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ABSTRACT

Parental abduction encompasses a broad array of illegal behaviors that involves one parent taking, detaining, concealing, or enticing away his or her child from the parent having custodial access. When the abducted parent intends to permanently alter custodial access by hiding the child or removing the child to another locale, the effects on the family and the obstacles to the child's recovery are compounded. This document describes the common characteristics of abducting parents and profiles parents at risk for abducting their children. Constructive interventions are offered for each of the six profiles provided. It draws on research conducted in the San Francisco Bay area and several reasons are given as to why this area was used. The profiles provide information that, along with the facts of a given case, may indicate that prevention interventions should be considered. The interventions described are current standards of professional and court practice for the provisions of legal and psychological counseling, mediation, and custody evaluation services. (Contains 16 references.) (JDM)

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JUVENILE JUSTICE BULLETIN

Family Abductors: Descriptive Profiles and Preventive Interventions

Janet R. Johnston and Linda K. Girdner

Background

Family abduction of children has become a serious concern in the United States. Coincident with the rapid rise in divorce and the increase in children born to unmarried parents, approximately 60 percent of all children spend time in a single-parent home (Glick, 1988; Hernandez, 1988). A national incidence study (Finkelhor, Hotaling, and Sedlak, 1991) revealed that in an unprecedented number of these single-parent families (354,000 in 1988), one parent took unilateral action to deprive the other parent of contact with their child. In almost half of these cases (163,200), the abducting parent intended to permanently alter custodial access by concealing the child or taking the child out of his or her home State or country.

Previous research has documented the obstacles to recovering these abducted children (Girdner and Hoff, 1993), the psychological harm inflicted on them, and the inordinate emotional and financial distress placed on left-behind parents (Hatcher, Barton, and Brooks, 1992; Greif and Hegar, 1993; Forehand et al., 1989). Social policy, consequently, is focusing on finding ways to identify potential custody violators early on and methods to prevent these painful and costly traumas (Hegar, 1990; Hoff, 1994, 1997).

Parental abduction, child stealing, and serious custodial interference—terms used synonymously in this Bulletin—are defined as the broad range of situations that involve one parent's taking, detaining, concealing, or enticing away his or her child from the parent who has custody or visitation rights. This Bulletin describes preventive interventions—counseling, conflict resolution, and legal strategies—that seek to settle custody and access disputes for families identified as at risk for parental abduction.

Research

The interventions described in this Bulletin result from a series of research studies, which are discussed below. Researchers began by undertaking a documentary study of 634 parental child-stealing cases from all files opened by the district attorney in two California counties[1] between 1987 and 1990. The purpose was to describe the demographic, family, and

[1] Research was conducted in the San Francisco Bay Area of California. This location was chosen for several reasons: (1) California's criminal statute broadly defines parental abduction to include pre- and postcustodial abductions and abductions committed by parents with sole custody, joint custody, and visitation rights; (2) because they are mandated to use both civil and criminal remedies to locate and recover abducted children, district attorneys in California have extensive files on a range of parental abductions; (3) the San Francisco Bay Area's large, economically and ethnically diverse urban population provides researchers the opportunity to study a variety of situations; and (4) comparative data on litigated custody already existed in this region.

From the Administrator

Parental abduction encompasses a broad array of illegal behaviors that involve one parent taking, detaining, concealing, or enticing away his or her child from the parent having custodial access. When the abducting parent intends to permanently alter custodial access by hiding the child or removing the child to another State or country, the effects on the family and the obstacles to the child's recovery are compounded.

Drawing on research conducted in the San Francisco Bay area, this Bulletin describes the common characteristics of abducting parents and profiles parents at risk for abducting their children. Constructive interventions are offered for each of the six profiles provided.

It should be kept in mind that these profiles neither predict the probability that a parental abduction will occur in a specific situation, e.g., when a particular family situation meets one or more of the characteristics, nor imply that there is no danger of such an abduction when no common characteristics exist. Rather, the profiles provide information that, along with the facts of a given case, may indicate that preventive interventions should be considered.

The information this Bulletin provides can be used to help prevent and reduce the serious problem of parental abduction.

