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# Attempted and completed incidents of stranger-perpetrated child sexual abuse and abduction

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*keywords:* Child sexual abuse; Abduction; Stranger; Victim; Offender

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## Attempted and completed incidents of stranger-perpetrated child sexual abuse and abduction

## Abstract

**Objective:** To establish the prevalence, typology and nature of attempted or completed incidents of stranger-perpetrated sexual abuse or abduction of children “away from home.”

**Method:** A questionnaire was completed by 2,420 children (83% response rate) aged 9-16 years in 26 elementary and high schools in North-West England.

**Results:** Of these children, 19.0% ( $n = 461$ ) reported that they had been the victim of *any* attempted or completed sexual abuse or abduction incident away from home at some point in their lives. Of these children, 161 (6.7% of the original sample) reported that the “last” incident had been perpetrated by a *stranger*. Based upon these *last* incidents, four main types of attempted or completed CSA or abduction incident were identified: indecent exposure (40.8% of victims), touching (25.8%), and abduction (23.1%), each occurring on their own; and incidents involving multiple types of act (10.2%). The majority of these abductions (91.1%) and touching incidents (50.9%) were attempted as opposed to completed. Rates of victimisation were generally higher among girls than boys (10.4% vs. 4.2%,  $p < .001$ ). A sizeable minority of victims had experienced sexual abuse or abduction previously (28.8%). The large majority of incidents were carried out by males (88.2%). Most incidents occurred when children were accompanied by their peers (67.9%). Many victims were frightened by their experience (46.9% *very frightened*) and the large majority made a disclosure (79.9%). Only a minority of incidents were reported to the police (33.3%).

**Conclusions:** Incidents of attempted and completed stranger CSA and abduction are distinct from CSA and abduction by known persons, go against stereotypes, are complex, and give rise to a number of key issues that may have implications for prevention and intervention.

**Practice implications:** Professionals involved in child protection should undertake work to reduce the risk of existing victims of CSA or abduction becoming victims of *stranger* CSA or

abduction, and the risk of attempted incidents becoming completed ones. They also need to encourage the disclosure and reporting of attempted and completed stranger CSA and abduction incidents.

Both the sexual abuse and the abduction of children by strangers have been the focus of considerable concern among policy makers, practitioners, the media and the public (Fetto, 2002; The Children's Society, 2007). There has, though, been a dearth of research into each of these problems, especially outside the US (Best, 1990; Boudreaux, Lord, & Etter, 2000). This applies even to basic aspects of stranger CSA and abduction, including their prevalence, typology and nature. The subsequent lack of knowledge calls into question the effectiveness and appropriateness of society's understanding of, and response to, stranger CSA and abduction. The present study was designed to produce the first substantial body of data on stranger CSA and abduction in the UK.

Besides this dearth of knowledge, our other major reason for examining CSA and abduction together was the overlap that exists between them, at least in terms of the number of abductions that involve CSA. Boudreaux et al. (2000) showed that nonfamily abductions took place for a variety of reasons including maternal desire, profit and retribution but also sexual gratification. There are varying figures in the literature as to the proportion of nonfamily abductions that involve CSA but it appears to be a substantial minority (Asdigian, Finkelhor, & Hotaling, 1995; Finkelhor, Hammer, & Sedlak, 2002; Finkelhor, Hotaling, & Sedlak, 1990; Finkelhor & Ormrod, 2000a). Finkelhor et al. (2002), for example, reported that 46% of victims in nonfamily abductions were sexually assaulted. Less data has been produced on the proportion of CSA incidents that entail abduction. What evidence there is indicates that only a very small proportion of CSA incidents involve abduction. Snyder (2000), for instance, in an analysis of CSA incidents reported to the FBI National Incident-Based Reporting System, found that an additional offence of kidnapping was recorded for only .85% of victims.

Most data on stranger CSA and abduction derives from victimisation surveys carried out in US. It has been established from these studies that the rate of sexual abuse of children

by strangers is relatively low (Finkelhor & Dziuba-Leatherman, 1994; Finkelhor, Ormrod, Turner, & Hamby, 2005; Hashima & Finkelhor, 1999). Finkelhor et al. (2005), for example, found that 4 children per 1000 aged 2-17 years had experienced a sexual assault by an adult stranger in the study year. Stranger child abduction has also been shown to be rare (Finkelhor & Dziuba-Leatherman, 1994; Finkelhor et al., 2002). Finkelhor et al. (2002), for instance, estimated that 21,534 children or 0.3 per 1000 were abducted by strangers in 1999.

There is a modest amount of data, in the literature, concerning the nature of CSA and abduction incidents in general (Finkelhor & Dziuba-Leatherman, 1994; Finkelhor et al., 2005; Hashima & Finkelhor, 1999). The focus within these surveys has been upon one or more of the following six areas: victim characteristics, offender characteristics, offender modus operandi, incident circumstances, victim experiences, and reactions on the part of victims and others. However, there has been little analysis of these data by victim-offender relationship. The exceptions have been in studies of certain types of incident, such as adult stranger sexual assault (Finkelhor et al., 2005) and specific features of incidents, such as levels of reporting to police (Hashima & Finkelhor, 1999). In a very small number of studies, particularly those on kidnapping (Finkelhor & Dziuba-Leatherman, 1994) and attempted abduction (Finkelhor, Hotaling, & Asdigian, 1995; Finkelhor et al., 1990), this has not been an issue as all or virtually all of the offenders were strangers.

There have been a number of studies based upon incidents reported to law enforcement agencies. The information from these studies on the nature of CSA (Finkelhor & Ormrod, 2000b; Snyder, 2000) and abduction (Asdigian et al., 1995; Finkelhor et al., 1990; Finkelhor & Ormrod, 2000a) has been especially detailed. As with victimisation surveys, though, there has been little analysis of these data by victim-offender relationship. Moreover, and as Finkelhor and Dziuba-Leatherman (1994) have pointed out, reported cases may not be representative of all cases. This is less of a problem in the case of stereotypical kidnappings

as the large majority tend, on account of their seriousness, to be reported to law enforcement (Finkelhor et al., 1990).

