Analysis of Nonfamily Abductions Reported to NCMEC 2016-2020

NATIONAL CENTER FOR
**MISSING &
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Nonfamily abductions are defined by the National Center for Missing & Exploited Children (NCMEC) as **the unauthorized taking, retention, luring, confinement or concealment of a child younger than the age of 18 by someone other than a family member.** These cases involve an array of circumstances, ages, abductor relationships, and recovery outcomes and are the rarest missing child case type NCMEC intakes. The following analysis examines the different types of motivations underpinning these abductions.

Abductions Overview

Child Demographics

Between 2016 and 2020, 366 of NCMEC's case intakes involved children who were abducted by someone who was not a family member. A majority of children (65%) were female. With a mean age of 6-years-old and a median age of 5-years-old, victims of nonfamily abductions skewed young. However, older teenagers between the age of 15 and 17-years-old were the second most common age group abducted during nonfamily abductions. The relationship between age, case circumstances, and the motivation for abduction are explored later in this analysis.

Child's Age Group

Child's Race/Ethnicity
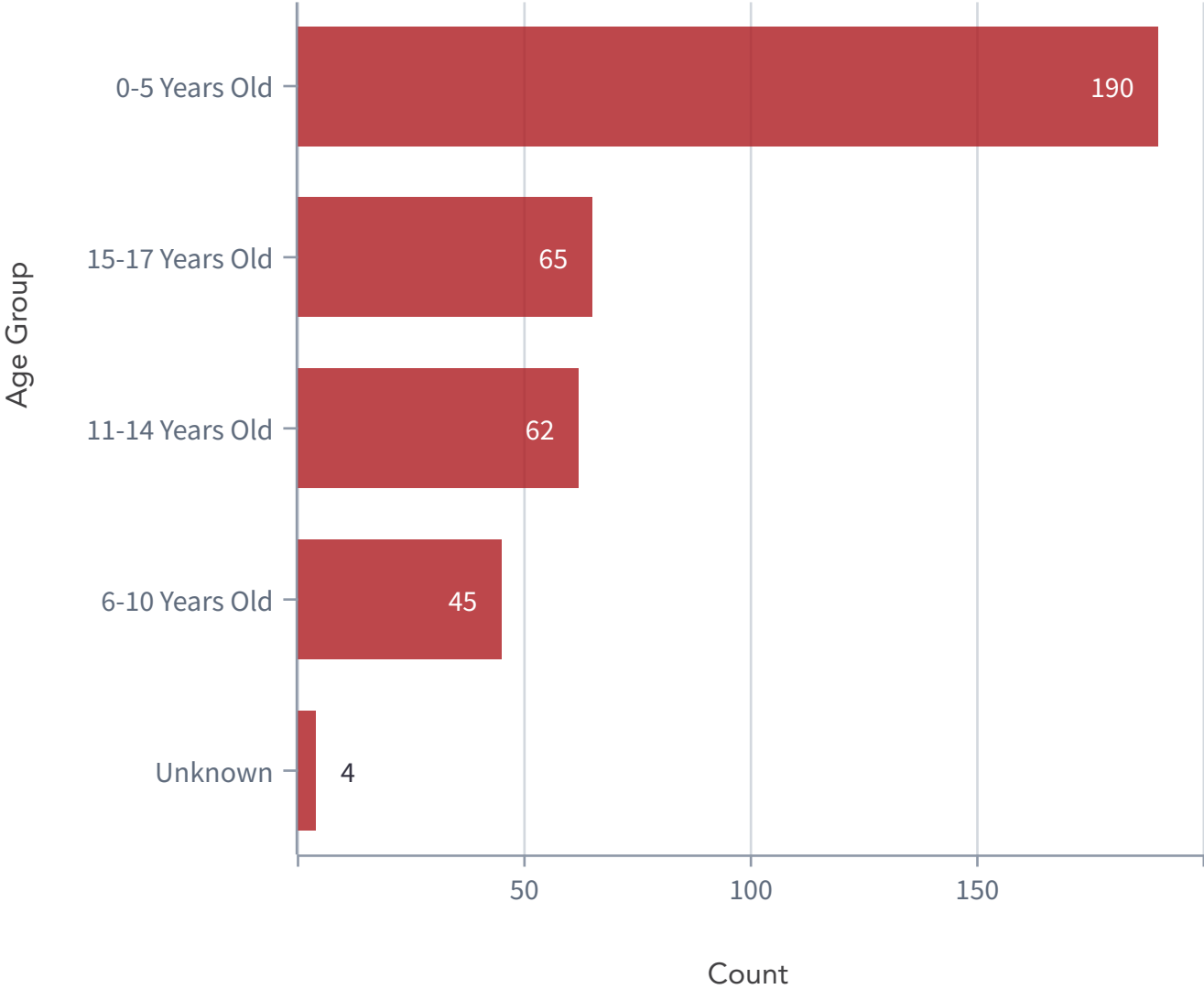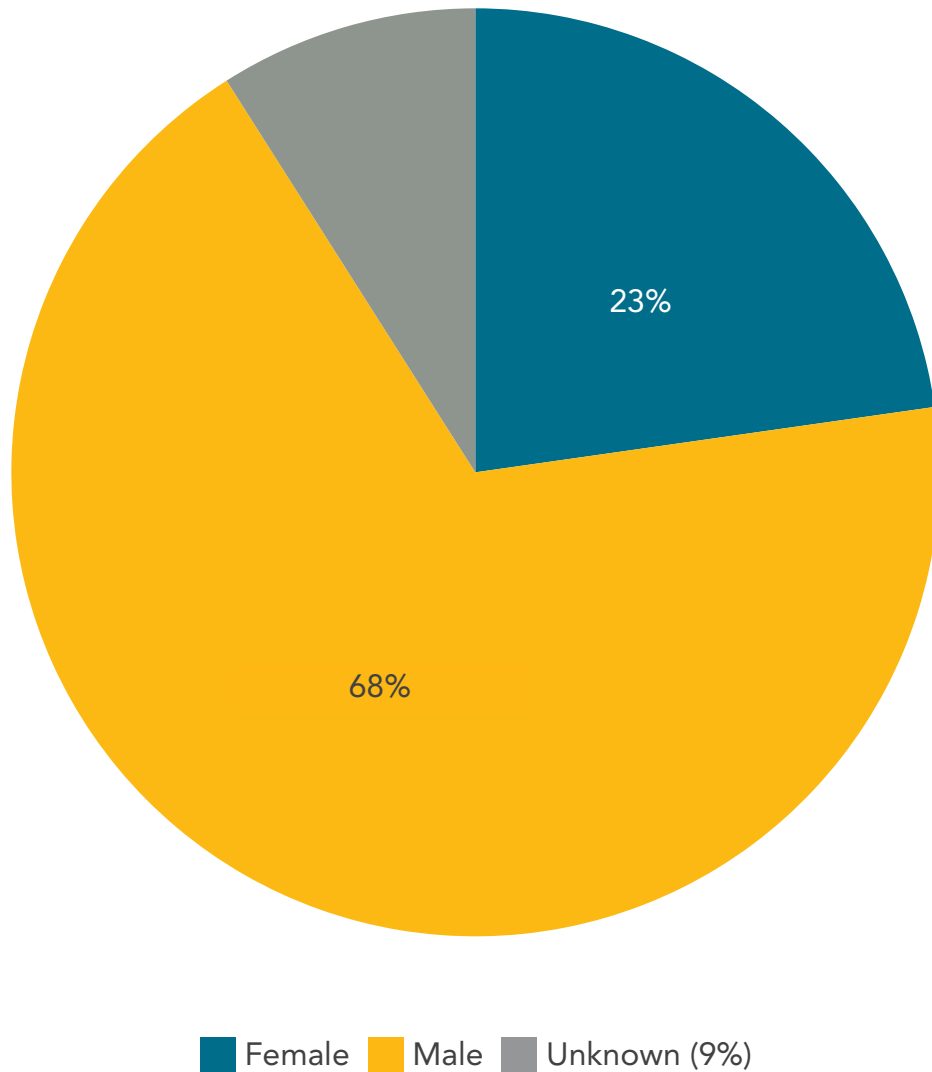