John J. Wilson
Acting Administrator

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dispute characteristics of custody violators and the legal system's response to parental child stealing (Sagatun-Edwards, 1998). Researchers then drew a small representative sample from the 1990 case records and, 3 years later, conducted Indepth interviews and administered psychological tests to 70 parents from 50 families—35 men and 35 women, half of whom were abductors and half of whom were left-behind parents. Researchers systematically compared the demographic, psychological, and dispute characteristics of these abducting families with similar data from 114 parents of 57 high-conflict families (i.e., families with repeated custody litigation) referred by family court services during 1990 (Johnston, Girdner, and Sagatun-Edwards, 1999). This comparison identified the similarities and differences between parents who resort to illegal actions and parents who use legal procedures to resolve custody and visitation disputes. The major characteristics that distinguished abducting parents from nonabducting parents were then arranged into six profiles of parents at risk for engaging in serious custodial interference (Johnston, 1994).

In the second phase of the research, family court counselors from eight San Francisco Bay Area counties used the risk profiles to identify potential custody violators and refer them to specialized preventive interventions. Fifty identified families were assigned randomly to 10 or 40 hours of confidential, free counseling provided by mental health professionals (psychologists, social workers, and marriage and family counselors) with special training in the dynamics of highly conflicted separating and divorcing families and in abduction risk. The counseling intervention sought to accomplish the following:

- Address the underlying psychological conflicts and disturbed family dynamics that contributed to the impasse in resolving custody disputes.
- Help parents focus on their children's individual and developmental needs.
- Give parents information about abduction laws in their State and the consequences of custody violations.
- Provide parents with referrals and access to appropriate social, health, and legal services in their communities.

A followup study conducted 9 months after the counseling intervention found that, compared with baseline (precounseling) measures, at-risk parents as a group were substantially more cooperative, expressed less disagreement, and were more likely to resolve disputes over custody issues than before. Incidents of violence between at-risk parents decreased. Most important, only 10 percent of families experienced serious custodial interference during the followup period, compared with 40 percent prior to the counseling intervention. Women generally showed more consistent improvement than men for most of the outcomes measured. There was no evidence that the 40-hour intervention was more effective than the 10-hour intervention (Johnston, 1996), but this finding must be qualified. In contrast to the families that received 40-hour therapist-only services, the families that received 10-hour treatment were linked up with additional services. The families that received 10-hour treatment, therefore, could conceivably have received more services. Of even greater significance was the unanticipated effect that counseling intervention had on both sets of families.

Compared with abducting families identified earlier in the research for purposes of developing risk profiles, the at-risk families assigned to counseling received heightened attention in family court. These families received more explicit court orders and more frequently were subject to judicial hearings, custody evaluations, appointment of a child's attorney or special master (arbitrator), and supervised visitation. Researchers hypothesize that these court-imposed constraints and monitoring of the families were partially responsible for the positive outcomes observed during the 9-month followup period. If further research confirms this hypothesis, the implication is that early case management in the court—together with brief, strategic, legal, and psychological counseling—may be sufficient to prevent many custodial violations.

Common Characteristics of Abducting Parents

Before presenting the distinguishing features of the risk profiles, it is important to describe the features that most of the profiles have in common:

- Abducting parents are likely to deny and dismiss the other parent's value to the child. This tendency is greater in abducting parents than in parents who chronically litigate custody. Abducting parents believe that they, more than anyone else, know what is best for their child; they cannot see how, or even why, they should share parenting with their ex-partner.
- Abducting parents are likely to have very young children (the mean age is 2–3). Such children are easier to transport and conceal, are unlikely to verbally protest, and may be unable to tell others their name or other identifying information. Older children who are taken or retained in violation of custody orders are usually those who are particularly vulnerable to influence or have colluded with the abducting parent.
- Most abducting parents (except those characterized as paranoid delusional) are likely to have the support of a social network—family, friends, cultural communities, cult-like groups, or an underground dissident movement—that provides not only practical assistance (money, food, lodging) but also emotional and moral support to validate the abducting parent's extralegal actions.
- Most custody violators do not consider their actions illegal or morally wrong, even after the involvement of the district attorney's office.
- Mothers and fathers are equally likely to abduct their children, although at different times—fathers, when there was no child custody order in place; mothers, after the court had issued a formal custody decree.