A number of different typologies have been developed for both CSA and abduction incidents. CSA typologies have been based upon attempts versus completions (Catalano, 2006), contact versus noncontact (Finkelhor & Dziuba-Leatherman, 1994), type of sexual act (Snyder, 2000), adult versus juvenile offender (Finkelhor et al., 2005) and whether or not force was used (Hashima & Finkelhor, 1999). Abduction typologies have been founded upon attempts versus completions (Finkelhor & Dziuba-Leatherman, 1994; Finkelhor et al., 1990, 1992), sexual assault versus nonsexual assault (Asdigian et al., 1995), and stereotypical kidnappings versus legal definition abductions (Finkelhor et al., 1990, 1992). Important variations between different types of stranger CSA and abduction incident, in terms of their prevalence (Finkelhor et al., 1990) and nature (Finkelhor et al., 2005), have been highlighted in this work. Again, though, there has been negligible examination of these data by victim-offender relationship. One of the few studies in which this has been done is the work by Finkelhor and Dziuba-Leatherman (1994) on the prevalence of adult- versus juvenile-perpetrated stranger CSA incidents.

There has been only one national, victimisation survey in the UK - the annual, government-sponsored British Crime Survey (BCS) (Nicholas, Kershaw, & Walker, 2007). There has, though, been very little data on stranger CSA or abduction from the BCS. Juvenile victimisation, including CSA and abduction, has been incorporated only once, in 1992 (Aye Maung, 1995). This survey was restricted to 12-15 year olds, utilised only a global measure of CSA and abduction (“Sexual harassment by men”) and provided little analysis of the data by victim-offender relationship. There have been other victimisation surveys in the UK that have included questions on CSA and/or abduction (see, for example, Anderson, Kinsey, Loader, & Smith, 1994; Mawby, 1979; Painter & Farrington, 2001; Smith, 1994). These surveys have



been small scale, provide little data on stranger-perpetrated incidents and like the BCS, have been restricted to children of high school age (11 or 12 years upwards). There have also been a number of CSA prevalence surveys conducted among the adult population in the UK (Baker & Duncan, 1985; Cawson, Wattam, Brooker, & Kelly, 2000; Kelly, Regan, & Burton, 1991). Questions on victim-offender relationship have been included in these surveys but in general the coverage of stranger CSA and abduction has been quite superficial.

There was then a need for large-scale surveys of stranger CSA and abduction in the UK that incorporated children of elementary school age (11 years and below) and provided detailed incident data. This paper presents findings from the first such survey in the UK. The survey was designed to establish the prevalence, typology and nature of attempted or completed stranger CSA or abduction incidents. The survey comprised a school-based questionnaire administered to 2,420 children in four different areas in North-West England.

## **Method**

### **Participants**

The initial sample comprised all the 2,916 children aged 9-16 years from 103 classes in 26 elementary and high schools in North-West England (Table 1), of whom 83% ( $n = 2,420$ ) participated in a questionnaire survey. Of these children, 2,109 (87%) answered screening questions on attempted and completed CSA and abduction that had taken place “away from home.” The schools were drawn from four types of area: inner city, outer city social housing, outer suburb (owner-occupied), and *rurban* (rural area with small towns: Bonner, 1997). As the large majority of children in the UK attend a school in the area in which they live, school area is a fairly accurate proxy for area of residence. The inner city,

outer city, outer suburb and rural areas (one each) closest to the research office were used. This procedure ensured that the children who took part in the survey were drawn from a wide range of demographic, socio-economic and physical environments and were broadly representative of all UK children.

## Instrument

The questionnaire was a modified version of one that had been used in two previous child victimisation surveys in the UK: Anderson et al. (1994), and Aye Maung (1995). The questionnaire had five sections: demographic characteristics, lifestyle, victimisation and accidents “away from home,” fears and anxieties, and strategies for keeping safe. The victimisation section covered four types of incident: theft (attempted and completed), harassment, physical abuse, and CSA and abduction (attempted and completed). The screening questions for CSA and abduction are given in Figure 1, in the same format in which they appeared on the questionnaire. We had to strike a balance between specificity and generality in the wording of these questions. The wording had to be sufficiently specific such that children would understand to what the questions referred. At the same time, the wording had to be sufficiently general such that caregivers and teachers, and children possibly, would not be negatively disposed to the questions on the grounds of their sensitivity.

The questionnaire had not been subject to any formal assessment of its validity. This is particularly significant in relation to the screening questions for attempted and completed CSA and abduction. However, it was possible, within the context of this study, to carry out two types of analyses that provide some measure of the validity of these questions (Table 2). The first analysis consisted of an examination of where on the questionnaire - in terms of victimisation sub-sections - *apparent* stranger CSA and abduction incidents ( $n = 161$ ) were

recorded. The large majority of these incidents were recorded only in the CSA and abduction sub-section. A small number were recorded in both the CSA and abduction, and another victimisation sub-section. (In most of these cases it appeared that the child had simultaneously been subject to another type of victimisation in addition to CSA or abduction.) Of these incidents, 88% were jointly reported under harassment which, given the nature of this victimisation, seemed to be appropriate. The remaining incidents were entered only under a victimisation sub-section other than CSA and abduction (*false negatives*). The harassment sub-section accounted for 86% of these incidents. There was no significant difference in the proportion of CSA only and abduction only incidents (4 of 106 and 3 of 30 respectively) that were recorded only in these other victimisation sub-sections (Fisher's exact  $p = .18$ ). This analysis suggests that most children understood the CSA and abduction, and other, victimisation screening questions.