Child's Race/Ethnicity
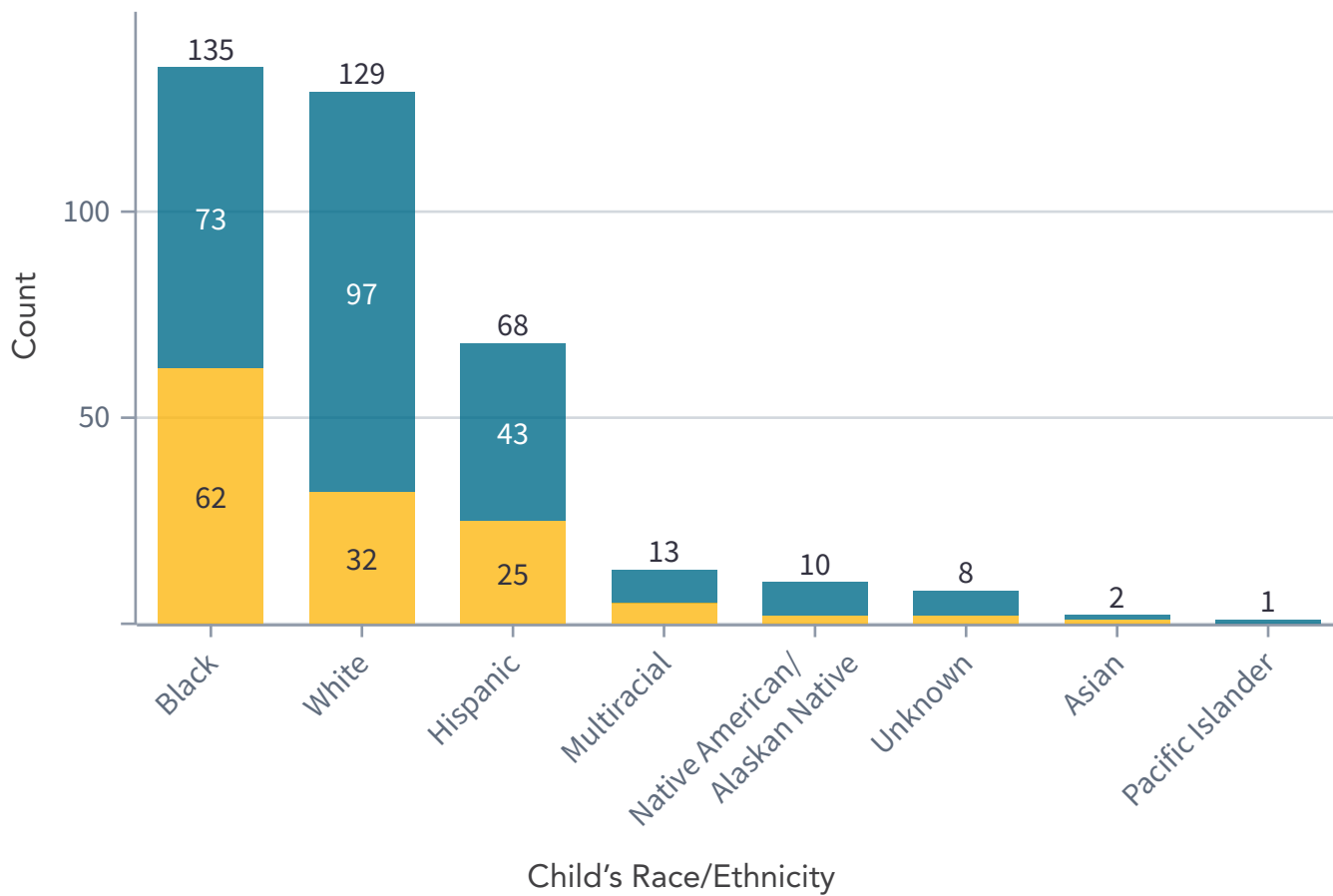
Child's Gender ▮ Female ▮ Male

Abductor Demographics

There were 422 different abductors involved in these cases. 12% of these cases involved more than one abductor, with 7 being the highest number of abductors involved in one case.

Abductor's Gender

Female 　 Male 　 Unknown (9%)

NCMEC uses the term nonfamily abduction rather than stranger abduction because the abductor is often known by the victim in these situations. This proved to be the case in this data set. Two-thirds (65%) of these children knew their abductor in some capacity. This was seen in cases where the abductors were a stranger to the parents but known to the child (as seen in online enticement situations), or the abductor was a trusted family friend or babysitter.

Abductor's Race/Ethnicity
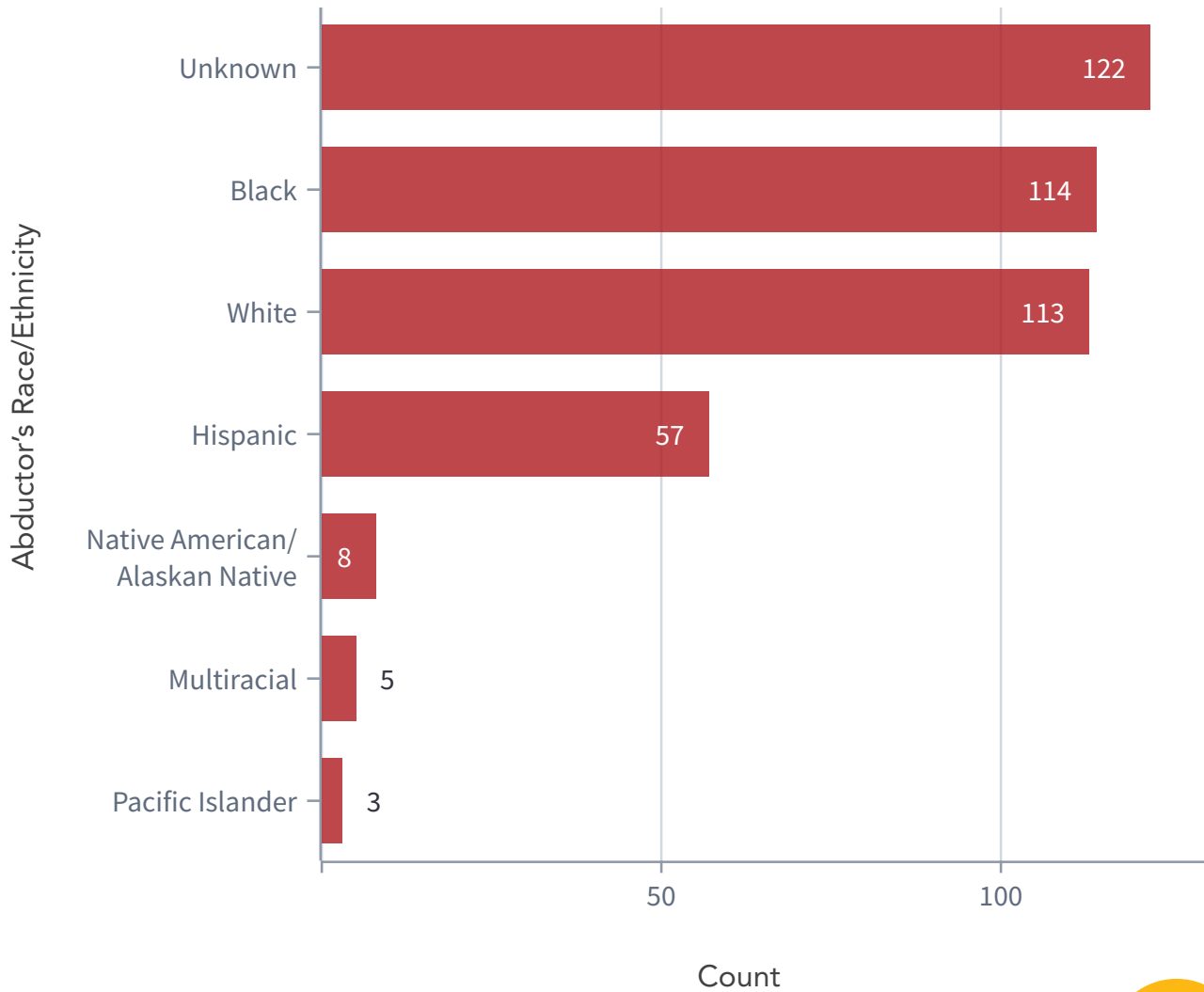
Case example:

A 3-month-old Black female child who was abducted by a family acquaintance. The child's mother dropped the child off at a hotel room so that the abductor could babysit the child. When the mother returned to the hotel, neither the family acquaintance nor the baby were present. There were concerns about the child's welfare due to a CPS case that had been brought against the abductor due to an infant in her care being abused and testing positive for drugs. An AMBER Alert was issued and the abducted child was ultimately recovered a day later due to police investigation.

Child's Relationship to Abductor
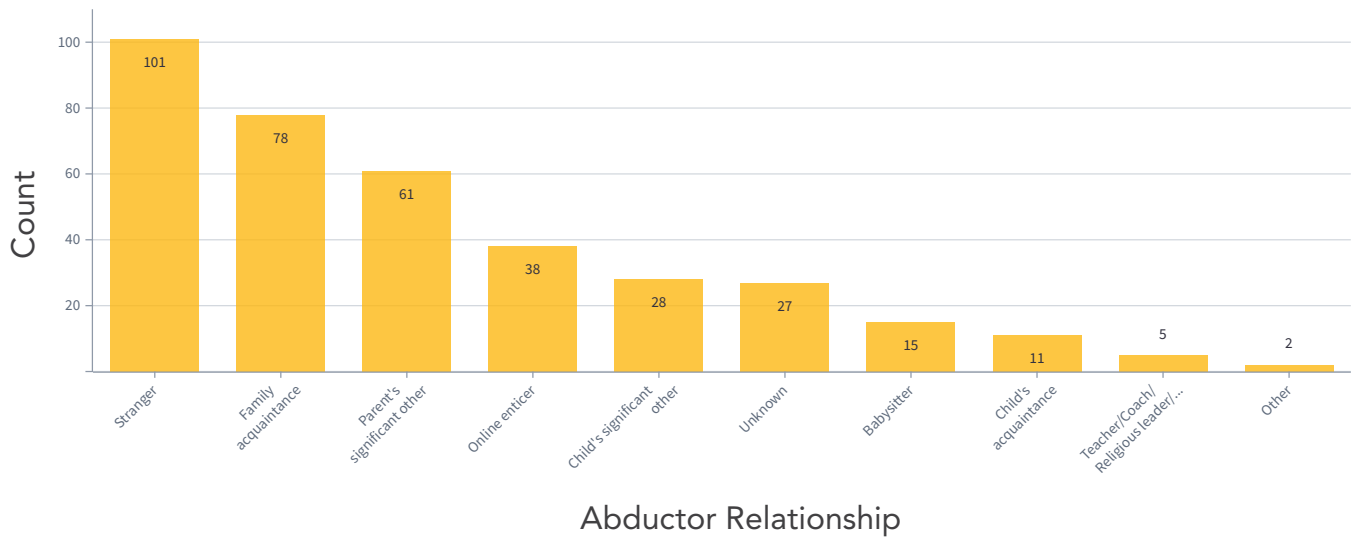
There were two cases in which the child's relationship to the abductor was unknown, but circumstances made it clear that they were not a stranger.

