

Media Portrayals of Abducted Children

Researchers interested in the media and crime have used content analysis in a number of ways. For example, scholars analyzing crime depictions presented in the media often conclude that newspaper and television coverage of crime is frequently inaccurate and misleading; stories disproportionately report violent crimes, and reporters tend to focus attention on sensational matters such as the capture of criminal or high-status offenders.

Over the past few decades, policy makers and the media alike have been paying increasing attention to the child abductions. Unfortunately, similar to media coverage for other crimes, the media tends to focus on sensational abductions such as those perpetrated by strangers compared to the more common family abduction incidents. Justine Taylor and her colleagues Danielle Boisvert, Barbar Sims, and Carl Garver (2013) wanted to determine whether media representations of abductions actually represented the most common characteristics of abductions. To do this, they relied on data from the United States Justice Department–sponsored National Incidence Studies of Missing, Abducted, Runaway, and Thrownaway Children 2 (NISMAART-2), the federal government’s most accurate accounting of children abductions in the United States. NISMAART-2 not only collects information on abductions from law enforcement agencies but also employs a random sample survey of youth households about their experiences with missing children. NISMAART classifies several different types of abductions including family, nonfamily, and stereotypical abductions, which is a nonfamily abduction in which a child is detained overnight, transported at least 50 miles, held for ransom, or abducted with intent to keep the child permanently or to kill the child. These NISMAART data were used to describe the actual incidences and characteristics of child abductions in the U.S., which were compared to how newspapers reported on abductions across the United States.

To obtain a sample of newspaper articles, Taylor et al. (2013) searched LexisNexis Academic, which provides articles from most major newspapers in the United States, using the terms *kidnap* or *abduct*. Only articles related to