It is significant that half of the families studied fit more than one risk profile. For this reason, a combination of strategies was often needed to help settle custody disputes.

Profiles of Parents At Risk for Abducting Their Children

Profile 1: When There Has Been a Prior Threat of or Actual Abduction

When a parent has made credible threats to abduct a child or has a history of hiding the child, withholding visitation, or snatching the child from the other parent, there is justifiable distrust between parents and a heightened risk for further serious custody violation. This risk profile is usually combined with one or more of the other profiles. In these cases, the underlying psychological and social dynamics that motivate the child stealing need to be understood and addressed. When other risk factors are present, one or more of the following

are general indicators of threat of flight with a child:

- The parent is unemployed, homeless, and without emotional or financial ties to the area.
- The parent has divulged plans to abduct the child and has the resources or support of extended family or underground dissident networks to survive in hiding.
- The parent has liquidated assets and made maximum withdrawals of funds against credit cards or borrowed money from other sources.

Interventions. At the request of a concerned parent, the court can take a number of specific steps when an imminent threat or actual history of parental abduction exists. A court order should be in place, specifying which parent has custody, defining arrangements for the child's contact with the other parent, designating which court has jurisdiction, and requiring the written consent of the other parent or order of the court before a parent can take the child out of the area. If visitation is unsupervised, plans for access for the noncustodial parent should denote times, dates, places of exchange, holiday periods, etc. The court order should also specify consequences for failure to observe its provisions. Parents should be encouraged to keep a certified copy of the custody order available at all times.

An explicit court order outlining the above provisions can be presented to the appropriate embassy or agency providing passports and birth certificates, with the request that the custodial parent be notified if the other parent attempts to obtain copies of such documents without the certified written authorization of both parents or the court. The child's passport also can be marked with the requirement that travel not be permitted without similar authorization. The child's and parents' passports may be held by a neutral third party, and the court may require (or both parents may stipulate) that a substantial bond be posted by the departing parent—especially if the departing parent is leaving the United States on vacation.

School authorities, daycare providers, and medical personnel also should have a copy of the custody order and can be given explicit instructions not to release the child or any records of the child to the noncustodial parent. If possible, relatives and others who might support a parent in hiding a child should clearly understand their criminal liability if they aid and abet in what some State laws consider a felony.

Supervised visitation is a fairly stringent method of preventing parental abduction and is typically used to prevent recidivism in serious cases. It may be difficult to convince a judge to curtail a parent's access to his or her child this severely without substantial proof that the parent has already committed a crime. High-security supervision is expensive and difficult to obtain, and there are no guidelines for determining how long it should be in force. Parents who have recovered their children after a traumatic abduction typically have tremendous anxieties and often try to insist on supervised visits for years afterwards.

Profile 2: When a Parent Suspects/Believes Abuse Has Occurred and Friends and Family Members Support These Concerns

Many parents abduct their child because they truly believe that the other parent is abusing, molesting, or neglecting the child. These abducting parents feel that authorities have not taken their allegations seriously and have not properly investigated their concerns. In these cases, repeated counterallegations are likely to occur between parents, decreasing effective communication and increasing hostility and distrust. Parents who have the fixed belief that abuse has occurred—and will continue to occur—then "rescue" the child, often with the help of supporters who concur with their beliefs. Supporters, as previously discussed, might include family members, friends, or an underground network (usually women) that helps "protective" parents (usually mothers) obtain new identities and find safe locations.

In a disturbing number of such cases, the child has been previously exposed to neglectful and abusive environments (e.g., domestic violence, substance abuse, or other criminal behavior by a parent). Often, an unsubstantiated allegation of sexual abuse by a father or stepfather motivated a mother to abduct her child. In these cases, children's protective agencies and courts may fail to take measures to protect the child. Instead, they may trivialize the allegations, dismissing them as invalid or the product of a malicious divorce. Some forms of abuse, such as inflicting emotional abuse or allowing a child to witness domestic violence, do not meet official criteria of direct harm to the child. In other cases, often those involving ethnic minority families living in poverty, parents may not know how to present their concerns to authorities in a convincing manner. In these cases, subsequent investigations are cursory, and courts have insufficient substantiating evidence to take action.