Motivation and the Abductor's Relationship to the Child
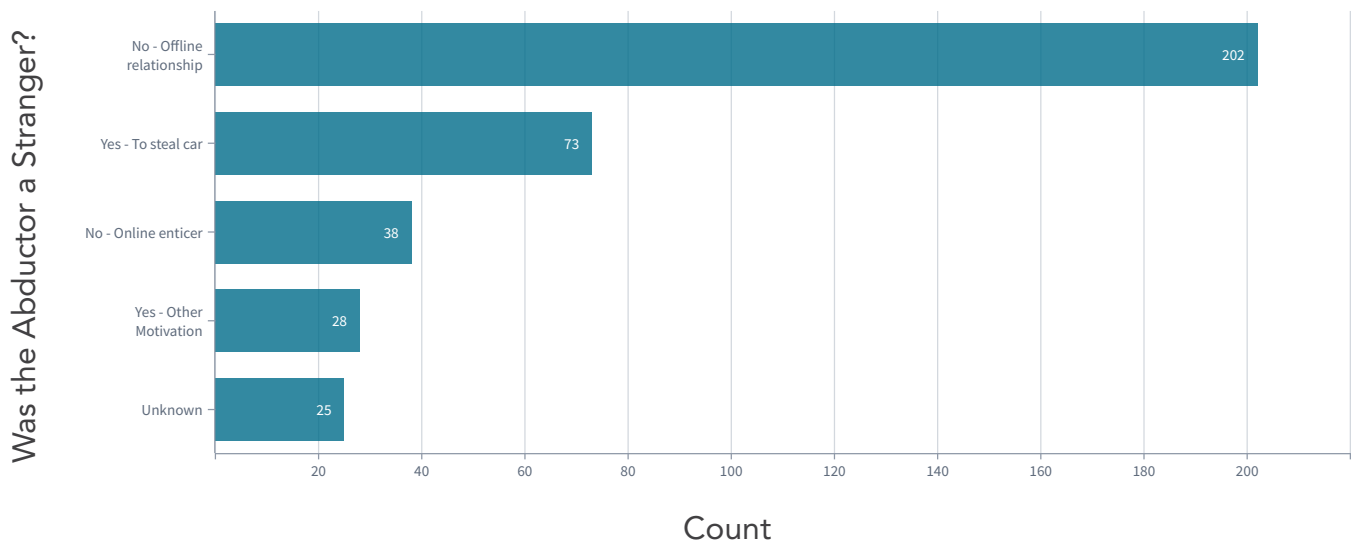
Strangers who had a different motivation than car theft typically abducted the child in order to sexually abuse them. Less commonly, they abducted the child in order to raise them or they abducted in the commission of another crime such as burglary. See section "Motivations for Abduction".

During the Abduction

Abduction Location

There are many factors worth considering when examining the abduction itself. Location was often crucial when it came to the circumstances in a case given that it had an impact on who had access to the child. For example, a child was much more likely to be abducted by a stranger when they were in a vehicle than if they were located on private property or in areas with a great deal of surveillance (such as retail locations).

Case example:

A 1-year-old Black male child who was left in a running car at a gas station while the mother went inside to pay. During her absence, a stranger got into the car and drove it away. There was a cell phone left in the vehicle which allowed investigators to track signal information from the carrier. An AMBER alert was issued that included a description of the stolen vehicle. A resident called 911 after they saw the vehicle. The child was recovered within an hour and less than 5 miles from the abduction location.

Abduction location categories:

Inside private property:
This consists of the child's home, as well as foster home, friends' homes, or abductor's home. These are private areas that are hard for the public to access unless someone lives there or has been invited inside. However, some abductors accessed these locations while committing robbery.

In a vehicle:
The child was last seen in an automobile.

Outside location:
Areas in which the child was outdoors and there was no sort of boundary between the child and the abductor. This includes areas such as parks, playgrounds, sidewalks, outside a car in parking lots, and walking city streets.

Retail or transportation:
These were areas owned by a business, but the child was in an area that could be easily frequented by anyone who wanted to enter the facilities. This includes malls, other types of stores, and parking garages.

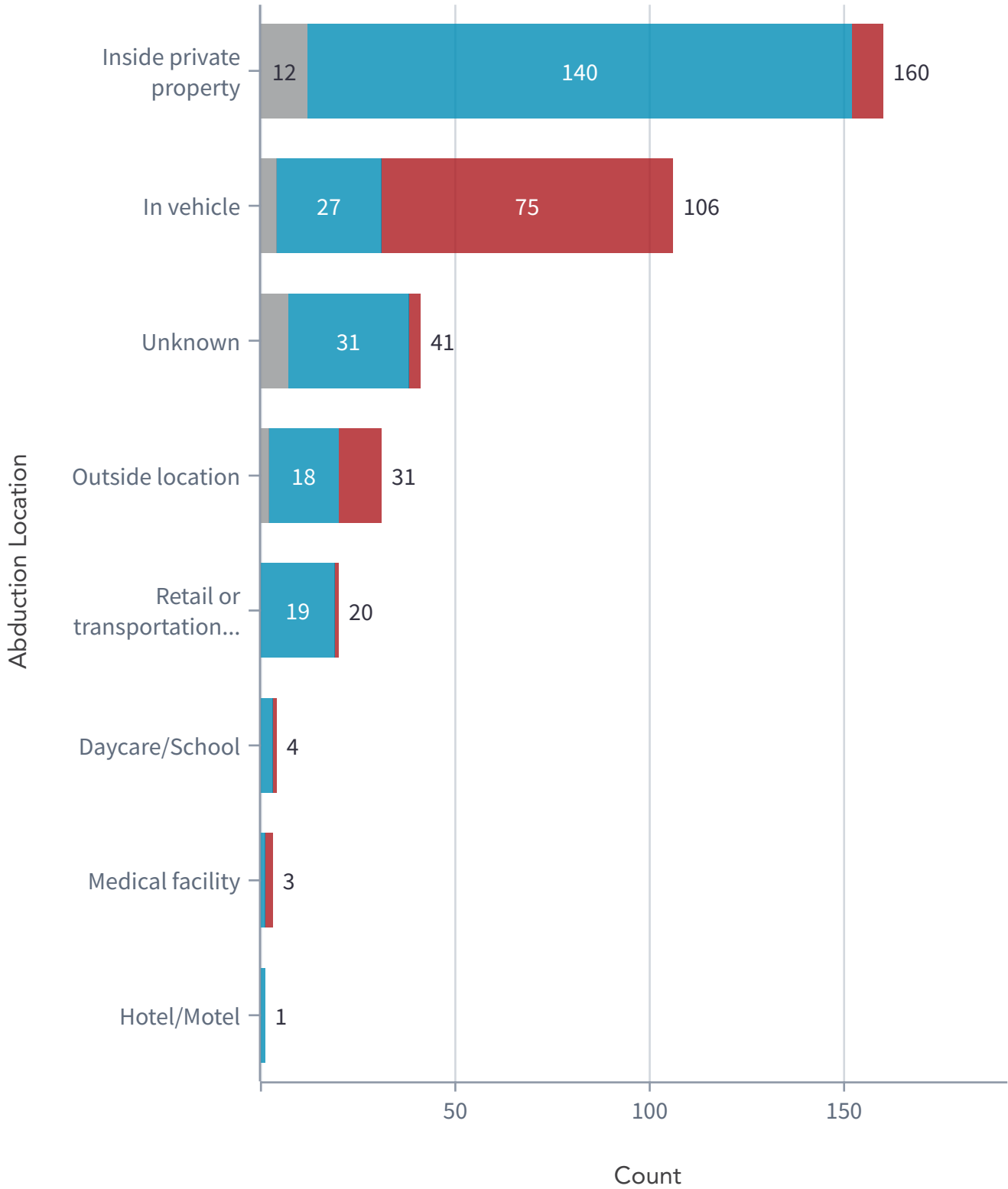**Daycare/School:**
The child's daycare or school.

Medical facility:
Areas devoted to medical care.

