood of family abduction. Information on obtaining counseling or mediation services is available at [www.divorceinfo.com](http://www.divorceinfo.com). Child Find of America (1-800-426-5678) offers a mediation hotline. Your local family court can also help you with referrals to counseling or mediation services.
- Begin the custody process immediately and get temporary custody of your child. You cannot prove your custody rights without a custody order.
- Include abduction and interference prevention measures in the custody order. The most common are:
  - Having both parents post bonds. If the child is abducted, the money helps the left-behind parent with costs of recovery. It also serves as a deterrent. Companies that provide such services include Accredited ([www.accredited-inc.com/childbonds.html](http://www.accredited-inc.com/childbonds.html)) and Roche Surety ([www.rochesurety.com](http://www.rochesurety.com)). For more information on posting bonds, contact the Professional Bail Agents of the United States at [www.pb.us.org](http://www.pb.us.org) or 1-800-833-PBUS.
  - Providing detailed police procedures in case of abduction or custodial interference, and authorization for law enforcement to recover the child.
  - Imposing visitation restrictions, such as supervised visits. The Supervised Visitation Network ([www.svnetwork.net](http://www.svnetwork.net)) can provide more information about supervised visitations.
  - Requiring that the parents' passports be left at the county clerk's office during visitations.
- Keep a certified copy of the custody order with you at home. Check with your family court that it is the most recent order.
- Record and document abduction threats. Report them to the family courts or your lawyer immediately.
- Ask the police or prosecutor to intervene. If a parent threatens to abduct a child, it can help to ask the local police or prosecutor to contact the parent and warn him/her of the criminal consequences.
- Notify schools, healthcare providers, day care centers and babysitters of custody orders. Certified copies of custody orders should be on file with the school office and given to teachers, day care providers, babysitters, dentists and pediatricians with instructions not to release your child to anyone else without your permission. You should ask to be contacted immediately if the non-custodial parent attempts to pick up your child without explicit authorization.
- Keep lists of identifying information about the other parent and your child, including Social Security numbers, current photographs, license plate numbers and bank and credit card account numbers.
- Keep a complete written description of your child, including hair and eye color, height, weight, date of birth, and identifying physical features. Take color photographs of your child every six months. A head and shoulder portrait is best. Consider getting your child fingerprinted. Contact your local police department to find out how this can be done in your area. You, not the police, should retain the prints. Or use the Child ID kit available from the Polly Klaas Foundation to fingerprint and document identification information about your child.

- File or register a certified copy of the custody order in the non-custodial parent's state. This notifies the courts that a valid order has been made and must be enforced without modification. Contact your local family court for advice on how to do this.
- Obtain a passport for your child and notify the passport office that your child is not to leave the country without your written permission. Learn how to restrict your child's passport through the U.S. Department of State at [www.travel.state.gov](http://www.travel.state.gov).

To keep your children safe, it is ALSO important that you:

- Keep the lines of communication open between you and your children.
- Teach your children their full name(s) and your full name. Older children should be able to easily recite their full address, city, state and country, as well as telephone number with area code.
- Practice using both a private phone and pay phone, with clear explanation of when to call home, and how to place long distance calls. You should also help them understand how and when to dial 9-1-1 and 0 for Operator, and that these calls are free, even from a pay phone.

AND MOST IMPORTANT OF ALL is something you can easily do every day:

- Be sure that your child knows that you love him/her and if anything should ever separate you that you will do everything you can to be together again. For your child's well-being, this should be conveyed without mentioning, or accusing, the other parent of being a potential threat.

The Polly Klaas Foundation has compassionate and professional case workers who can help you prevent family abduction and recover a child who has been abducted by a family member. If you have any reason to believe you and your child are in danger of family abduction, contact us immediately at 1-800-587-4357.

## Resources

Allen, E. *"The kid is with a parent, how bad can it be?" The Crisis of Family Abductions.* Alexandria, VA: National Center for Missing and Exploited Children, 1991.

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