The second analysis comprised an examination of the vignettes provided by the children who recorded incidents in the CSA and abduction sub-section ( $n = 154$ ). Almost two-thirds of these vignettes gave a clear indication as to what the incident entailed. Virtually all of these vignettes provided further evidence indicating that the child had been subject to CSA or abduction (*true positives*). In only a very small minority of these accounts did it appear that what the children described was not a CSA or abduction incident (*false positives*). All of these seemed to constitute physical abuse incidents. If these figures - 95.6% cases verified, 4.4% unverified - were applicable to all 154 reports in the CSA and abduction sub-section of the questionnaire, then 147 of these would be verified and 7 unverified.

Based upon these two analyses, the CSA and abduction screening questions involved 147 true positives (91.4% of the whole sample,  $n = 161$ ), 7 (4.2%) false positives and 7 (4.3%) false negatives. There was no significant difference in the proportion CSA only and abduction only incidents (99 of 106 and 27 of 30 respectively) that were true positives

(Fisher's exact  $p = .69$ ). It is likely that a second type of false negative arose in the survey - where children did not report a CSA or abduction incident they experienced, anywhere on the questionnaire. It is not possible to assess the extent of this problem in this survey.

The following are examples of vignettes provided by victims. The vignettes of some of the youngest respondents have been used in order to underline the point about children's ability to comprehend the screening questions.

10 year old girl checking the box "Showed you a private part of their body which you did not want to see" (indecent exposure):

Me and my sister were in the park at night and a man was walking up and down and then he stood in a corner and pulled his pants [underwear] down at us.

10 year old girl who checked the box "Tried to get you to touch them in a way that you didn't like" (touching):

I was playing with my friend in a street near where I live. A man came on a motorbike. He shouted at us for 10 pence [money]. He said we could sit on his bike. Then he pulled his trousers down and said come over here, and then he grabbed Sarah's [pseudonym] hand and then he grabbed my hand. I struggled and got my hand away and then he got Sarah's hand and touched his penis. I ran back but I waited for Sarah. I didn't know what to do. I stuck to the wall frightened. Sarah got away. Then we ran to her house and then to mine and then told our mums and they phoned the police. They caught him. He'd done it to someone else. The police told us.

10 year old boy checking the box "Tried to get you to go with them when you didn't want to" (abduction):

I was in my old street and I was playing cricket with my friends and a car drove through and then stopped and reversed back up to me and shouted to me to get in her

car. I said “No!” and ran off to my house. The car drove off. All I can remember is that it was a white car.

Additional evidence in support of the validity of the CSA and abduction screening questions came from an analysis of the pattern of non-responses in the victimisation and accidents section of the questionnaire. There was a steady rise in non-response with successive victimisation sub-sections - these being 2% (theft), 3% (harassment), and 7% (physical abuse) - but a sharp increase - to 13% - when children came to CSA and abduction. This was followed by a marked decrease in non-response - to 6% - when children moved on to accidents. Children’s reticence in answering CSA and abduction questions may have been due to any one of a number of factors, such as embarrassment, prior involvement in consenting sex with peers or victimisation. Whatever the reason for this behaviour, it further suggested that children understood to what the questions referred. Interaction between members of the research team and the children, including the youngest ones, as they were completing questionnaires, reinforced this impression.

It would appear then that the questionnaire had reasonable validity in identifying victims of CSA or abduction. In the absence of an independent validation exercise, we can not, however, be certain as to the accuracy of the questionnaire in this respect. It is likely that some of the incidents incorporated within this paper did not comprise CSA or abduction. Consequently, some caution must be exercised in interpreting the results of this study.

## Procedure

There were a number of elementary and high schools in each of the four study areas. Information was obtained on the demographic profile of the children in each of these schools,

in terms of age, gender, ethnicity and socio-economic status. The first elementary/high school approached to take part in the survey in any given area was the one whose student demographic profile was most similar to that of all children (of the relevant age group) in that area. If a school declined to participate in the survey, then an approach was made to the next most similar school and so on. A total of 53 schools were approached, of which 26 (49%) agreed to take part in the survey. Questionnaires were administered by a male and female member of the research team. Children were given a briefing session prior to starting the questionnaire and could request assistance from a member of the research team as they were completing it. Children were asked to complete the questionnaire in private.

Those children who had been subject to *any* given type of victimisation, had to indicate the specific acts that had taken place - by means of completing multiple choice check boxes on the questionnaire - and record the number of times “anything like this had happened to you.” They were then invited to provide a short written account or vignette of the “*last*” (i.e., most recent) incident. Following this, they were asked to provide information on the last incident, again by means of completing multiple choice check boxes. This information related to the perpetrator, incident circumstances, and their reaction and that of other people to the incident. This information included to which of the following categories the perpetrator belonged: “People I knew,” “People I had seen before,” and “Strangers.”

The survey was carried out between April 1996 and January 1997. The research proposal, including ethical procedures, was vetted by the funding organisation (the Economic and Social Research Council) - a process that incorporated independent peer review. We also submitted our proposals to local social services departments to ensure that they were satisfied with the proposed ethical procedures.

## Results

### Prevalence

A total of 461 children (19.0% of the original sample,  $N = 2,420$ ) reported that they had been the victim of attempted or completed CSA or abduction, away from home, by *any* perpetrator, at some time in their lives. Of these children, 161 (6.7% of the original sample) reported that the *last* incident had been perpetrated by a stranger. The remainder of this paper is based upon these 161 children and the incidents in which they were involved, although final sample sizes vary owing to missing data.

### Acts committed

The specific acts children reported as having been committed against them in attempted or completed stranger CSA or abduction incidents, and the number of times each of these was endorsed, is shown in Table 3. There was a quite diverse pattern in the distribution of these acts, with children reporting a total of 16 different victimisation scenarios. It was possible to identify distinct groupings within these scenarios. The majority of incidents (90%) comprised a single type of act and 10% involved multiple types of act. Incidents involving one type of act could be further divided into three groups according to the broad type of act perpetrated. Thus, four discrete incident groups were distinguished: indecent exposure only, which accounted for by far the single largest group of victims, touching only (attempted or completed - 26%), abduction only (attempted or completed - 23%) and incidents involving multiple types of act (10%). The following analyses are based upon these four groups.