Hotel/Motel:
Differentiated from retail areas as lobbies can be accessed by the public, but individual rooms are private.
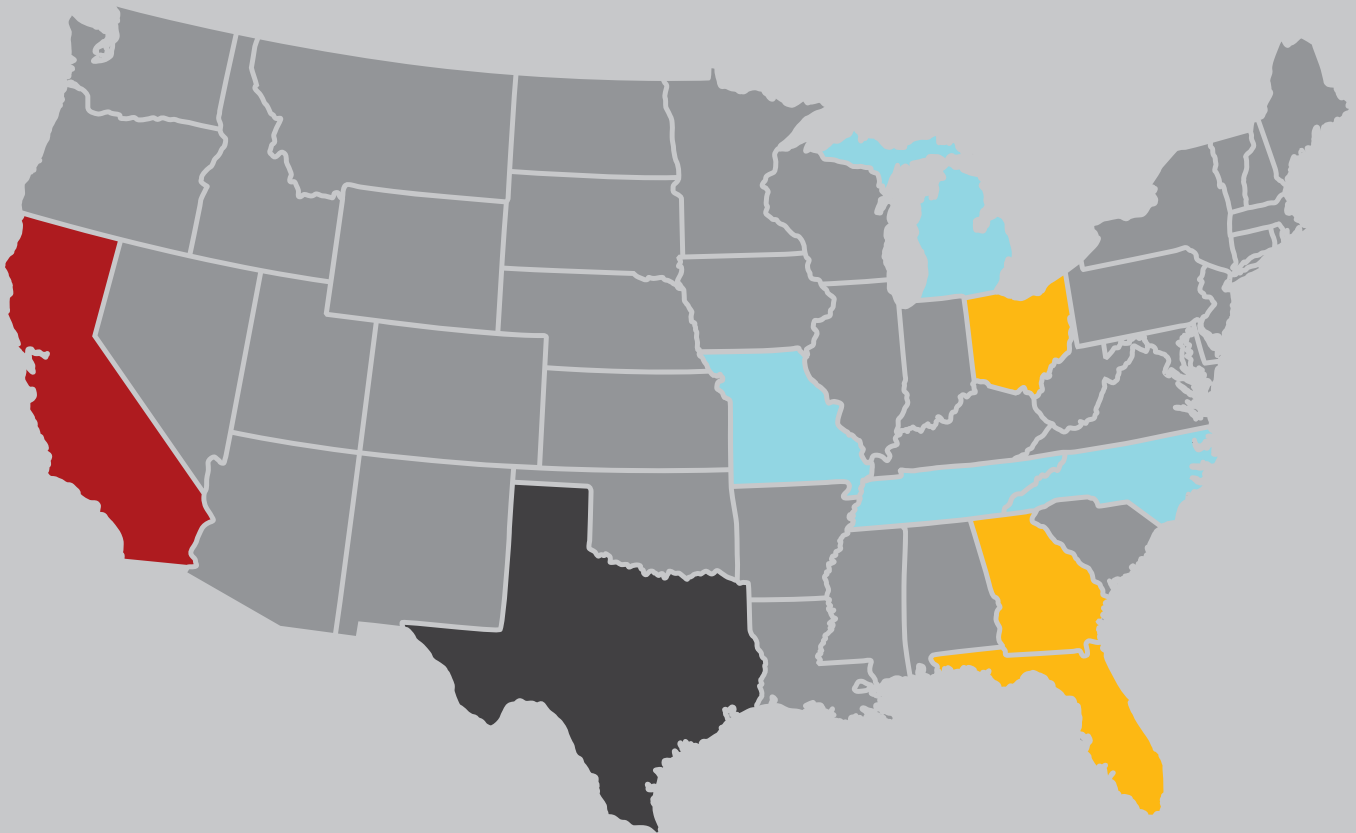
Abduction Location

Was the Abductor a Stranger? ▮ Unknown ▮ No ▮ Yes

Missing states for Nonfamily abductions

As a rule, the states with the greatest number of children who were abducted by a non-family member were states that had a large population.

Missing States

● 1+   ● 10+   ● 20+   ● 30+   ● 40+

Method of Abduction

Abductors used a variety of methods in order to abduct children. Some abductors would take the child during a violent altercation, while others initially had permission to watch the child, and others still made use of coercion and manipulation in order to abduct the child.

This analysis identified the following most common methods of abduction:

Forceful abductions:
Abductions in which violence was used in order to abduct the child. This could involve harm to the child, but it could also involve harm to the child's parent or other bystanders.

Co-Occurring Crime:
Abductions in which the abductor's primary motivation did not appear to include child abduction. The child abductor occurred during the commission of another crime, typically carjackings.

Abductor groomed the child:
Cases during which the child was enticed to leave with the abductor. Sometimes these cases involved the child leaving with a significant other or a family acquaintance. Sometimes these cases involved the child leaving with an online enticer.

Abductor initially had permission:
Cases in which the abductor initially had temporary permission to watch the child but subsequently did not return the child.

Sneaked away with child:
Abductions in which the abductor took the child away without employing any sort of violence. These cases occurred in places like medical facilities and retail areas, or large events such as parties.
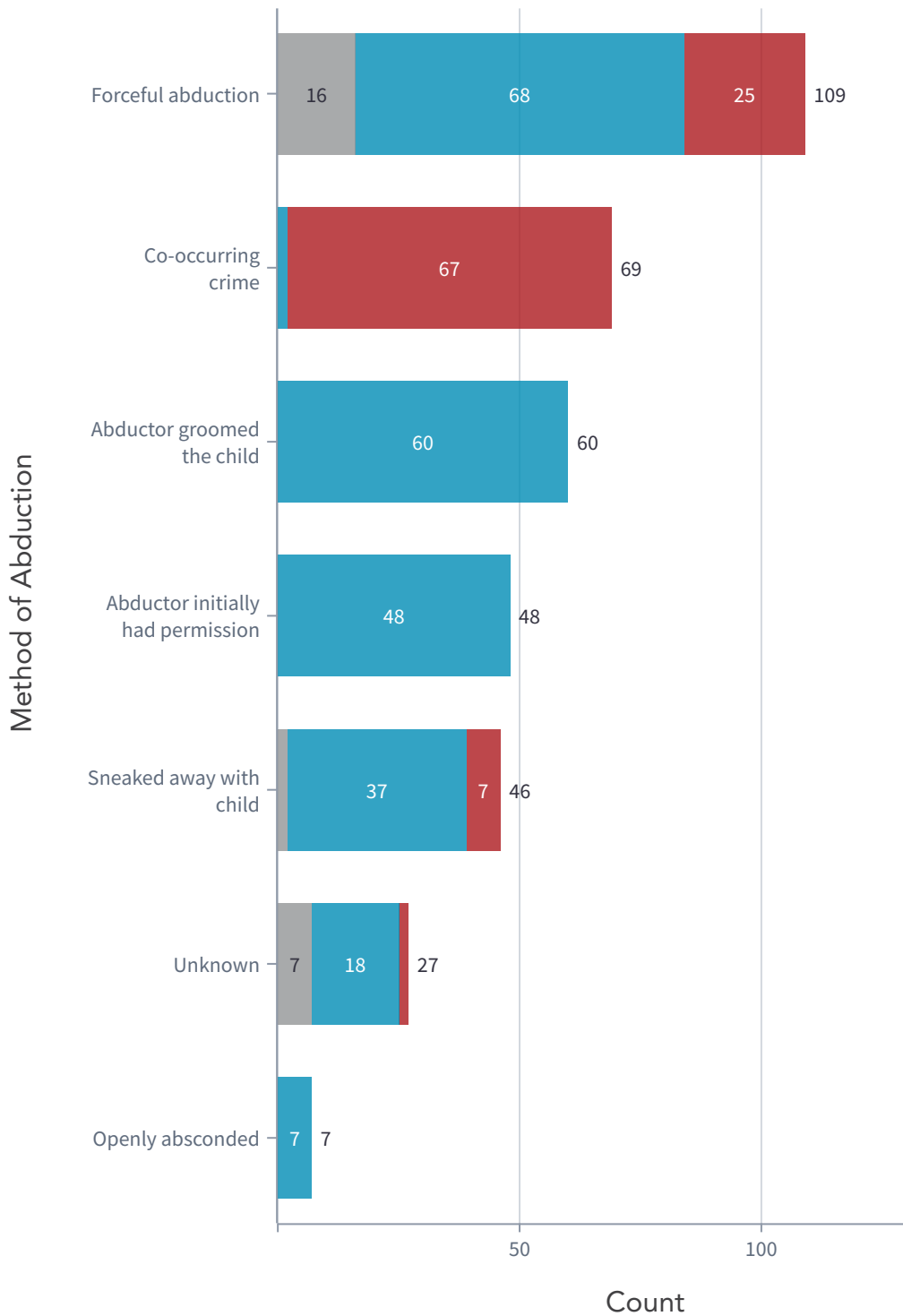
Openly Absconded:
Cases in which the abductor took the child in full view of the child's guardians, did not have permission to watch them, and did not use force.

