

A Scoping Review: Prevention of Non-Parental Child Abduction in the United States

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Introduction

- Non-family child abduction is a rare occurrence with **366 cases** (~1%) reported to the National Center for Missing and Exploited Children in 2016-2020¹
- Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs)** such as physical and sexual abuse are known to have negative consequences on cardiometabolic and mental health² and abduction in childhood is a uniquely traumatic ACE with significant impact on children, their families, and communities
- The impact of child abduction may be underrecognized in the public health literature



Aims and Objectives

The aim of this study was to understand the *public health implications* of child abduction in the United States.

Primary Objective

Identify and evaluate public health interventions aimed at preventing non-parental childhood abduction in the United States and mitigating its effects.

Secondary Objectives

Explore the demographic factors associated with increased risk of abduction and assess the psychosocial impacts on victims of child abduction

Methods

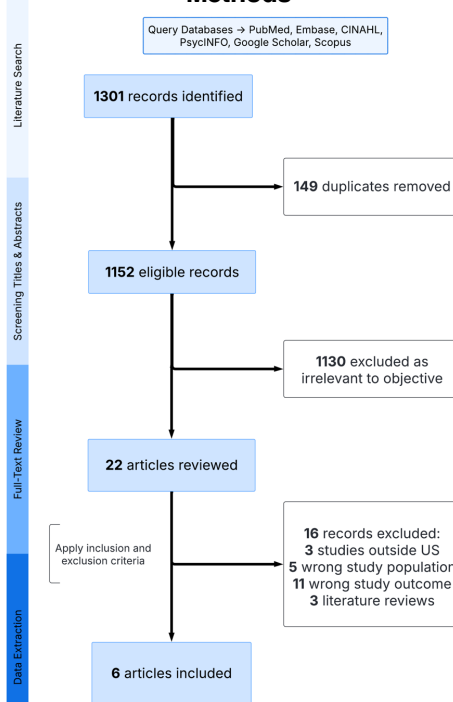


Figure 1. Study flow diagram

Inclusion criteria:

- Published peer-reviewed research (quantitative and qualitative) in English
- Focusing on non-parental abduction
- Involving children ages 1-18 years old
- In the United States
- Publication year between 1990-2024

Exclusion criteria: non-primary research including editorials, letters, book chapters, conference proceedings

- Two independent reviewers (AP, DH)
- Covidence** software utilized for review management

Results

Table 1. Summary table of included studies

Author, Year	Study Design	Population	Sample Size	Study Purpose	Findings
Abadir, 2021	Prospective study; concurrent multiple probe design	Adolescent males diagnosed with autism spectrum disorder	4 children	Evaluate video modeling for teaching adolescents with ASD to respond to abduction lures	Vocal prompting in addition to video modeling was necessary to achieve full effectiveness in promoting response to lures. Three-quarters of participants maintained learned skills at one-week follow-up.
Bergstrom, 2014	Prospective study; nonconcurrent multiple baseline design	Adolescent males (age 10-12) diagnosed with autism spectrum disorder	3 children	Evaluate behavioral skills training (BST) for teaching adolescents with ASD how to respond to incentive lures from male strangers	Correct response were observed between sessions 3 and 7 across the three participants in natural testing environments. Overall, individuals with ASD can be taught stranger abduction skills which can be generalized to natural environments
Gunby, 2014	Prospective study; nonconcurrent multiple baseline design	Children (age 5-6) diagnosed with autism spectrum disorder	3 children	Evaluate behavioral skills training (BST) with in situ feedback for teaching children with ASD how to respond to high-probability lures from strangers	Participants achieved full safety score after 5-10 sessions post-training using both BST and in situ feedback. Adequate response was maintained at one month follow-up.
O'Donnell, 2022	Retrospective analysis	Children <17 reported as missing to law enforcement	71 calls reporting 73 children	Examine differences in characteristics between true 911 calls vs false allegation callers	Males more likely to reported missing in false allegation calls; children tended to be younger when reported in false allegation calls.
Shelton, 2016	Retrospective analysis	Convicted non-parental offenders and victims of child abduction within the child's home, from 1981 to 2012	32 cases (n= 25 offenders; 32 victims)	Examine offender, victim and offense characteristics, the offenders' previous familiarity with the residences, and their behavior entering while inside and exiting from the homes	Average age 9 years old, majority Caucasian (84%) and females (87.5%), previously known (59%) to the offender. Sexual assault in 81% of cases. 92% of offenders had a documented criminal history. 12% registered sex offenders.
Warren, 2016	Retrospective analysis	Children <18 identified as victims of child abduction and single perpetrators involved	463 cases	Examine how victim variables is associated with perpetrator characteristics, presence and type of criminal history, and fatal vs non-fatal outcome	Among males, more infants were abducted; girls 15-17 were more abducted. Most frequent location was a public outdoor setting (46%). Motivation for abductions in both males (52%) and females (75%) largely for sexual reasons. Only 5% of perpetrators registered sex offenders.

Conclusions

- Child abduction remains understudied in the public health literature.
- Public health professionals may work towards collaboration with law enforcement and promoting awareness of child abduction in communities.
- Behavioral skills training may have potential utility in teaching abduction prevention skills, and training in this methodology may be beneficial for community-based public health professionals.
- More robust studies exploring the health outcomes of child abduction victims is needed.
- This study is limited due to only 6 studies meeting inclusion criteria; lack of standardized language on abduction may have limited initial search.

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