In addition to being less numerous than indecent exposure, touching and abduction incidents were generally more likely to involve attempts rather than completions. There were 41 attempts to abduct a child but only 4 completed ones, and 8 perpetrators attempted to get the child to touch them but there was only 1 such completed incident. The exception to this was perpetrators touching children, where attempted acts ( $n = 21$ ) were slightly exceeded by completed ones ( $n = 27$ ). The motivation of perpetrators in abducting a child was difficult to discern given that nearly all of these incidents were not completed. Among the admittedly small number of completed abductions, 3 victims did report other acts as having taking place: 2 were touched by a perpetrator; and a third, as well as being touched, was made to touch the perpetrator and the perpetrator indecently exposed himself. Among attempted abductees, 8 reported being subject to another type of act. These involved one or more of the following: a perpetrator touching the child, trying to touch the child or trying to get the child to touch him/her and the perpetrator indecently exposing him/herself.

#### Victim characteristics

*Gender.* Girls were over-represented in all but one of the incident groups (Table 4).

Compared to boys, their rate of victimisation was over five times as much for indecent exposure,  $\chi^2(1, N = 2,030) = 31.77, p < .001$  and more than twice as high for touching,  $\chi^2(1, N = 2,030) = 7.09, p < .01$ . There were no significant difference between girls and boys for multiple acts (Fisher's exact  $p = .17$ ) or abduction  $\chi^2(1, N = 2,030) = .06, p > .1$ .

*Age.* The overall rate of attempted or completed stranger CSA or abduction was higher among older children (13-16 years) than younger ones (9-12 years). This was to be expected given that older children had been exposed to the risk of these incidents for a longer period. The



only significant difference was for indecent exposure, with a much larger proportion of older children reporting this type of incident,  $\chi^2(1, N = 2,008) = 16.05, p < .001$ .

*School area.* The victimisation rate for all incidents was greatest for children attending inner city schools, dropped in the outer city areas and further still in the outer suburbs, and was lowest for children in rural schools. These differences were significant for inner city versus outer suburb,  $\chi^2(1, N = 1,030) = 6.81, p < .01$  and inner city versus rural  $\chi^2(1, N = 967) = 12.35, p < .001$ .

*Ethnicity.* Responses for children from the various minority ethnic groups had to be combined on account of their very small numbers. It is recognised that this strategy is not ideal but it was deemed unavoidable. There were no significant differences in victimisation rates by ethnicity,  $\chi^2(1, N = 2,007) = .00, p > .1$ .

*Repeat victimisation.* Over one-quarter of all victims indicated that they had been involved in one or more prior incidents of attempted or completed CSA or abduction (by any perpetrator). Victims were not asked whether the “last” and any previous incident were connected or were wholly separate. It is assumed that they were separate as all the perpetrators in the “last” incident had to be strangers. There were no significant differences in re-victimisation rates between incident groups,  $\chi^2(2, N = 101) = 1.0, p > .1$ .

#### Perpetrator characteristics

*Gender.* A large majority of incidents in each of the four identified groups involved male perpetrators only (Table 5). There were no significant differences between incident groups in

the proportion that involved male only versus male plus female and female only combined (indecent exposure versus touching, Fisher's exact  $p = .1$ , indecent exposure versus abduction,  $p = .27$ , indecent exposure versus multiple acts,  $p = 1.0$ , touching versus abduction,  $p = .76$ , touching versus multiple acts,  $p = .66$ , and abduction versus multiple acts  $p = .66$ ). Most incidents (52.5%) that involved a female perpetrator also involved a male perpetrator, whereas only 6.6% of incidents involving a male perpetrator also involved a female perpetrator.

*Age.* It was anticipated that few if any victims would know the age of the perpetrator. It was also thought that children might experience difficulty in estimating the age of perpetrators with any precision. Therefore, they were asked to assign the perpetrator to one of three broad age groups: "adults," "young people," or "children." An age range for each these groups was not specified so as to avoid making the question too complex. Adults were responsible for approximately three times as many incidents as young people plus children. There were roughly three times as many adults as young people and children in the UK population at the time this survey was conducted (Office of Population, Censuses & Surveys, 1992). Thus, on a per capita basis, children and young people were as likely as adults to be responsible for attempted or completed stranger CSA or abduction incidents - although this is not to imply that these two sets of incident were necessarily the same in terms of their nature or victims' reactions. Indecent exposure plus abduction incidents were significantly more likely than touching plus multiple acts to involve adult perpetrators,  $\chi^2(1, N = 136) = 20.00, p < .01$ .

*Number.* The majority of all incidents involved lone perpetrators. There were no significant differences between incident groups in terms of the numbers of perpetrators they involved,  $\chi^2(2, N = 130) = 5.16, p > .05$ . Multiple perpetrator incidents usually comprised two or three

perpetrators. According to children's vignettes, some of the multiple perpetrator incidents involved groups or gangs of young people or children (males primarily) harassing and touching girls in swimming pools.

#### Incident circumstances

*Companionship.* More than two-thirds of all attempted or completed stranger CSA or abduction incidents occurred when the victim was with other children and just over a quarter when they were alone. Very few incidents occurred when children were in the company of adults (Table 6). Indecent exposure was significantly more likely than touching incidents to occur when the victim was with other children as opposed to being on their own,  $\chi^2(1, N = 90) = 13.45, p < .001$ .

*General location.* Most attempted or completed stranger CSA or abduction incidents took place outside with only a small minority occurring inside a building. There is an artefact in this finding in that children were asked to report upon only those incidents that occurred "when you have been away from home." Indecent exposure was significantly more likely than touching to occur outside,  $\chi^2(1, N = 99) = 6.88, p < .01$ .