Unknown:
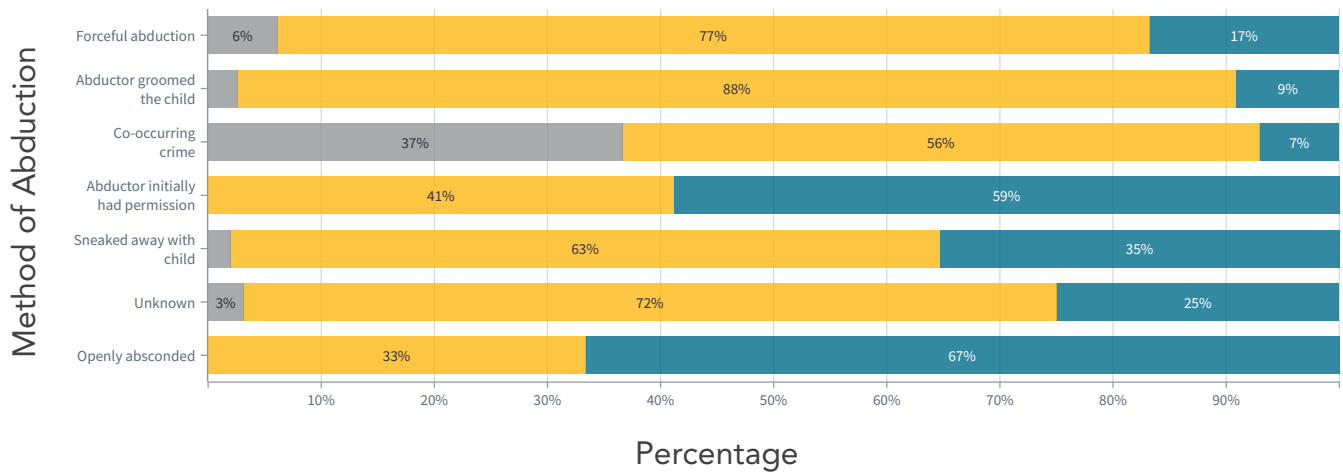Cases in which an abduction occurred but the method is uncertain.
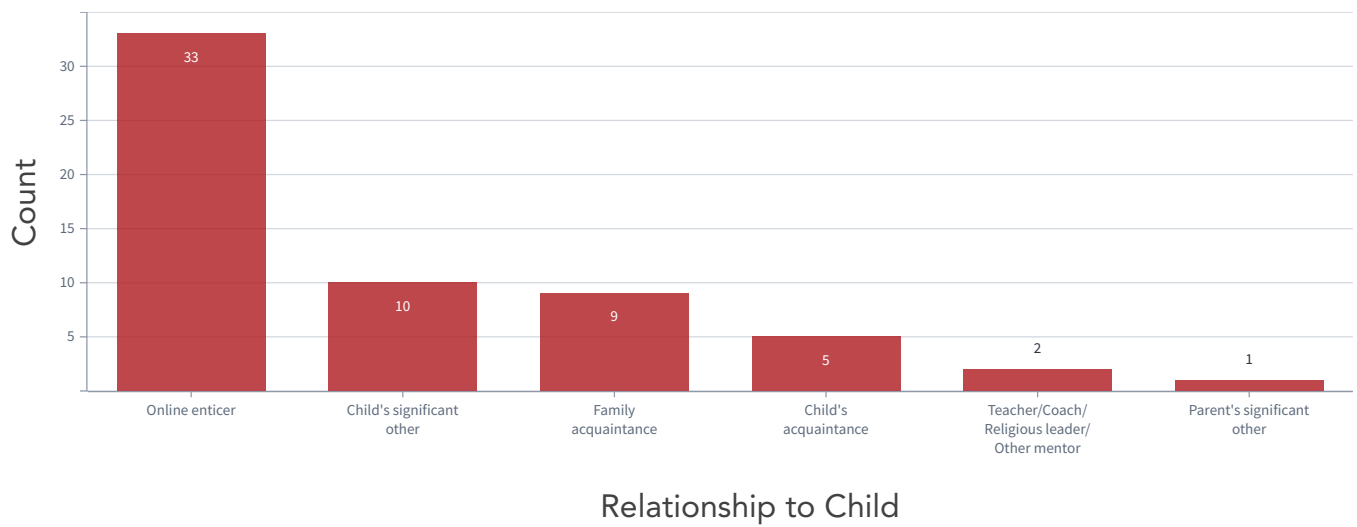
Method of Abduction

It is worth noting that force was not exclusive to stranger abductions. There were 68 cases in which the abductor was an acquaintance of the child and used violence while abducting the child. Conversely, the vast majority of stranger abductions occurred during non-violent abductions that took place during a co-occurring crime.

Method of Abduction and Abductor's Gender

Method of Abduction (y-axis) vs Percentage (x-axis)

Method of Abduction	Unknown	Male	Female
Forceful abduction	6%	77%	17%
Abductor groomed the child		88%	9%
Co-occurring crime	37%	56%	7%
Abductor initially had permission		41%	59%
Sneaked away with child		63%	35%
Unknown	3%	72%	25%
Openly absconded		33%	67%

Abductor's Gender: Unknown, Male, Female

Abductor Groomed the Child: Relationship Between Child & Abductor

Count

33

10

9

5

2

1

Online enticer | Child's significant other | Family acquaintance | Child's acquaintance | Teacher/Coach/ Religious leader/ Other mentor | Parent's significant other

Relationship to Child

Motivations for Abduction

In addition to abductors employing a variety of methods to abduct children, there were also a variety of motivations underpinning these abductions. Motivation had an impact on everything from demographics, to missing circumstances, to missing duration.

Overview and Definitions

Sexually motivated cases:
The abductor was seeking to sexually abuse the child.

To steal a car:
The abductor was stealing a vehicle and abducted a child in the process.

Intimate partner violence: The abduction was an escalation of a pattern of intimate partner abuse. Sometimes the child was abducted by their significant other, and sometimes the child was abducted by the significant other of the parent.

Did not want to return the child:
The abductor had permission to watch the child for a temporary amount of time, refused to return the child, and no other motivation could be discerned.

Unknown:
On occasion there was not enough information in the case narratives to know the motivations for the abduction.

In commission of another crime:
All other cases in which the abductor was committing another crime and abducted a child in the process. This included crimes such as robbery and drug use.

Other:
Cases in which a motivation was determined but the motivation was so rare that patterns could not be determined from it. These included scenarios such as a ransom request or the abductor believing they were protecting the child from their parents, or the child wanting to spend time with their friends and the friends happened to be acquaintances who were young adults.
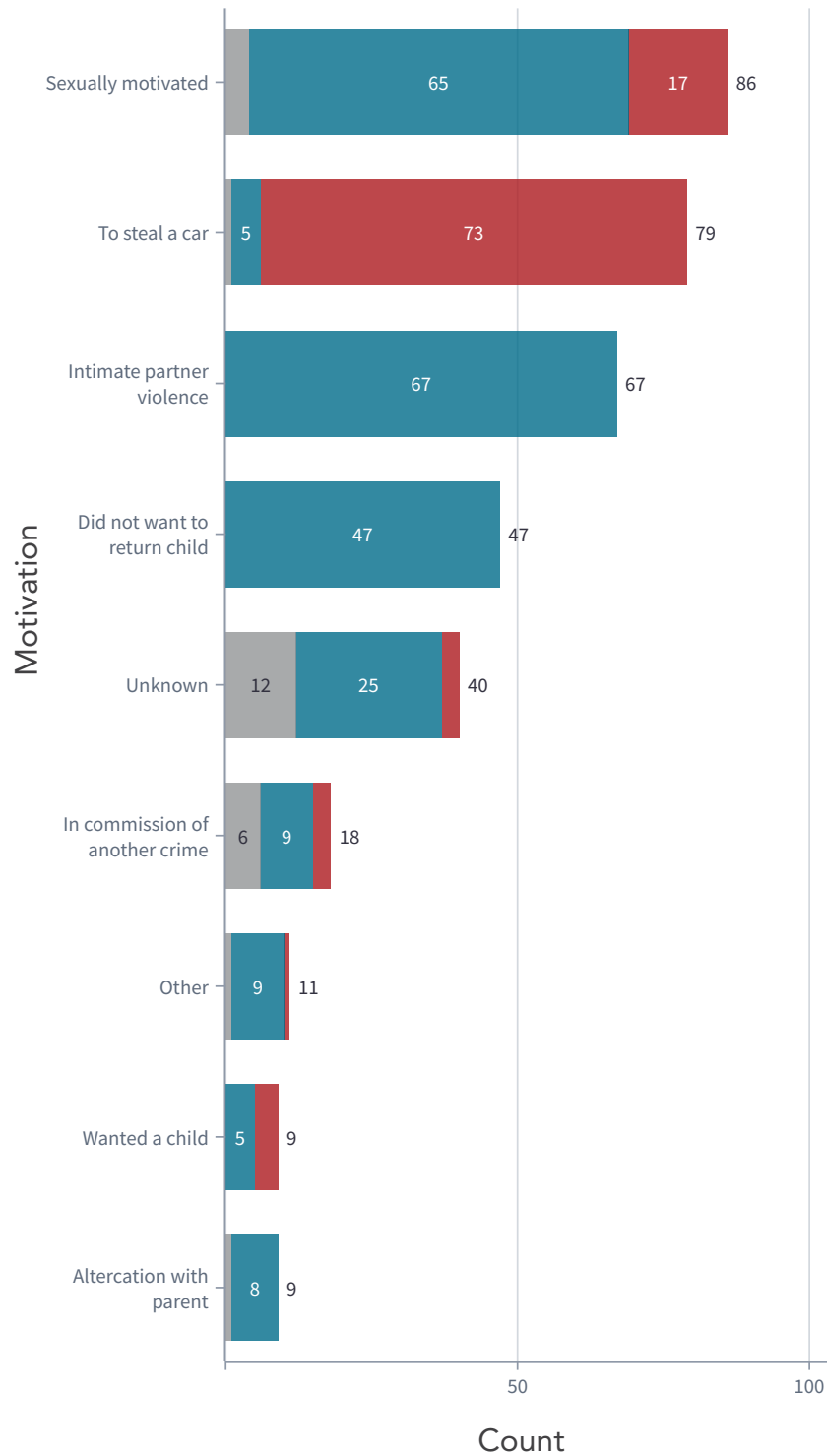
Wanted a child:
The abductor wanted to pretend that the child was their own.