Interventions. The first order of business in cases involving allegations of abuse is to ensure that a careful and thorough investigation of the allegations takes place. Accusing parents are likely to become calmer and more rational if they feel that investigators are taking their concerns seriously. Accused parents are more cooperative if approached with a respectful request to help the investigators discover what might have incited the suspicions of abuse.

During this investigative stage, authorities should take precautions to ensure that there is no ongoing abuse or, alternatively, to protect a parent—who may in fact be innocent—from further allegations. Such precautions may include supervised visitation, especially if the child is very young, clearly frightened, or

distressed and demonstrating symptoms of emotional and behavioral disturbance in response to parental visits. Investigators can show the accusing parent how to respond to the child and how to make accurate observations without confounding the investigative process. They also can counsel the parent on how not to react visibly to the child's unusual verbal statements and behaviors (e.g., sexualized play) in a manner that might encourage the child to repeat these statements and behaviors to get attention. Whenever possible, this intervention should involve concerned extended family members and other social support persons. Moreover, it is helpful if all relevant professionals involved with the family are authorized by the parents or court to talk with each other so they can support the family cohesively during the investigation and not incite anxiety by offering discrepant, premature conclusions.

Investigators—preferably with expertise in both child abuse and the dynamics of highly conflicted divorcing families—should assemble data about the allegations and the child's symptomatic behavior and should use the data to formulate alternative possible explanations and reasoned conclusions. Investigators should share any findings with both parents and their support persons. In rare cases, especially if severe psychopathology is diagnosed in both parents and their extended families, the child may be placed in the temporary care of a neutral third party (with supervised visitation to both parents), allowing investigators time to sort out who or what is fueling the claims of abuse.

Professionals working with cases involving allegations of parental abuse should keep in mind that lack of substantiation is not proof that abuse has not taken place. Extreme distrust and anger between parents often are the legacy of unproved accusations and can affect the fragmented, divorced family for years, putting the child at risk for continued emotional—if not physical—abuse. These families need long-term structure for rebuilding trust between parents and ensuring the child's protection. This structure can include one or more of the following:

- Mandated counseling for one parent or both parents to ensure appropriate parenting practices.
- Appointment of a special master (co-parenting coordinator and arbitrator) to help parents communicate with each other, make reality checks of their mutual distrust, monitor the situation, and—where authorized to do so—make necessary decisions for the family when disputes reoccur.
- Provision of long-term therapy for the child that offers a safe place for sorting through fears and phobias and disclosing abuse should it occur or reoccur.
- Appointment of a legal representative (guardian *ad litem*) for the child in the event of further legal action.

Profile 3: When a Parent Is Paranoid Delusional

In this profile, one parent demonstrates flagrantly paranoid, irrational beliefs and behaviors or psychotic delusions about the other parent. These accusing parents may claim that their former partners have harmed or are exercising mind control over them or their child. The accusing parents usually do not need the support of others in these beliefs; their own convictions are sufficiently fixed to justify what they consider to be urgent and necessary steps to protect themselves and the child.

Although this diagnosis is rare (about 4 percent of the studies' samples), parents fitting this profile are often the most dangerous and frightening of abductors—especially if they have a history of domestic violence, hospitalization for mental illness, or serious substance abuse. Typically, they are overwhelmed by their divorce and believe their former partners have betrayed and exploited them. They may be obsessed alternately with desires for reconciliation and fantasies of revenge.

It is important to note that psychotic parents do not perceive the child as a separate person. Rather, they perceive the child as fused with themselves as a victim (in which case, they take unilateral measures to rescue their child), or they perceive the child as part of the hated other parent (in which case, they may precipitously abandon or even kill the child). Marital dissolution and instigation of a custody dispute generally trigger an acute phase of danger for these psychotic individuals, which can result not only in parental abduction but also in murder and suicide.