*Specific location.* Attempted or completed stranger CSA or abduction incidents occurred in a wide range of locations, both inside (for example, shops, leisure buildings and residential properties) and out (including bus stops, woods and forests, and car parks). Almost two-thirds of all incidents took place in just two locations comprising "streets" and "parks and fields." There were no significant differences between incident groups in terms of the specific locations in which they took place,  $\chi^2(2, N = 119) = .62, p > .1$ .

## Reactions

*Fear.* Many children experienced appreciable levels of fear as a result of attempted or completed stranger CSA or abduction incidents (Table 7). Almost one-half of all victims said they had been *very frightened* by the incident and a further one quarter recalled being *quite frightened*. Not all victims reported being so frightened by their experiences with, for example, almost one-fifth of respondents indicating that they were *not at all frightened*. Abduction victims were significantly more likely than indecent exposure victims to report having being very frightened,  $\chi^2(1, N = 91) = 7.78, p < .01$ .

*Disclosure.* A large majority of victims in each of the incident groups told someone about their experience. There was no significant difference in this between incident groups overall,  $\chi^2(2, N = 122) = 1.55, p > .1$ .

*Disclosure recipients.* Caregivers were the single biggest group to whom victims disclosed, being cited by almost two-thirds of children who told someone. Relatively large proportions of disclosures were made to friends and siblings, and a small but sizeable minority to teachers. There was no significant difference between incident groups overall as to whether or not victims disclosed to caregivers,  $\chi^2(2, N = 97) = 3.95, p > .1$ .

*Reports to police.* One-third of all victims stated that the attempted or completed stranger CSA or abduction incident had been reported to the police. Touching incidents were significantly less likely to be reported to the police than both indecent exposure,  $\chi^2(1, N = 92) = 5.44, p < .05$ , and abduction,  $\chi^2(1, N = 63) = 5.13, p < .05$ .

## Discussion

Based upon *last* incidents, the prevalence of attempted and completed stranger CSA and abduction away from home is relatively low. These incidents are of four main types: indecent exposure, touching, abduction, and multiple acts. Indecent exposure is the most prevalent type of incident and of the remaining ones these are mainly attempts rather than completions. Victimization rates are highest among girls, older children, and those attending schools in inner city areas. A sizeable minority of victims have experienced attempted or completed CSA or abduction previously. Most incidents are perpetrated by males and adults acting on their own. Incidents usually occur when victims are with other children and when they are outside, especially in the street or parks/fields. A large majority of victims are frightened by these incidents and tell someone about them, particularly their caregivers. Only a minority of incidents are reported to the police.

We know of two other studies that have used a similar methodology to our research: the Edinburgh (Scotland) youth victimisation survey (Anderson et al., 1994) and the British Crime Survey (BCS) (Aye Maung, 1995). Each of these studies report broadly similar findings to those in our research. In the BCS, for example, a sizeable minority of victims of stranger sexual harassment are repeat victims (41%), many incidents occur when victims are accompanied (49%) and a high proportion of victims tell someone about the incident (80%). There are some differences in the findings of these two studies and our research. In the Edinburgh survey, for instance, touching, and not indecent exposure, is the most common incident reported. Despite these differences - which may be due to variations in methods - overall the results of our research concur with the work of Anderson et al. and Aye Maung (1995).

Some more general messages regarding the nature of, and reactions to, attempted and completed stranger CSA are highlighted in our research. These incidents are, in some respects, like CSA in general. For example, a large majority of victims are female and most incidents are perpetrated by males (Cawson et al., 2000). There are, though, a number of features of these incidents that render them unlike other CSA cases. It appears, for instance, that most are quite isolated events rather than being part of any prolonged experience as is common in much CSA (Rodriguez, Ryan Rowan, & Foy, 1996). Many incidents take place either outside or within public, commercial or leisure buildings, as opposed to private homes, where the majority of CSA is thought to occur (Budin & Johnson, 1989; Snyder, 2000). So although attempted and completed stranger CSA shares some of the features of CSA cases perpetrated by known offenders, it also needs to be seen as a distinct entity.

Attempted and completed stranger CSA and abduction incidents can conform to stereotypical perceptions of these phenomena (Valentine & McKendrick, 1997). For example, some incidents involve lone victims who are abused by adults. However, incidents often challenge these conceptions: many occur when children are accompanied as opposed to being on their own; and on a per capita basis, children and young people are as likely as adults to perpetrate these incidents. Other researchers, such as Asdigian et al. (1995), Finkelhor & Ormrod (2000a) and Martens (1992), report similar findings. Finkelhor & Ormrod (2000a), for instance, found that kidnappings of children by strangers involves juvenile offenders (10%), female offenders (5%), and victims who are male (36%), and of elementary school-age (32%). Prevailing stereotypes of attempted and completed stranger CSA and abduction may have some validity but these findings suggest their value is limited.

Attempted and completed stranger CSA and abduction are complex phenomena. For example, they comprise four major types of incident, which are themselves based upon a large number and wide range of victimisation scenarios. Rates of victimisation for incidents overall

and most individual incident groups show a steady but notable decline with distance from the inner city. The complexity of attempted and completed stranger CSA and abduction has been emphasised elsewhere. Even though they were writing about a much narrower sub-set of cases, Asdigian et al. (1995) argue that “[s]tranger abduction is not a unitary phenomenon but has a complexity that goes beyond the public stereotype and needs to be detailed and refined” (p. 230).

This complexity extends into debates concerning the seriousness of, and appropriate responses to, attempted and completed stranger CSA and abduction. Support for both sides of this debate can be found in this research. On the one hand, it appears that these phenomena are not major problems. Only a small minority of children are victims of attempted or completed CSA or abduction. Almost one half of incidents involve indecent exposure as opposed to a contact offence, and most of the remainder involve attempts as opposed to completions. Set against this, though, some children are subject to serious sexual assaults, other incidents involve attempts to abduct children by forcing them into cars and a large majority of victims are frightened by their experiences. Similar tensions are discussed in the literature (Finkelhor et al., 1992; Newiss & Fairbrother, 2004). Finkelhor et al., (1992), for example, estimate that in the United States in 1988 there had been 200-300 stereotypical kidnappings but 114,600 *attempted* nonfamily abductions. They conclude that “the prevalence of attempted abduction does give a sense that there is a certain type of threat to children that may be minimized by statistics on actual abductions” (p. 240). The problems of attempted and completed stranger CSA and abduction need to be kept in perspective but at the same time they should not be underestimated.

