

NEW RESEARCH EXPOSES HUGE INCREASE IN CHILD ABDUCTIONS

- Police-recorded child abductions and kidnappings jump by 29% in a single year.
- But many cases, particularly those of parental abduction, are not reported to the police. These figures are still just the tip of the iceberg.
- Action Against Abduction calls for urgent improvements to child safety strategies.

A report published today by the charity Action Against Abduction (formerly Parents and Abducted Children Together) shows that in 2014/15 a total of 1,141 offences were recorded by the police in England, Wales and Northern Ireland (a 29% increase over the previous year), with 600 non-parental child abductions (an increase of nearly 50%).

Geoff Newiss, Director of Research at Action Against Abduction, said: “With police recording nearly two non-parental child abductions a day it is important that children are getting the right safety advice. All too often children are still being told about ‘Stranger Danger’ which is deeply flawed and counter-productive. We should be giving children the skills and confidence to stay safe from the threat of abduction in all its various forms, rather than simply making them frightened of strangers.”

Using a Freedom of Information Request to each police force across the UK, the charity has been able to gather and analyse data on the number of parental child abductions, non-parental child abductions and child kidnappings recorded from 2012/13 to 2014/15. The report suggests that a large part of the increase in offences is most probably down to changes in police crime recording practices. The report also highlights how improvements in the police response to child sexual exploitation have affected the number of child abductions recorded by police. Cases involving child sexual exploitation together with abductions and attempted abductions by a stranger, account for the large majority of child abduction offences recorded by police.

Geoff Newiss adds “There is enormous variation in the number of offences recorded by different police forces. It’s difficult not to conclude that some are simply doing a better job of recording incidents of abduction than others. In this respect, I’m more concerned to see further scrutiny of police forces with very low rates of offences than those with higher numbers.”

The full report is available on Action Against Abduction’s website (www.actionagainstabduction.org) and on the UK’s child abduction hub (www.childabduction.org.uk) – an information resource developed and maintained by the charity.

ENDS

1. Media Enquiries

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2. Available for Interviews:

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3. Action Against Abduction

Action Against Abduction – formerly known as Parents and Abducted Children Together – is a charity founded in 1999 by Lady (Catherine) Meyer, CBE. It is registered in the UK and the US. Action Against Abduction’s mission is to put an end to the tragedy of missing and abducted children and to campaign for fundamental improvements in child protection policies and practices. See www.actionagainstabduction.org

4. The report

Action Against Abduction sent Freedom of Information requests to each police force in England, Wales and Northern Ireland, asking for:

- The number of child abduction offences perpetrated by a parent in 2014/15
- The number of child abduction offences perpetrated by someone other than a parent in 2014/15

- The number of kidnappings offences recorded in 2014/15 in which the victim was aged under 18 at the time of the offence.

The returns were compared to the same data for 2012/13 and 2013/14 published last year. Only one police force declined to provide any of the data requested. Scotland was not included in this research, because of different legislation and offence categories.

Follow-up letters were sent to 18 police forces which recorded relatively large increases in one or more offence category. Responses were received from 15 police forces. The letter asked police forces to identify any known reasons for increases in offences and, if possible, evidence to substantiate the reasons given.

5. Key findings

- Child abduction offences recorded by police in England, Wales and Northern Ireland increased by 34 per cent from 2013/14 to 2014/15. 779 offences were recorded in 2014/15, more than two a day.
- Non-parental child abductions increased by 47 per cent over the same period, whilst police-recorded parental child abductions decreased slightly. Four times as many non-parental child abductions were recorded than parental abductions. It is likely that many parental child abductions are not reported to, or recorded by, police.
- Child kidnappings increased by 18 per cent over the two-year period, to 371 offences in 2014/15.
- Whilst increases in child abduction and kidnapping are clearly alarming, the explanation for their increase may – at least in part – lie in changes to police crime-recording practices. Some incidents which may previously have gone unrecorded may now be recorded as a crime.
- Police force initiatives to tackle child sexual exploitation may also be having a sizeable effect on trends in recorded crime, as might efforts to intervene in forced marriage and domestic abuse. Without further research it is not possible to say whether the underlying incidence of child abduction and kidnapping is increasing.
- There is enormous variation between regions and police forces in the number, and rate, of child abduction and kidnapping offences.

- A relatively small number of police forces have recorded a large proportion of the increase in offences. The Metropolitan Police Service (London), West Midlands Police, Greater Manchester Police and West Yorkshire Police accounted for nearly 60 per cent of the increase in non-parental child abductions and 40 per cent of the increase in kidnappings. Greater Manchester alone accounted for 30 per cent of the increase in non-parental child abductions.
- Overall, the large city police forces (London, West Midlands, Greater Manchester and West Yorkshire) all have higher rates of child abduction and kidnappings offences than the national average. However, the pattern is not always consistent. For example, the rate of parental child abduction in West Yorkshire was less than half the national average in 2014/15. Additionally, some smaller police forces have even larger rates of offences.
- Police-recorded child abduction or kidnapping is relatively rare. 9.41 offences of child abduction or kidnapping per 100,000 children were recorded by police in England, Wales and Northern Ireland in 2013/14. However, many incidents go unreported to, or unrecorded by, the police.

6. Stranger Danger

Action Against Abduction's 2014 research paper, 'Beyond Stranger Danger', concluded that the traditional message of telling children to steer clear of strangers threw up a number of problems:

- Children of all ages struggle to distinguish a stranger from a non-stranger. Some child safety materials even feel it necessary to emphasise that being 'nice-looking' or 'kind-sounding' does not mean that someone is not a stranger.
- It conflicts with the requirement on many children to be obedient and helpful to adults, thus causing confusion.
- It can detract from the greater danger posed by someone known to them.
- Teaching children to be wary of strangers can inhibit them from seeking help if they are lost or in distress.

Action Against Abduction wants to see safety materials developed based on a new set of principles for deterring child abduction:

- Knowing how to recognise *danger* (e.g. different lures) is more important than trying to recognise a *stranger*.

- Teaching *don'ts* (“don’t go with, don’t get into a car” etc.) must be matched by teaching *dos* (“yell, run and tell”).
- Teaching should involve *practice and interaction* rather than just *lecture*.
- Giving children *confidence* helps keep them safe; making them *frightened* does not.