Altercation with parent:
A non-significant other took the child in order to cause distress to the parent.
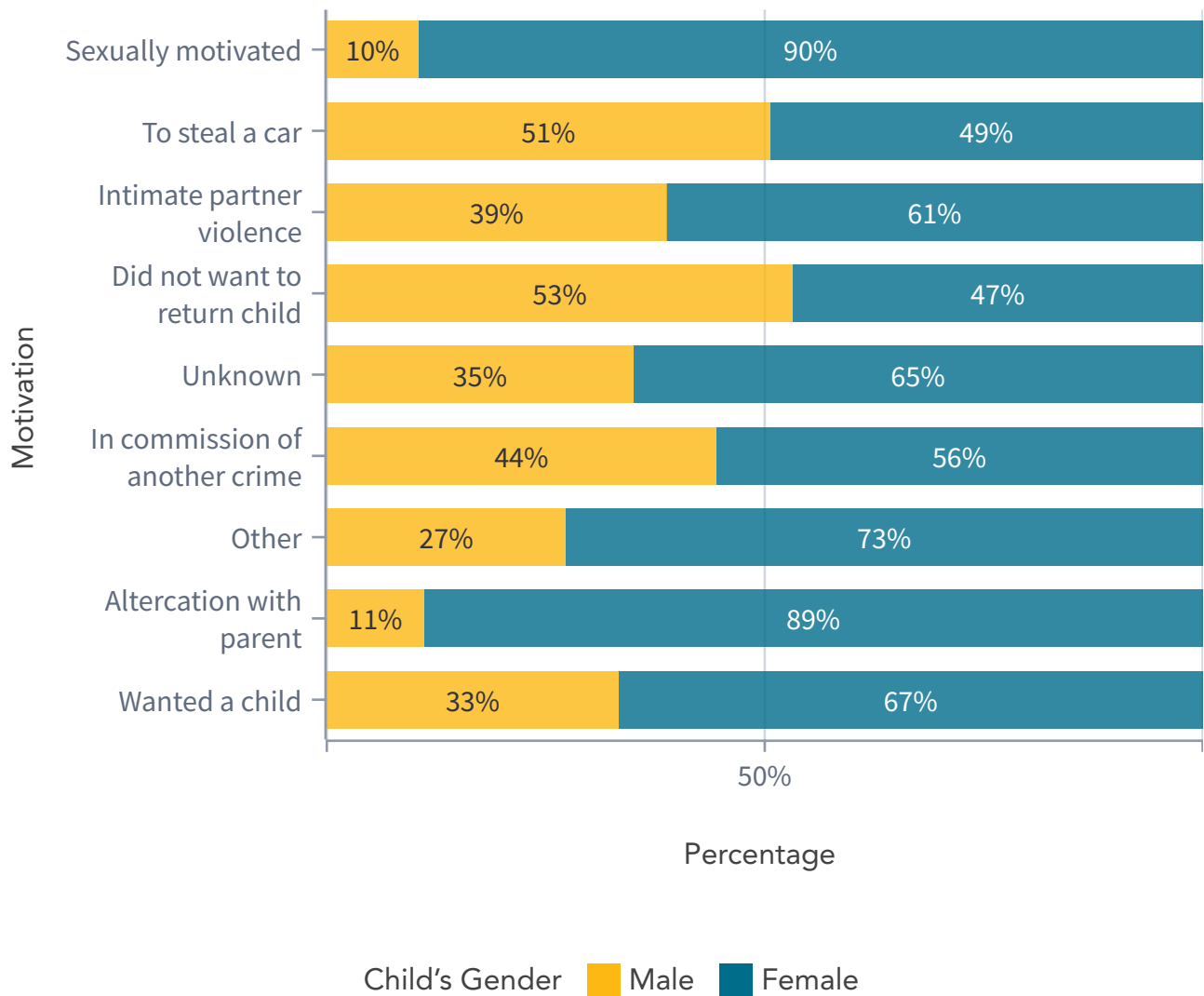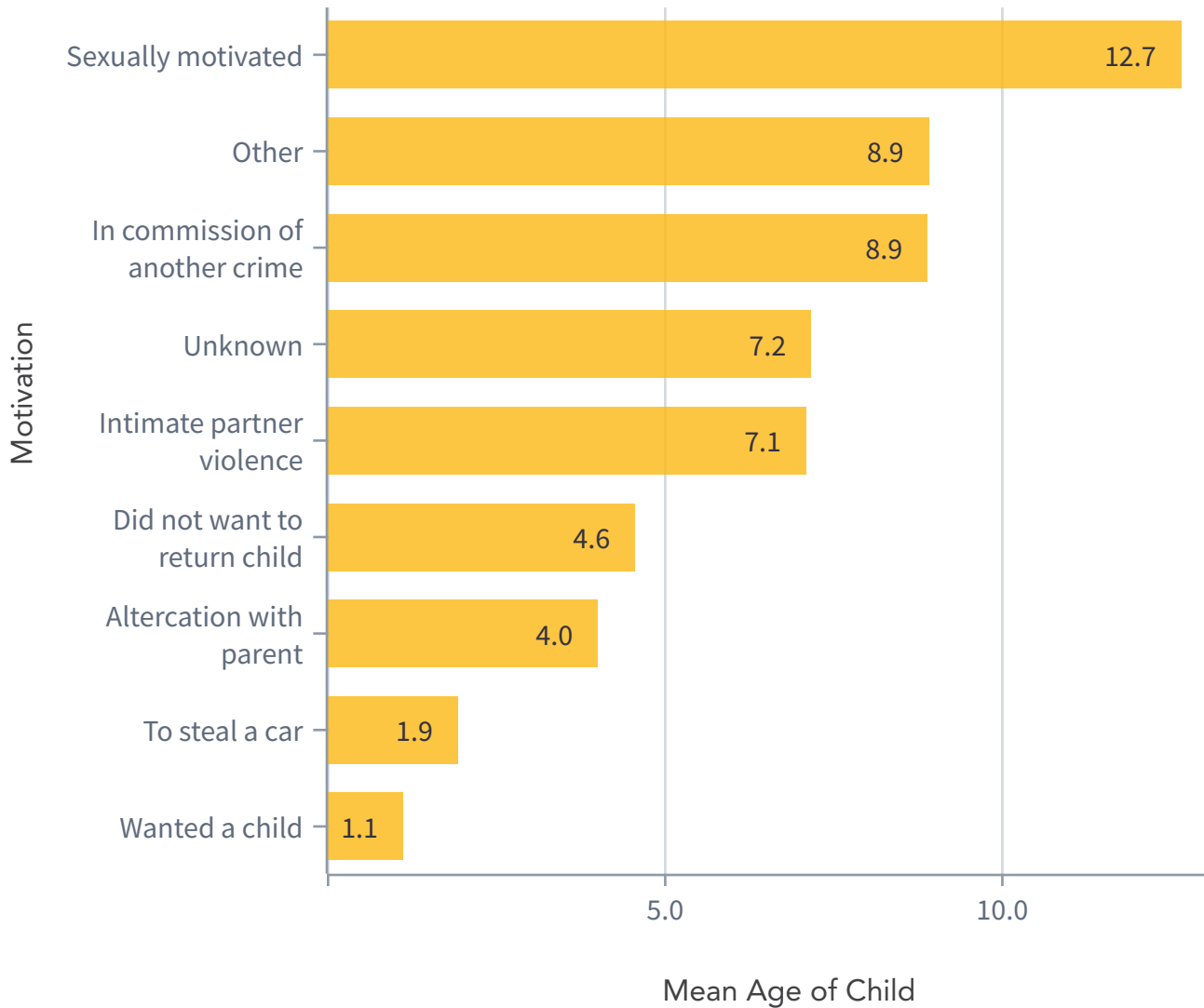
Motivation for Abduction

When another crime was the motivation, it was most often a burglary or robbery (9 cases.) Three cases involved an abductor fleeing from law enforcement while a child was in their car. The other types of crimes occurred two times each: going to buy drugs, gang violence, and altercations over drugs.

Demographics

Motivation for Abduction: Child's Gender

Sexually motivated — 10% | 90%

To steal a car — 51% | 49%

Intimate partner violence — 39% | 61%

Did not want to return child — 53% | 47%

Unknown — 35% | 65%

In commission of another crime — 44% | 56%

Other — 27% | 73%

Altercation with parent — 11% | 89%

Wanted a child — 33% | 67%

Motivation (y-axis)