A number of key issues in relation to stranger CSA and abduction are identified in our research: many more incidents are attempts (i.e. failures) than completions, over one-quarter of victims have experienced an attempted or completed CSA or abduction incident

previously, only one-half of all victims tell their caregivers about incidents and only one-third of incidents are reported to the police. Other studies highlight some of the same but also additional key issues (Finkelhor et al., 1992, 1995). Finkelhor et al. (1995), for instance, report that attempted nonfamily abductions are significantly more prevalent among families experiencing psycho-social problems. Our research is not equipped to determine how the issues we identified should be interpreted but it is clear that they may have important implications for both prevention and intervention.

### Limitations

There are several limitations in this study. As the questionnaire had not been subject to any formal validation exercise, the accuracy with which it identified victims of attempted or completed stranger CSA or abduction is not known. A fundamental problem in using a survey was that the information obtained tended to be quite superficial (Hamby & Finkelhor, 2001). There was, for instance, no detailed or precise information concerning the nature or seriousness of, or motivation behind, the touching and abduction incidents. Moreover, the research was based entirely upon information from victims. It is likely that important, additional information on the subject of attempted and completed stranger CSA and abduction could be obtained through research with offenders and with agency workers who deal with these incidents. The number of incidents upon which the analyses were based was relatively modest. This was a particular issue when undertaking within-group comparisons where some of the cell sizes were very small. The study was located in only one region of England and the sample was based upon children attending mainstream, public schools only. Although the participation rate among children was very good, it was much lower among schools. Also, some respondents did not answer the screening questions on attempted and completed CSA



and abduction. Consequently, the sample may not be representative of, and the results may not be generalizable to, all UK children.

## **Conclusions**

We believe that some important and - in the UK context - unique data on the prevalence, typology and nature of attempted and completed stranger CSA and abduction has been obtained through our research. This has enabled us, in turn, to highlight a series of notable and general features of these phenomena: they are distinct from CSA and abduction by known persons, go against stereotypical perceptions, are complex, and give rise to a number of key issues. Although the value of carrying out research on this topic is underlined by these findings, it has to be recognised that this remains the only epidemiological study of stranger CSA and abduction in the UK. Moreover, our work suggests that there is much more knowledge that could and should be obtained on stranger CSA and abduction. There is, then, a need for much more research in the UK, but also other countries, on stranger CSA and abduction. Future research should build upon our study but also the relatively large body of relevant research that has been carried out in the US.

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## Tables and figure

Table 1

Sample and sub-samples in school-based questionnaire survey

All children aged 9-16 years in participating schools ( $N = 2,916$ )	<i>n</i>	%
Children who participated in survey	2,420	83.0
Children who did not participate in survey <sup>a</sup>	496	17.0
Children who participated in survey ( $n = 2,420$ )		
Children who completed CSA or abduction screening questions	2,109	87.1
Children who did not complete CSA or abduction screening questions	311	12.9
Children who completed CSA or abduction screening questions ( $n = 2,109$ )		
Children who reported “EVER” having been involved in an attempted or completed CSA or abduction incident <i>by any perpetrator</i>	461	21.9
Children who did not report “EVER” having been involved in an attempted or completed CSA or abduction incident	1,648	78.1
Children who reported attempted or completed CSA or abduction ( $n = 461$ )		
Children who reported that the “last” attempted or completed CSA or abduction incident was perpetrated by a <i>stranger</i>	161	34.9
Children who reported that the “last” attempted or completed CSA or abduction incident was not perpetrated by a <i>stranger</i>	234	50.8
Missing	66	14.3

<sup>a</sup> Reasons children did not participate in the survey included: caregiver refusing consent, child’s absence from school on day of survey and advice from teacher not to include child in survey.

Figure 1  
Screening questions for attempted or completed CSA or abduction

**19a. Has anyone EVER done, or tried to do, any of these things to you when you have been away from home ?**

- Touch you in a way that you didn't like
- **Tried** to touch you in a way that you didn't like
- Got you to touch them in a way that you didn't like
- **Tried** to get you to touch them in a way that you didn't like
- Got you to go with them when you didn't want to
- **Tried** to get you to go with them when you didn't want to
- Showed you a private part of their body which you didn't want to see
  
- **Or**, has **nothing** like this ever happened to you


**19b. How many times has anything like this happened to you ? ..... **

Table 2

Assessment of the validity of victims' responses to screening questions on attempted or completed CSA or abduction incidents – stranger-perpetrated incidents only

Description	Incident group			
	CSA only ( <i>n</i> = 106) %	Abduction only ( <i>n</i> = 30) %	CSA plus abduction ( <i>n</i> = 25) %	All ( <i>n</i> = 161) %
Victimisation sub-section where CSA/abduction incident was recorded				
CSA/abduction sub-section only	89.6	66.7	88.0	85.1 <sup>a</sup>
CSA/abduction plus other sub-section	6.6	23.3	12.0	10.6
Other sub-section only	3.8	10.0	0	4.3
Quality of victim' vignettes	( <i>n</i> = 102)	( <i>n</i> = 27)	( <i>n</i> = 25)	( <i>n</i> = 154)
Vignette provided clear description of CSA/abduction incident	61.8	55.6	52.0	59.1
Vignette did not provide clear description of CSA/abduction incident	22.5	29.6	20.0	23.4
Victim did not provide vignette	15.7	14.8	28.0	17.5
Did vignette verify CSA/abduction victimisation	( <i>n</i> = 63)	( <i>n</i> = 15)	( <i>n</i> = 13)	( <i>n</i> = 91)
Yes	96.8	100.0	84.6	95.6
No	3.2	-	15.4	4.4

*Note.* Attempted and completed incidents are combined within each incident group.

