

# Research Spotlight

Published by the NCPC Research and Evaluation Department

Topic  
Date

**Missing and Exploited Children**

January 13, 2005

Numbers of missing children in the three major categories – family abductions, runaways, and “lost, injured, or otherwise missing” children – did not increase in the 11 years between 1988 and 1999, and in several instances decreased. The National Incidence Studies of Missing, Abducted, Runaway, and Thrownaway Children (widely referenced as NISMART 1 and NISMART 2) divides each of these three categories into “broad scope” and “policy focal.” These terms are important. “Broad scope” is general; “policy focal” represents more serious episodes within that category. This report highlights a comparison of NISMART 1 and 2 that was published in October 2004.

## **Findings:**

- “The most important finding (in this report) is the absence of increases in any of these problems.”
- Though the news is promising, it is not cause for complacency. Large numbers of children are still victims.
- Broad scope family abductions declined at a statistically significant level—down from 5.62 per 1,000 children in 1988 to 4.18 per 1,000 in 1999. Policy focal family abduction rose slightly but that change was within the survey’s margin of sampling error.
- Broad scope runaways dropped to an extent that nears statistical significance – from 7.09 per 1,000 children in 1988 to 5.28 per 1,000 children in 1999. Policy focal runaway cases decreased, but the decrease is not statistically significant. The 1988 rate was 2.06 per 1,000 in 1988 to 1.25 per 1,000 in 1999.
- The broad scope group of “lost, injured, or otherwise missing children” dropped at a statistically significant rate – from 6.95 per 1,000 children in 1988 to 3.40 in 1999. The rate for the policy-focal group also declined at a rate approaching statistical significance – from 2.21 per 1,000 in 1988 to 0.51 in 1999.

The report suggests that cell phones (which facilitate parent-child communication, public education and awareness, relaxing of parental limits (on teens in particular), and other factors may have helped restrict and reduce the harm.

**Implications:** There is continuing need to give attention to the issue of “missing children” with differentiation among the categories and degrees of risk/danger. Training, publications, PSAs and other NCPC initiatives need to be aware of this as an ongoing crime prevention issue. We need to include such information as AMBER Alert operations in our trainings (BJA can provide information). It would be good to consider how to communicate to youth and children on this problem in a non-fear-invoking way.

**Source:** Hammer, Finkelhor, Sedlak, and Porcellini. *National Estimates of Missing Children: Selected Trends, 1988-1999*. Washington, DC: Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention, Office of Justice Programs, U.S. Department of Justice. NCJ 206179. Available through [www.ncjrs.org](http://www.ncjrs.org).