Interventions. Family courts need to have procedures in place to protect the child in cases involving serious delusional thinking by one parent or both parents. A lethality assessment can indicate how acute the danger is (Hart, 1988).

If the noncustodial parent is psychotic, visitation must be supervised in a high-security facility and the custodial parent should be helped to devise a safety plan for all other times. The psychotic parent's visitation rights may need to be suspended if he or she repeatedly violates the visitation order; highly distresses the child by the contact; or uses his or her time with the child to denigrate the other parent, obtain information about the other parent's whereabouts, or transmit messages of physical harm, death threats, or child abduction. If an evaluation determines that reinstatement of parent-child contact is appropriate, visitation typically should begin under supervision, preferably in the presence of a mental health professional.

If the custodial parent or the child's primary care person is psychotic, extreme care must be taken so that the litigation and evaluation processes do not precipitate abduction or violence. The family court may need to obtain an emergency

psychiatric screening and use *ex parte* hearings (without notice to the psychotic parent) to effect temporary placement of the child with the other parent or a third party while investigators undertake a more comprehensive psychiatric and custody evaluation. In these emergency situations, there should be a confidentiality waiver allowing all relevant professionals to share information about the case with each other. The psychotic parent may need legal representation, and the child may need to have an attorney appointed for any subsequent litigation. The court may need to appoint a judicial officer or special master to monitor implementation of any court orders requiring the parent and/or the child to undergo psychiatric treatment.

Profile 4: When a Parent Is Severely Sociopathic

Sociopathic parents are characterized by a long history of contempt for any authority—including the legal system—and flagrant violations of the law. Their relationships with other people are self-serving, exploitive, and highly manipulative. They are likely to hold exaggerated beliefs about their own superiority and entitlement and are highly gratified by their ability to exert power and control over others. Cases involving sociopathic parents often include a history of domestic violence. As with paranoid and delusional parents, sociopathic parents are unable to perceive their children as having separate needs or rights. Consequently, they often use their children blatantly as instruments of revenge or punishment or as trophies in their fight with the ex-partner. Hence, the sociopathic parent believes that domestic violence and child abduction can be perpetrated with impunity. Like paranoia, a diagnosis of severe sociopathy is rare (4 percent of the studies' samples).

Interventions. For a parent diagnosed with severe sociopathic personality disorder, confidential therapeutic mediation and family counseling constitute an inappropriate and possibly dangerous intervention. Such interventions are inappropriate because a sociopathic parent lacks the capacity to develop a working therapeutic alliance with a counselor. It can be dangerous because the sociopathic parent may hide behind the confidentiality of the program and manipulate and control the other parties—including the counselor—to achieve his or her own ends. Sociopathic parents are unlikely to respect agreements made in such a forum unless doing so suits their purposes.

If a sociopathic parent demonstrates blatant disregard of custody orders and violates restraining orders, supervised or suspended visitation is the appropriate response by the court. Access to the child may be reinstated after the parent meets clearly stated conditions, and then only in graduated steps to ensure compliance. Moreover, the court needs to respond immediately and decisively—with sanctions such as fines and jail time—to any overt disregard of explicitly defined custody and access orders to send a clear message that such violations are guaranteed to be costly. A coparenting coordinator with arbitration powers (as stipulated by the parent and/or ordered by the court) who is prepared to testify in court may be needed over the longer term to monitor the family situation for any further threat of abuse or abduction. Only when control mechanisms such as these are in place can family counseling and therapy be helpful in cases involving a sociopathic parent.

Profile 5: When Parents Who Are Citizens of Another Country End a Mixed-Culture Marriage

Parents who are citizens of another country (or have dual citizenship with the United States) and have strong ties to extended family in their country of origin have long been recognized as potential abductors. The risk of abduction is especially acute at the time of separation and divorce, when these parents may feel cast adrift from their mixed-culture marriage and may need to return to their ethnic or religious roots to find emotional support and reconstitute a shaken self-identity. Often, in reaction to being rendered helpless or feeling rejected and discarded by the ex-spouse, such parents may try to take unilateral action by returning with the child to their country and family of origin. This may be a way of insisting that the abducting parent's cultural identity be given preeminent status in the child's upbringing.

