The words "missing child" call to mind tragic and frightening kidnappings reported in the national news. But a child can be missing for many reasons, and the problem of missing children is far more complex than the headlines suggest. Getting a clear picture of how many children become missing—and why—is an important step in addressing the problem. This series of Bulletins provides that clear picture by summarizing findings from the Second National Incidence Studies of Missing, Abducted, Runaway, and Thrownaway Children (NISMART-2). The series offers national estimates of missing children based on surveys of households, juvenile residential facilities, and law enforcement agencies. It also presents statistical profiles of these children, including their demographic characteristics and the circumstances of their disappearance.

This Bulletin presents results of a special analysis comparing selected findings from NISMART-2 and its predecessor, NISMART-1. The analysis, which is based on household surveys of adult caretakers and covers victims of family abductions, runaways, and children categorized as "lost, injured, or otherwise missing,"1 highlights trends from 1988 to 1999 and reveals some encouraging news.

1 For methodological reasons, the analysis does not cover nonfamily abductions (including stereotypical kidnappings) and children categorized as "thrownaway." See methodology sidebar on pages 4-7.
Key Findings
In the three categories considered (family abductions, runaways, and lost, injured, or otherwise missing children), the analysis finds:

- No evidence of any increase in the incidence of missing children between 1988 and 1999.

Background
The 1984 Missing Children’s Assistance Act (Pub. L. 98-473) requires the Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention (OJJDP) to conduct periodic studies to determine the number of children reported missing and the number recovered in a given year. The first such study, NISMART-1 (Finkelhor, Hotaling, and Sedlak, 1990), provided estimates for 1988 and the second, NISMART-2 (Hammer, Finkelhor, and Sedlak, forthcoming), provided estimates for 1999.

In NISMART-2, the research team changed definitions and methodology to reflect what was learned in NISMART-1. In contrast to the other Bulletins in the NISMART-2 series, this Bulletin uses the original NISMART-1 definitions to permit comparisons between 1999 and 1988. The methodology sidebar on pages 4-7 presents important information for readers to keep in mind as they consider the results that follow.

Results
This section presents findings for three categories of children: victims of family abductions, runaways, and children categorized as lost, injured, or otherwise missing. The subsections begin with definitions of the cases included in the analysis. In each category, definitions distinguish between "broad scope" and "policy focal" cases—i.e., all cases and those considered to be more serious—as explained below. The findings are summarized in the figure on this page.

Family Abductions
Definitions. An episode qualifies as a broad scope family abduction if, in violation of a custody agreement or decree, a family member took a child or failed to return a child at the end of a legal or agreed-upon visit and the child was kept at least overnight. Policy focal family abductions meet at least one of three additional conditions: (1) the abductor attempted to conceal the taking or whereabouts of the child or to prevent contact with the child, (2) the abductor transported the child out of state, or (3) evidence existed that the abductor intended to keep the child indefinitely or to affect custodial privileges permanently.

■ The incidence rate for children who experienced broad scope family abductions declined significantly, from 5.62 per 1,000 children in 1988 to 4.18 in 1999.
One might expect an increase, not a decrease, in the incidence of family abduction victims, given that the population has become more geographically mobile, divorce rates remain high, and parents (particularly fathers) have rising expectations for more equitable custody arrangements. However, countervailing trends may be at work: greater public awareness and avoidance of risks associated with catastrophic conflicts over custody, improved public access to custody dispute resolution services, and court system reforms that make it harder for disgruntled parents to turn to other states for more favorable treatment.

Such factors may explain the decline in the incidence rate for children who experienced broad scope family abductions. The lack of decline in the incidence rate for children who experienced more serious policy focal family abductions may mean that these improvements have had less impact on the most acrimonious, combative custody situations in which noncustodial parents resort to extreme unilateral actions.