<sup>a</sup>Fisher's exact  $p = .18$ . Test based upon victimisation sub-section in which incident was recorded (CSA/abduction only plus CSA/abduction and other section, versus other sub-section only) by incident type (CSA only versus abduction only).



Table 3

## Acts committed in attempted or completed stranger CSA or abduction incidents

All victims ( $n = 161$ )	%
Victims indicated acts committed against them	91.3
Victims did not indicate acts committed against them	8.7
Victims who indicated acts committed against them ( $n = 147$ )	
Incidents involving a single type of act	
Perpetrator indecently exposed self	40.8
Tried to get child to go with him/her	22.4
Touched child	12.2
Tried to touch child	10.2
Tried to get child to touch him/her	3.4
Got child to go with him/her	0.7
Got child to touch him/her	0
Incidents involving multiple types of act	10.2

*Note.* Not all percentages add up to 100 because of rounding.

Table 4  
Victim characteristics in attempted or completed stranger CSA or abduction incidents

Characteristic	Incident group						<i>P</i>
	Indecent exposure	Touching	Abduction	Multiple acts	All incidents	Non-victims	
Gender	%	%	%	%	%	%	<.001 <sup>a</sup>
Female ( <i>n</i> = 998)	5.1	2.8	1.6	0.9	10.4	89.6	
Male ( <i>n</i> = 1,032)	0.9	1.2	1.7	0.4	4.2	95.8	
Age (years)							<.01 <sup>b</sup>
13-16 ( <i>n</i> = 929)	4.6	2.3	1.6	0.5	9.0	91.0	
9-12 ( <i>n</i> = 1,079)	1.6	1.8	1.6	0.7	5.7	94.3	
School area							<.01 <sup>c</sup>
Inner city ( <i>n</i> = 508)	5.7	1.6	2.0	1.4	10.6	89.4	
Outer city ( <i>n</i> = 540)	2.6	2.4	1.9	0.6	7.4	92.6	
Outer suburb ( <i>n</i> = 522)	2.3	2.1	1.3	0.4	6.1	93.9	
Rurban ( <i>n</i> = 459)	1.1	1.7	1.5	0.2	4.6	95.4	
Ethnicity							>.1 <sup>d</sup>
White ( <i>n</i> = 1,715)	2.8	2.2	1.7	0.5	7.2	92.8	
Minority ethnic group ( <i>n</i> = 292)	3.8	0.7	1.4	1.4	7.2	92.8	
Re-victimisation (stranger victims only <i>n</i> = 111)							>.1 <sup>e</sup>
Victimised previously	29.8	31.0	20.0	40	28.8		
Not victimised previously	70.2	69.0	80.0	60	71.2		

*Note.* Most of this table is based upon all the children who completed the questionnaire. The only exception is re-victimisation which is based upon only those children who reported stranger child sexual abuse or victimisation. Attempted and completed incidents are combined within each incident group.

<sup>a</sup>  $\chi^2$  based upon gender by all incidents. Indecent exposure by gender,  $\chi^2(1, N = 2,030) = 31.77, p < .001$ , touching by gender,  $\chi^2(1, N = 2,030) = 7.09, p < .01$ .

<sup>b</sup>  $\chi^2$  based upon age group by all incidents. Indecent exposure by age,  $\chi^2(1, N = 2,008) = 16.05, p < .001$ .

<sup>c</sup>  $\chi^2$  based upon school area (urban versus non-urban) by all incidents. Urban comprises inner city plus outer city social housing, non-urban comprises suburb plus rurban. Inner city versus suburb,  $\chi^2(1, N = 1,030) = 6.81, p < .01$  and inner city versus rurban,  $\chi^2(1, N = 967) = 12.35, p < .001$ .

<sup>d</sup>  $\chi^2$  based upon ethnic group by all incidents.

<sup>e</sup>  $\chi^2$  based upon re-victimisation status by incident group (multiple acts excluded because one expected value below 5).

Table 5  
Perpetrator characteristics in attempted or completed stranger CSA or abduction incidents

Characteristic	Incident group					<i>p</i>
	Indecent Exposure	Touching	Abduction	Multiple acts	All incidents	
Gender	% ( <i>n</i> = 60)	% ( <i>n</i> = 38)	% ( <i>n</i> = 33)	% ( <i>n</i> = 13)	% ( <i>n</i> = 144)	n/a <sup>a</sup>
Male(s) only	93.3	81.6	84.8	92.3	88.2	
Male(s) and female(s)	1.7	10.5	9.1	7.7	6.2	
Female(s) only	5.0	7.9	6.1	0	5.6	
Age group <sup>b</sup>	% ( <i>n</i> = 60)	% ( <i>n</i> = 36)	% ( <i>n</i> = 32)	% ( <i>n</i> = 12)	% ( <i>n</i> = 140)	<.001 <sup>c</sup>
Adult(s) only	88.3	44.4	84.4	66.7	74.3	
Young people only	6.7	27.8	9.4	25.0	14.3	
Children only	5.0	22.2	3.1	0	8.6	
Combination of age groups	0	5.6	3.1	8.3	2.9	
Number of perpetrators	% ( <i>n</i> = 60)	% ( <i>n</i> = 38)	% ( <i>n</i> = 32)	% ( <i>n</i> = 13)	% ( <i>n</i> = 143)	>.05 <sup>d</sup>
1	85.0	65.8	71.9	76.9	76.2	
2	10.0	15.8	21.9	0	13.3	
3	0	2.6	6.2	15.4	3.5	
4+	5.0	15.8	0	7.7	7.0	

*Note.* Attempted and completed incidents are combined within each incident group.

<sup>a</sup>  $\chi^2$  not applicable as one expected value in each of touching, abduction and multiple acts was less than 5.

<sup>b</sup> Participants were not given specific age criteria for the definition of “adult”, “young person” or child”. Participants were asked to record whether, in their view, the perpetrator belonged to the category of adult, young people or child.