In this profile, parents at risk of becoming abductors are those who idealize their own family, homeland, and culture and deprecate American culture. They are likely to repudiate the child's mixed heritage. Furthermore, their own homeland may offer more emotional and financial support than is available in a location near the ex-spouse. If the country of origin has not ratified the Hague Convention on the Civil Aspects of International Child Abduction,[2] the stakes are particularly high, as recovery of the child can be difficult, if not impossible.

Interventions. Preventive measures for situations in which international abduction is a possibility include the range of actions discussed under profile 1 (prior threat of or actual abduction), especially restricting removal of the child from the State or country without authorization, preventing issuance of the child's passport, or requiring that the parent's and child's passports be surrendered. Difficulties occur when the child has dual citizenship, as foreign embassies and consulates are not under any obligation to honor these restrictions if the request is made by the ex-spouse who is a U.S. citizen. Instead, the court may require the parent who is a foreign national to request and obtain these assurances of passport control from his or her own embassy before granting the parent unsupervised visitation with the child. The foreign-national parent could also post a bond that would be released to the left-behind parent in the event of an abduction. At times of acute risk, investigators can monitor airline schedules so that an abducting parent and child could possibly be intercepted prior to leaving the United States or during a scheduled stopover in a country that is a party to the Hague Convention.[3]

A person may petition a foreign court to issue an order that parallels the provisions of the U.S. court order and can be enforced in the foreign court's country. The foreign court order can specify visitation and holiday arrangements, including dates and flight numbers, and can include a provision to return the child to the United States if the child is abducted or detained in the foreign court's country. This measure is potentially costly and time consuming for the parent who is a

[2] The Hague Convention on the Civil Aspects of International Child Abduction, ratified in 1986, is an international treaty that establishes administrative and judicial mechanisms to bring about the prompt return of an abducted or wrongfully retained child, usually to his or her country of habitual residence, and to facilitate the exercise of visitation across international borders. The Convention took effect in 1988, following enactment of the International Child Abduction Remedies Act, a Federal implementing statute.

[3] See www.missingkids.com/international/international_division.html for current signatories to the Hague Convention on the Civil Aspects of International Child Abduction.

U.S. citizen because it usually involves hiring legal representation in the foreign country and crafting a reciprocal order that conforms to both countries' child custody laws and procedures (Crouch, 1996). The cost, however, may be warranted if it diminishes the risk involved in granting foreign nationals their understandable wishes to visit their homeland with their children if the home country is not party to the Hague Convention. It is also important for all involved parties to know that U.S. laws exclude non-U.S. citizens who abduct a child out of the United States—and their foreign relatives and friends who assist in keeping a child abroad—from entering the United States. This information may deter non-U.S. citizens who travel in and out of the United States from being party to child abduction.

Although the above measures can help prevent abductions, they do not address the underlying factors that may prompt parents to abduct their child and flee to another country, nor do they sufficiently deter parents who are highly motivated to abduct. To help these parents settle their internal conflicts, culturally sensitive counseling and mediation are needed to discern and address underlying psychological dynamics. These parents should be reminded that the child needs both parents and opportunities to appreciate and integrate his or her mixed cultural or racial identities. Parents who have idealized their own culture, childhood, and family of origin may need encouragement to adopt a more realistic perspective. It may also be necessary to provide alternative sources of emotional and financial support to help a homesick parent remain in the area and find ways to visit the foreign homeland with assurances for the return of the child.

Profile 6: When Parents Feel Alienated From the Legal System and Have Family/ Social Support in Another Community

Several subgroups of potential parental abductors feel alienated from the judicial system. These parents rely on their own informal networks of kin, who may live in another geographical community, to resolve family problems—including custody disputes. Listed below are five such subgroups.

Subgroup 1. Parents who are indigent and poorly educated lack knowledge about custody and abduction laws and cannot

afford legal representation or psychological counseling that would help them resolve their disputes appropriately. In the research study described earlier in this Bulletin, 38 percent of abducting parents belonged to this subgroup.

Subgroup 2. Parents who have had prior negative experiences with the criminal or civil courts do not expect family courts to be responsive to their plight. In the research study described earlier in this Bulletin, 50 percent of abductors and 40 percent of left-behind parents had an arrest record.