At least one demographic change between 1988 and 1999 may have affected family abduction estimates: a decline in the number of children who live with both biological parents. During that period, the U.S. Census Bureau's Current Population Surveys (conducted in March of each year) show a 4.6-percent decline in the number of children living with both parents, and NISMART caretaker respondents who were biological parents of the child in question declined 4 percent between NISMART-1 and NISMART-2. In NISMART-1, 9 out of 10 respondents were parents, and the rest were primarily grandparents, aunts, and uncles (Finkelhor, Hotaling, and Sedlak, 1992); in NISMART-2, fewer (86 percent) were biological parents, more (4 percent) were stepparents, and 6 percent (about the same as in NISMART-1) were grandparents, aunts, and uncles.

The increase in the percentage of NISMART caretakers who are stepparents may be especially relevant to the decline in the incidence rate for children who experienced broad scope family abductions. Stepparents may be less aware of, or less likely to report, less serious family abductions, which tend to involve conflicts between biological parents.

### Runaways

**Definitions.** An episode qualifies as a broad scope runaway if it meets one of the following criteria: (1) a child left home without permission and was away at least one night; (2) a child made a statement or left a note indicating intent to run away and then stayed away at least overnight; (3) a child age 15 or older was away, chose not to come home when expected, and stayed away at least two nights; or (4) a child age 14 or younger was away, chose not to come home when expected, and stayed away at least one night. Policy focal runaway episodes meet the additional condition that the child was without a familiar and secure place to stay for at least one night.

The incidence rate for broad scope runaways declined from 7.09 per 1,000 children in 1988 to 5.28 in 1999. This decrease approaches statistical significance, meaning that it probably, but not conclusively, indicates an actual decline.

The incidence rate for policy focal runaways, from 2.06 per 1,000 children in 1988 to 1.26 in 1999, is not large enough to be statistically significant. The difference in rates may simply be due to chance and may not reflect an actual decrease in these cases.

The slight increase in the incidence rate for policy focal family abductions, from 2.59 per 1,000 children in 1988 to 3.15 in 1999, is not large enough to be statistically significant—i.e., the difference in rates may simply be due to chance and may not reflect an actual increase in the incidence rate.
demands on caretakers’ time. This could mean that fewer children who are away from home meet the runaway definition of being away without permission.

Another possible factor is the increasing availability of cell phones and other modes of communication. Children who have taken liberties may be more likely to negotiate an agreement with their caretakers, precluding a sense of alarm or violation of permission.

In addition, running away may hold less allure as children become more aware of the dangers involved. The Internet may now serve as a substitute for hanging out with friends, taking risks, and having adventures. The decline in running away is also consistent with improvements in child and youth well-being during the 1990s (Foundation for Child Development, 2004). These improvements include declines in child poverty (Federal Interagency Forum, 2000), teenage drinking (Johnston, O’Malley, and Bachman, 2000) and pregnancy (Federal Interagency Forum, 2000), youth violence and victimization (U.S. Bureau of Justice Statistics, 2000), and child abuse and neglect, including sexual abuse (Jones and Finkelhor, 2001; Finkelhor and Jones, 2004).

Lost, Injured, or Otherwise Missing Children

Definitions. An episode qualifies as broad scope lost, injured, or otherwise missing if it meets one of the following criteria: (1) a child disappeared from home or from parental supervision and could not be located for varying amounts of time depending on age—any amount of time (ages 0-2), 2 hours (3-4), 3 hours (5-6), 4 hours (7-10), 8 hours (11-13), overnight (14-17)—or, for a child of any age with a serious or permanent physical or mental disability or impairment or life threatening medical condition, for 1 hour; (2) a child who was out with parental permission failed to return, could not be located, and was gone at least overnight; or (3) a child who was out with parental permission failed to return or make contact with the parent for at least an
These findings suggest a clear decline in the incidence rate for children who experienced broad scope lost, injured, or otherwise missing episodes and a possible decline in the incidence rate for children who experienced episodes classified as policy focal because they triggered a call to police to help locate the missing child. Most commonly, lost, injured, or otherwise missing episodes involve children who are delayed coming home or contacting their parents because of weather, travel delays (such as car breakdowns), and other extenuating circumstances, and children who are perceived as missing because of a miscommunication about their plans or intentions.