50%

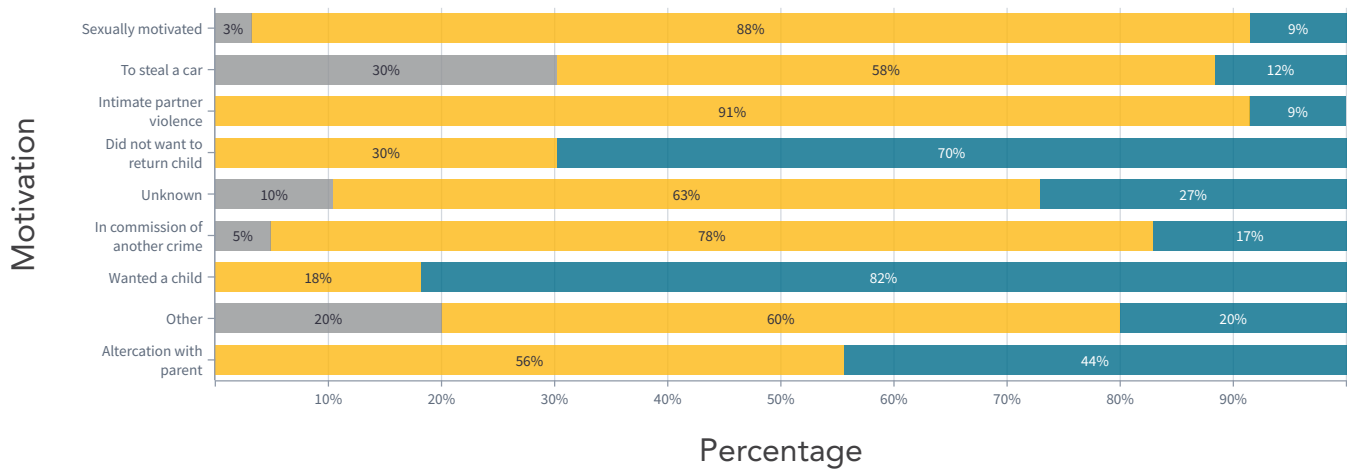Percentage

Child's Gender ▮ Male ▮ Female

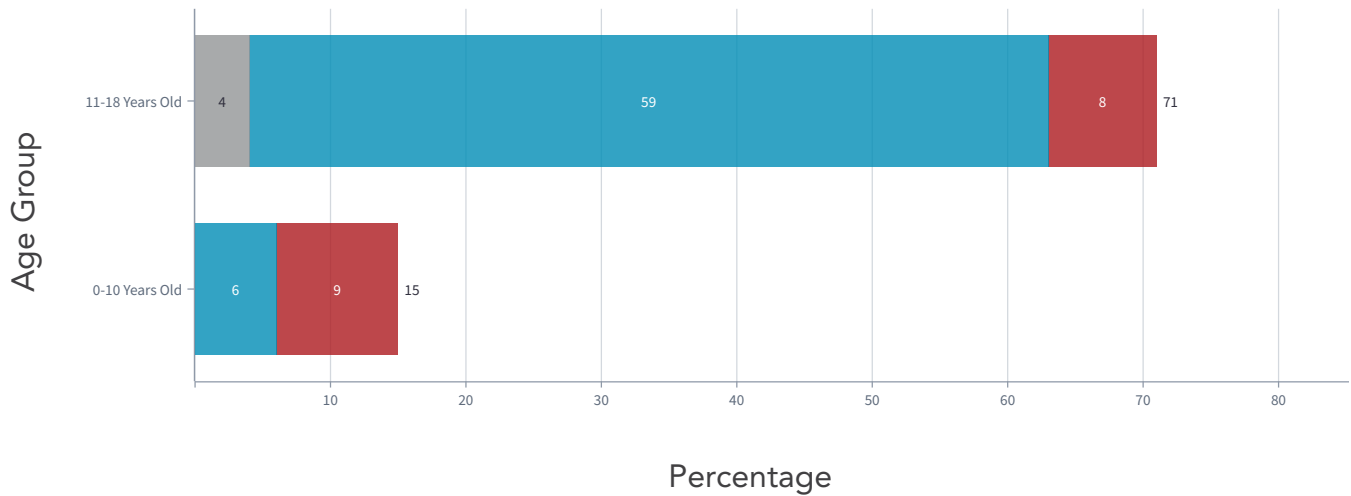## Motivation for Abduction: Mean Age of Child

As stated previously, age had a big impact on the motivation for abductions. For example, abductors appear to have targeted teenagers for sexually motivated abductions, while infants were more likely to be abducted while the abductor was stealing a vehicle.

Abductor's Gender and Motivations

Motivation (y-axis), Percentage (x-axis)

Motivation	Unknown	Male	Female
Sexually motivated	3%	88%	9%
To steal a car	30%	58%	12%
Intimate partner violence		91%	9%
Did not want to return child		30%	70%
Unknown	10%	63%	27%
In commission of another crime	5%	78%	17%
Wanted a child		18%	82%
Other	20%	60%	20%
Altercation with parent		56%	44%

Abductor's Gender ■ Unknown ■ Male ■ Female

Sexually Motivated Abductions

In sexually motivated abductions, strangers were more likely to abduct younger children. Non-strangers were more likely to abduct older children.

Case example:

A 15-year-old White female who was abducted by a family acquaintance while the child was out for a walk. The abductor was able to get the child into his car by claiming he needed help with a family problem. The child was then driven to a house that the abductor owned where she was held captive for a month and repeatedly sexually assaulted by the abductor and two other men. The child was able to escape the first time she was left alone and was able to flag down a pedestrian for help. An AMBER alert was never employed.

Time of Abduction

Sometimes weather appears to have had an impact on the abduction. When taken as a whole, there was a near even split for abductions occurring in spring, summer, and fall (abductions in winter were much less common.) Indeed, weather seemed to have little impact on sexually motivated crimes. However, carjackings that turned into abductions were much more common in autumn and spring, which are seasons with mild weather. Likewise children were more likely to be abducted by caretakers during the summer, when they would be out of school.
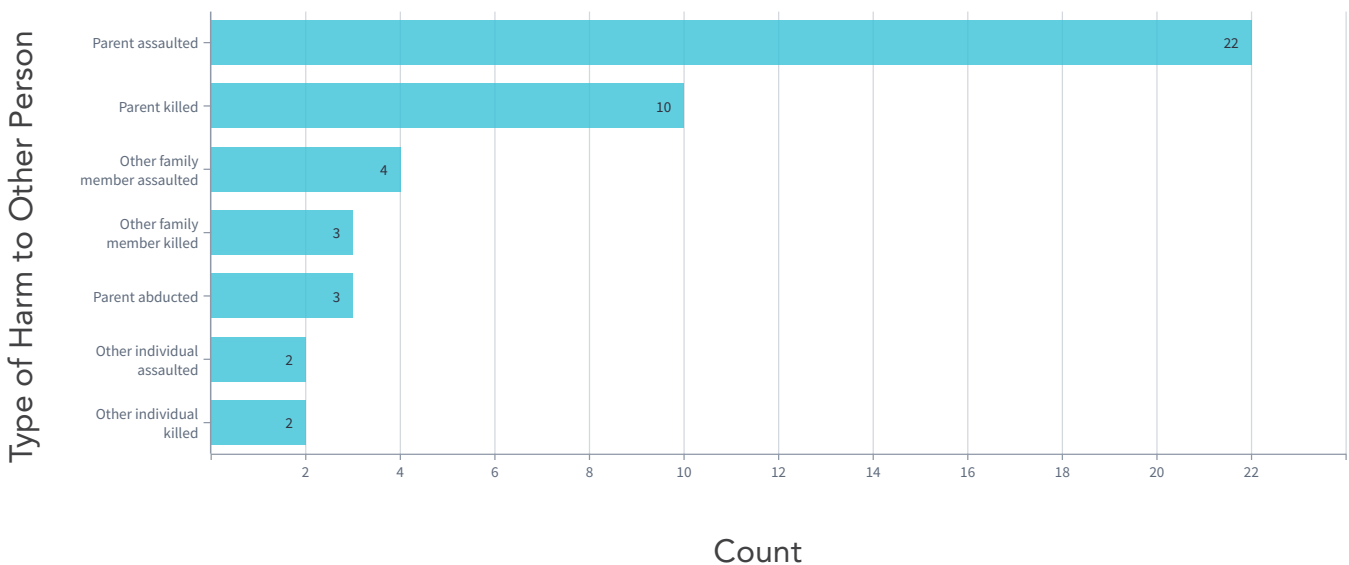
**Abduction Season and Motivation**
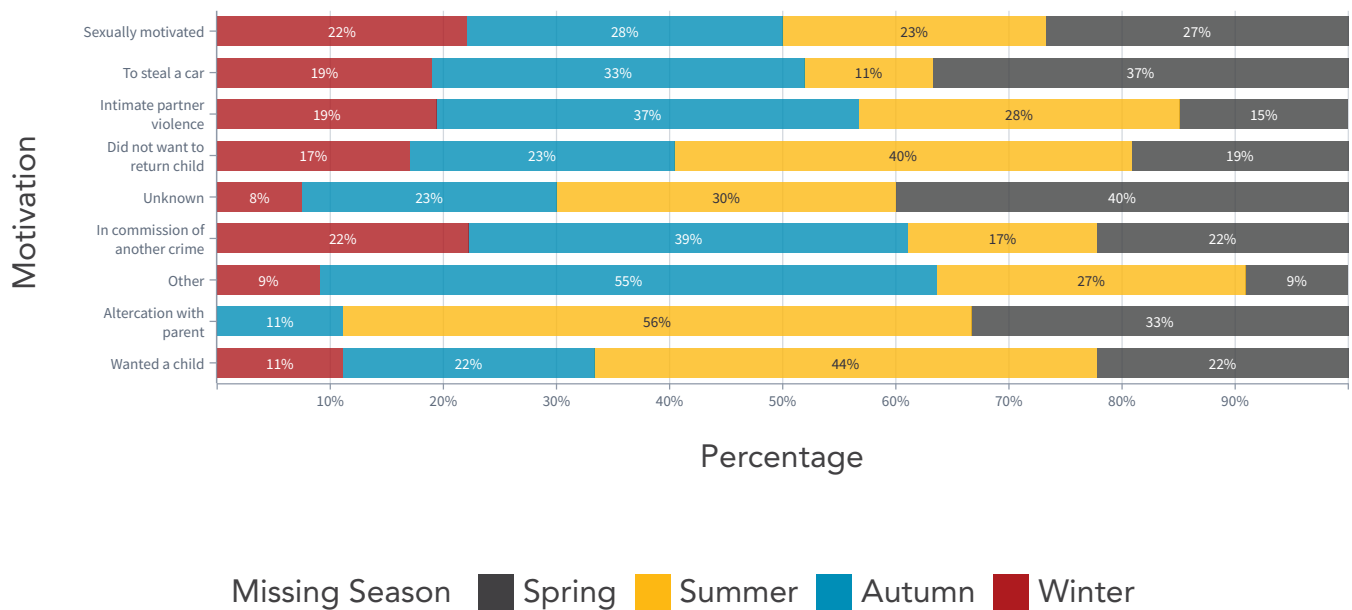
Harm to Others

Abducted children were not the only ones being harmed during nonfamily abductions. Family members, friends, and bystanders could also be harmed.

Who Was Harmed During the Abduction?

In 13% of all cases someone other than the child was harmed during the abduction. Harm to bystanders was most common in abductions where intimate partner violence was the motivation (37%), followed by altercations with the parents (33%), and the abductor wanting to raise the child (33%).