<sup>c</sup>  $\chi^2$  based upon age group (adults only versus children plus young people only) by incident group (multiple acts excluded because one expected value below 5). Indecent exposure plus abduction versus touching plus multiple acts,  $\chi^2(1, N = 136) = 20.00, p < .01$ .

<sup>d</sup>  $\chi^2$  based upon number of perpetrators (one versus two plus) by incident group (multiple acts excluded because one expected value below 5).

Table 6  
Circumstances of attempted or completed stranger-perpetrated CSA or abduction incidents

Circumstances	Incident group					<i>p</i>
	Indecent exposure	Touching	Abduction	Multiple acts	All incidents	
Companions	% ( <i>n</i> = 57)	% ( <i>n</i> = 37)	% ( <i>n</i> = 33)	% ( <i>n</i> = 13)	% ( <i>n</i> = 140)	<.01 <sup>a</sup>
Other child(ren) only	84.2	45.9	63.6	69.2	67.9	
Adult(s) and other child(ren)	1.8	5.4	6.1	0	3.6	
Adult(s) only	0	2.7	3.0	0	1.4	
Alone	14.0	45.9	27.3	30.8	27.1	
General location	% ( <i>n</i> = 60)	% ( <i>n</i> = 39)	% ( <i>n</i> = 32)	% ( <i>n</i> = 13)	% ( <i>n</i> = 144)	<.01 <sup>b</sup>
Outdoors	88.3	66.7	93.8	84.6	83.3	
Indoors	11.7	33.3	6.2	15.4	16.7	
Specific location	% ( <i>n</i> = 54)	% ( <i>n</i> = 35)	% ( <i>n</i> = 30)	% ( <i>n</i> = 13)	% ( <i>n</i> = 132)	>.1 <sup>c</sup>
Street	29.6	42.9	60.0	46.2	41.7	
Park/field	31.5	14.3	6.7	23.1	20.5	
Shop	7.4	11.4	13.3	7.7	9.8	
Other <sup>d</sup>	31.5	31.4	20.0	23.1	28.0	

*Note.* Attempted and completed incidents are combined within each incident group. Not all percentages add up to 100 because of rounding.

<sup>a</sup>  $\chi^2$  based upon companionship (children only versus alone) by incident group (multiple acts excluded because one expected value below 5). Indecent exposure versus touching,  $\chi^2(1, N = 90) = 13.45, p < .001$ .

<sup>b</sup>  $\chi^2$  based upon general location by incident group (multiple acts excluded because one expected value below 5). Indecent exposure versus touching,  $\chi^2(1, N = 99) = 6.88, p < .01$ .

<sup>c</sup>  $\chi^2$  based upon specific location (street plus park/field versus remainder) by incident group (multiple acts excluded because one expected value below 5).

<sup>d</sup> Other comprises, in order, leisure building, bus stop, bar/nightclub, school, private residence, wood/forest, bus and car park.

Table 7  
Reactions to attempted or completed stranger-perpetrated CSA or abduction incidents

Reaction	Incident group					<i>p</i>
	Indecent exposure	Touching	Abduction	Multiple acts	All incidents	
Victim's level of fear	% ( <i>n</i> = 59)	% ( <i>n</i> = 39)	% ( <i>n</i> = 32)	% ( <i>n</i> = 13)	% ( <i>n</i> = 143)	<.01 <sup>a</sup>
Very frightened	32.2	46.2	62.5	76.9	46.9	
Quite frightened	30.5	23.1	21.9	15.4	25.2	
Not very frightened	13.6	10.3	3.1	0	9.1	
Not at all frightened	23.8	20.5	12.5	7.7	18.9	
Did victim disclose	% ( <i>n</i> = 55)	% ( <i>n</i> = 37)	% ( <i>n</i> = 30)	% ( <i>n</i> = 12)	% ( <i>n</i> = 134)	>.1 <sup>b</sup>
Yes	83.6	73.0	80.0	83.3	79.9	
No	16.4	27.0	20.0	16.7	20.1	
Disclosure recipient <sup>c</sup>	% ( <i>n</i> = 46)	% ( <i>n</i> = 27)	% ( <i>n</i> = 24)	% ( <i>n</i> = 10)	% ( <i>n</i> = 107)	>.1 <sup>d</sup>
Caregiver	63.0	48.1	75.0	80.0	63.6	
Friend	43.5	48.1	29.2	20.0	39.3	
Sibling	26.1	25.9	16.7	30.0	24.3	
Teacher	2.8	11.1	8.3	10.0	15.0	
Other relative	0	3.7	4.2	0	1.9	
Was incident reported to police	% ( <i>n</i> = 57)	% ( <i>n</i> = 35)	% ( <i>n</i> = 28)	% ( <i>n</i> = 12)	% ( <i>n</i> = 132)	<.05 <sup>e</sup>
Yes	36.8	14.3	39.3	58.3	33.3	
No	63.2	85.7	60.7	41.7	66.7	

*Note.* Attempted and completed incidents are combined within each incident group.

<sup>a</sup>  $\chi^2$  based upon fear (very frightened versus remainder) by incident group. Indecent exposure versus abduction,  $\chi^2(1, N = 91) = 7.78, p < .01$ .

<sup>b</sup>  $\chi^2$  based upon whether victim told by incident group (multiple acts excluded because one expected value below 5).

<sup>c</sup> Total column percentages may exceed 100 as who victim told categories are not mutually exclusive.

<sup>d</sup>  $\chi^2$  based upon whether victim told caregiver or not by incident group (multiple acts excluded because one expected value below 5).

<sup>e</sup>  $\chi^2$  based upon whether incident was reported to the police by incident group (multiple acts excluded because one expected value below 5). Indecent exposure versus touching,  $\chi^2(1, N = 92) = 5.44, p < .05$ ; indecent exposure versus abduction,  $\chi^2(1, N = 63) = 5.13, p < .05$ .