Once again, a factor in the observed decline could be improvements in communication technology, such as the proliferation of cell phones. However, it is also possible that the change could arise from methodological differences between NISMART-1 and NISMART-2.

Summary
This analysis examines trends in the incidence of children who are family abduction victims, runaways, and lost, injured, or otherwise missing, based on NISMART data for 1988 and 1999. It considers children who experienced a broad scope (i.e., any) incident and those who experienced a policy focal (more serious) incident.
The analysis offers evidence of statistically significant declines in incidence rates for children who experienced broad scope family abduction episodes and lost, injured, or otherwise missing episodes, plus some evidence of declines in incidence rates for children who experienced broad scope runaway episodes and policy focal lost, injured, otherwise missing episodes. Observed changes in incidence rates for children who experienced policy focal family abduction episodes and policy focal runaway episodes are not statistically significant.

The most important finding is the absence of increases in any of these problems. This finding is consistent with growing evidence of improvements in child and youth well-being during the 1990s (Foundation for Child Development, 2004; Federal Interagency Forum, 2000; Johnston, O'Malley, and Bachman, 2000; U.S. Bureau of Justice Statistics, 2000; Jones and Finkelhor, 2001; Finkelhor and Jones, 2004).

Such evidence suggests that the environment affecting children—possibly the economic resources available for their care, the quality of family life and parental attention, availability of social and medical services, and community safety and cohesion—has not worsened and may have improved. It is also possible that the allure of running away may have dissipated as parents have given children greater freedom and independence. The proliferation of cell phones and other modes of communication has made it easier to locate children and clear up misunderstandings, which may help to explain the decline in lost, injured, or otherwise missing children.

Although the findings reported in this Bulletin are encouraging, they are no cause for complacency. The NISMART estimates for 1999 also reveal large numbers of children and youth still caught up in circumstances of crisis and vulnerability. The family and community problems these statistics reflect are unlikely to disappear anytime soon.

Finally, methodological differences between the 1988 and 1999 NISMART surveys (see sidebar on pages 4-7) may explain some of the change (and lack of change) reported in this Bulletin. Further analysis is required to
reach definitive conclusions about the impact of these differences.

Conclusion

The period between 1988 and 1999 saw significant mobilization on behalf of missing children. Law enforcement officers received special training, and public awareness grew as a result of media coverage and educational programs disseminated to schools and families. Have these efforts made a difference? What else should be done? The kinds of data collected thus far are of limited use in answering these questions. Data gathered more frequently and more locally could provide a tool for public policy analysis that might lead to even greater effectiveness in combating the problem of missing children.

References


This Bulletin was prepared under grant number 95-MC-CX-K004 from the Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention, U.S. Department of Justice, to Temple University.

Points of view or opinions expressed in this document are those of the authors and do not necessarily represent the official position or policies of OJJDP or the U.S. Department of Justice.

The Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention is a component of the Office of Justice Programs, which also includes the Bureau of Justice Assistance, the Bureau of Justice Statistics, the National Institute of Justice, and the Office for Victims of Crime.

**Acknowledgments**

Heather Hammer, Ph.D., is a Senior Study Director at the Temple University Institute for Survey Research, Philadelphia, PA, and Principal Investigator of NISMART-2. David Finkelhor, Ph.D., is Professor of Sociology and Director of the Crimes against Children Research Center, University of New Hampshire; and Advisor to NISMART-2. Andrea J. Sedlak, Ph.D., is Associate Director of Human Services Research at Westat, Inc.; Project Director of the NISMART-2 Unified Estimate, Juvenile Facilities Study, and Law Enforcement Study; and Advisor to the NISMART-2 Household Survey. Lorraine E. Porcellini, B.A., is Study Direction/Sampling Coordinator at the Temple University Institute for Survey Research.

The authors extend their appreciation to the many individuals who contributed to this Bulletin, to OJJDP NISMART-2 Program Manager Barbara Allen-Hagen, and to the NISMART survey respondents.