Subgroup 3. Parents who belong to certain ethnic, religious, or cultural groups may hold views about childrearing that are contrary to prevailing custody laws, which emphasize gender neutrality and the rights of both parents. For example, many low-income African Americans—who were overrepresented in this profile—consider childrearing to be the prerogative of the mother and her maternal kin.

Subgroup 4. A mother who has a transient, unmarried relationship with her child's father often views the child as her exclusive property, and her extended family supports this belief. In the study, almost half of the abducting parents had never married their child's other parent. Many of the women had assumed they had sole custody and were genuinely surprised, often outright aggrieved—especially if the father had not provided child support—when they were informed that the father, by law, had joint rights to the child.

Subgroup 5. Parents who are victims of domestic violence are at risk of abducting their child, especially when the courts and community have failed to take the necessary steps to protect them from abuse or to hold the abuser accountable. Joint custody, mediated agreements, and visitation orders too often leave victims vulnerable to ongoing violence, despite their separation from the abuser. When such victims abduct their child, the violent partners may successfully obscure the facts about the abuse and activate abduction laws to regain control of their victims.

Interventions. Of all the at-risk parent profiles, socially and economically alienated parents, especially women, have the best prognosis for an effective preventive intervention, which is limited only by the lack of helpful community resources. Some helpful resources these parents need include the following:

- Legal counseling and advocacy, i.e., access to information and education about custody and abduction laws and about the rights of both parents—even when there has been no marriage or sustained relationship. Abuse victims need advocates to help them obtain restraining orders and custody and visitation orders that do not place them in further danger. Alienated parents need a user-friendly court system, a cooperative clerical staff, language translation services, and support persons who will accompany them through the legal process.
- Access to affordable psychological counseling services for themselves and their children. Such services can help them manage their emotional distress and vulnerability and strengthen their parenting capacities at the time of separation and after divorce.
- Family advocates to help them bridge the cultural, economic, and logistical chasms to access other community resources, such as domestic violence services, substance abuse monitoring and counseling, training and employment opportunities, housing options, and mental health services.
- Important members of their informal social networks to be included in any brief intervention to provide these vulnerable families with long-term support and protection.

Conclusion

The profiles of parental risk for abduction described in this Bulletin were derived from a relatively small descriptive study comparing samples of abducting and litigating individuals with custody disputes. It is not known to what extent these samples are representative of the larger populations of abducting and litigating parents in other jurisdictions. These descriptive data do not provide any statistical prediction of the probability that an abduction will occur when any individual or family situation meets the criteria for one or more of these profiles; nor is it possible to estimate the probability of an abduction occurring when these criteria are not met.

Given this limited knowledge about parental abduction and the difficulty of predicting future behavior, what principles should guide the Nation's social policies for preventive interventions? Many of the interventions prescribed above are simply good standards of professional and court practice for the provision of legal and psychological counseling, mediation, and custody evaluation services, especially to those who are economically and socially alienated. The social policy dilemmas arise in those instances involving restrictions to the custody and access rights of parents as preventive measures. Policymakers must ask, "Is it worse not to have protected a child who is subsequently abducted or to have placed restrictions on the rights of a parent who may have never abducted?" They must decide what responsibility the court should assume in protecting children from possible abduction, in the absence of any actual wrongdoing, by a divorcing parent who is, for example, foreign-born and homesick for familiar surroundings.

The authors propose that the more restrictive measures suggested in this Bulletin are warranted under three conditions:

- When the risks for abduction are particularly high, as indicated by prior custody violations, clear evidence of plans to abduct, and overt threats to take the child.
- When obstacles to locating and recovering an abducted child would be particularly great, as they would be in uncooperative jurisdictions in some States and abroad—especially in countries not party to the Hague Convention.
- When the child faces substantial potential harm from an abducting parent, such as a parent who has a serious mental or personality disorder, a history of abuse or violence, or little or no prior relationship with the child.

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Internet: travel.state.gov/officeofchildissues.html

U.S. Department of State, Office of Passport Services
Internet: travel.state.gov/passport_services.html

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