Intimate Partner Violence: Child's Relationship to Abductor
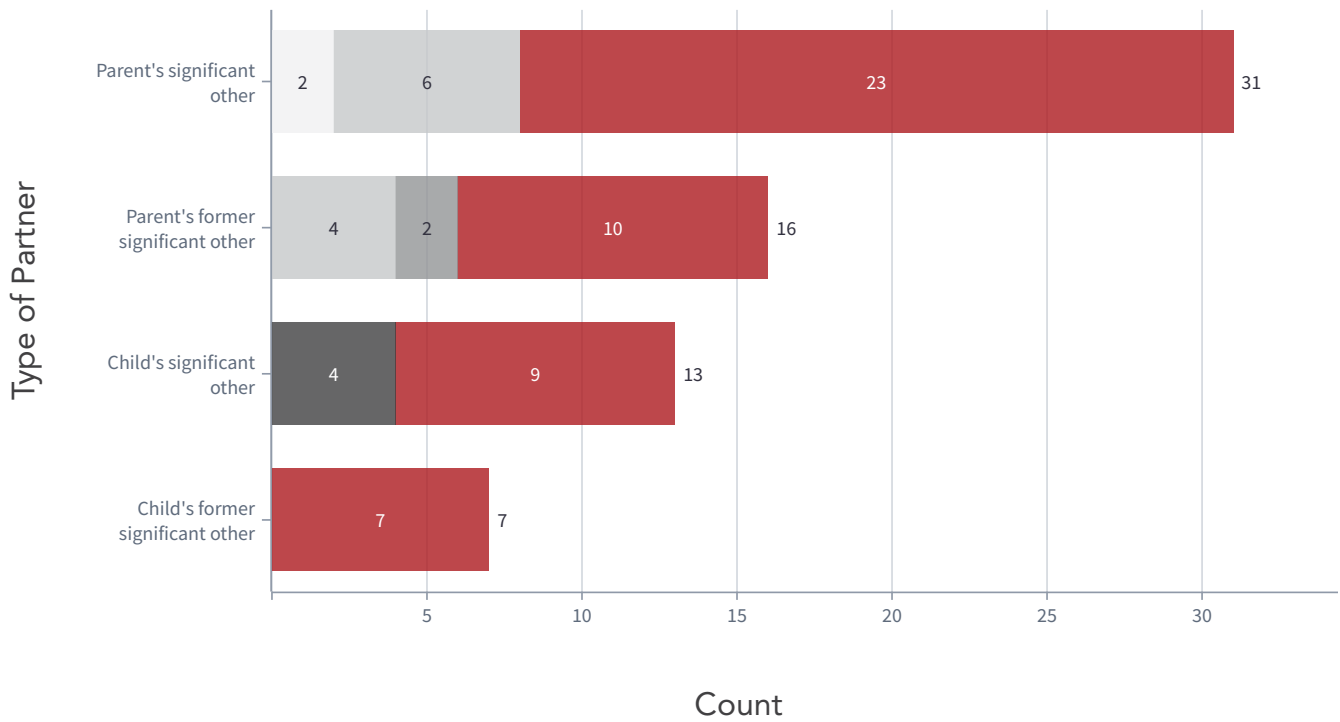
Method of abduction
- Forceful abduction
- Abductor groomed the child
- Openly absconded
- Sneaked away with child
- Unknown

Non-stranger abductors can still cause harm to the child and to bystanders, and abductions that are part of a pattern of intimate partner violence are a striking illustration of this. Regardless of the abductor's relationship to the child, the abductor used force a majority of the time.

Case example:

Two Hispanic male children who were 3-years-old and 4-years-old and were abducted by their mother's boyfriend. After becoming intoxicated, the abductor physically assaulted the children's mother before abducting the children. An AMBER Alert was issued and the children were recovered one day later due to police investigation.

Abduction Outcomes

The vast majority of nonfamily abductions resulted in recovery of the child. However, as with other aspects of this case type the child's physical condition varied at recovery, as well as the methods used to recover them.

Recovery Circumstances

Nearly all children were recovered (97%). At the time of analysis only 10 cases remained active.
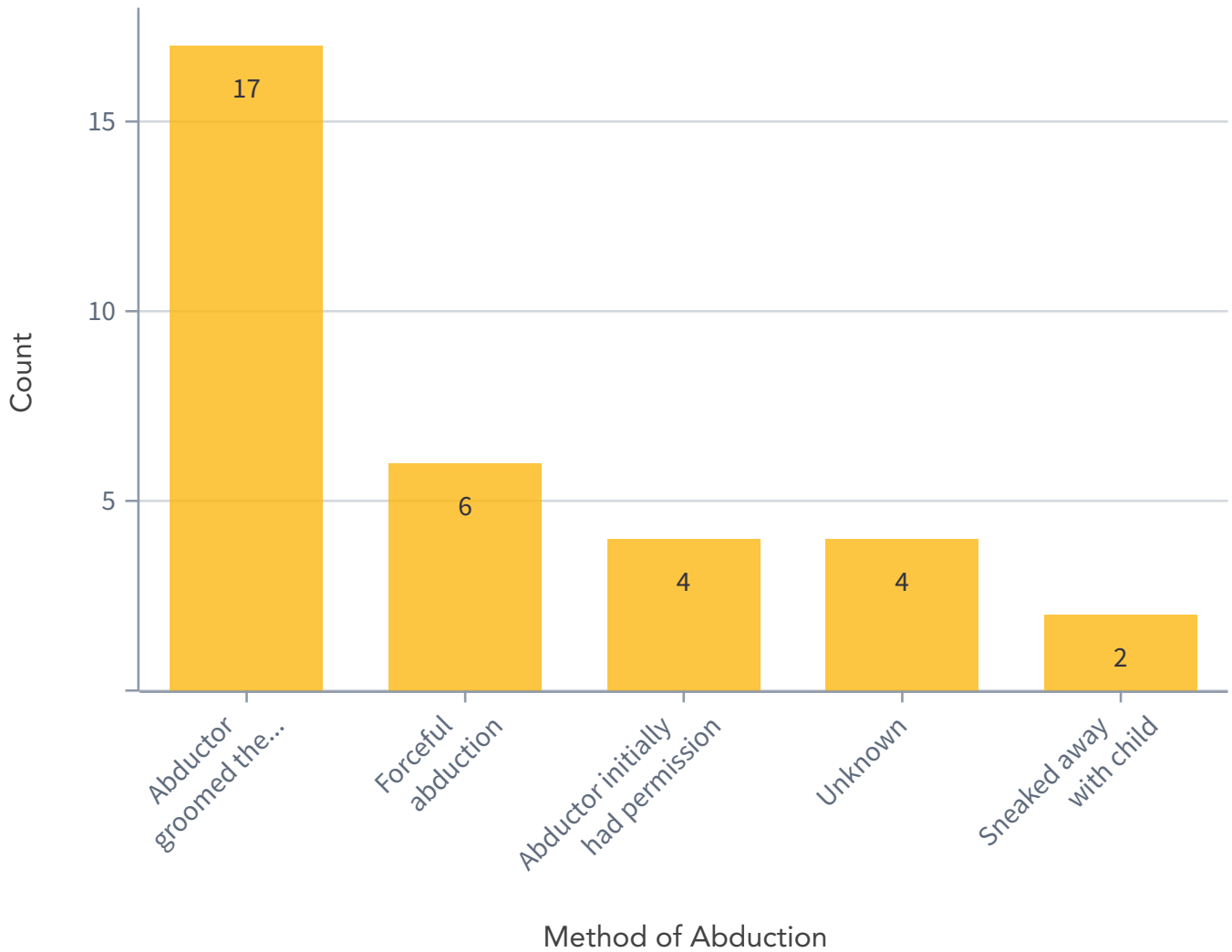
Furthermore, a vast majority recovered were alive (95%) and in good condition (79%). However, some children were sexually assaulted during the abduction (9%), and a minority were recovered deceased (5%).
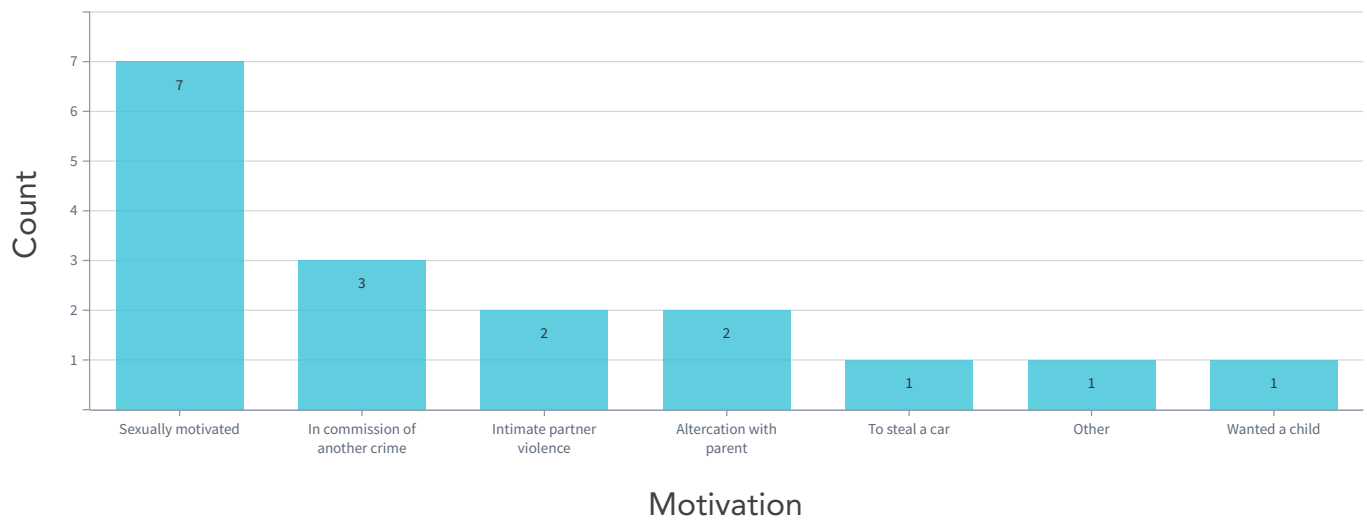
Recovery Location
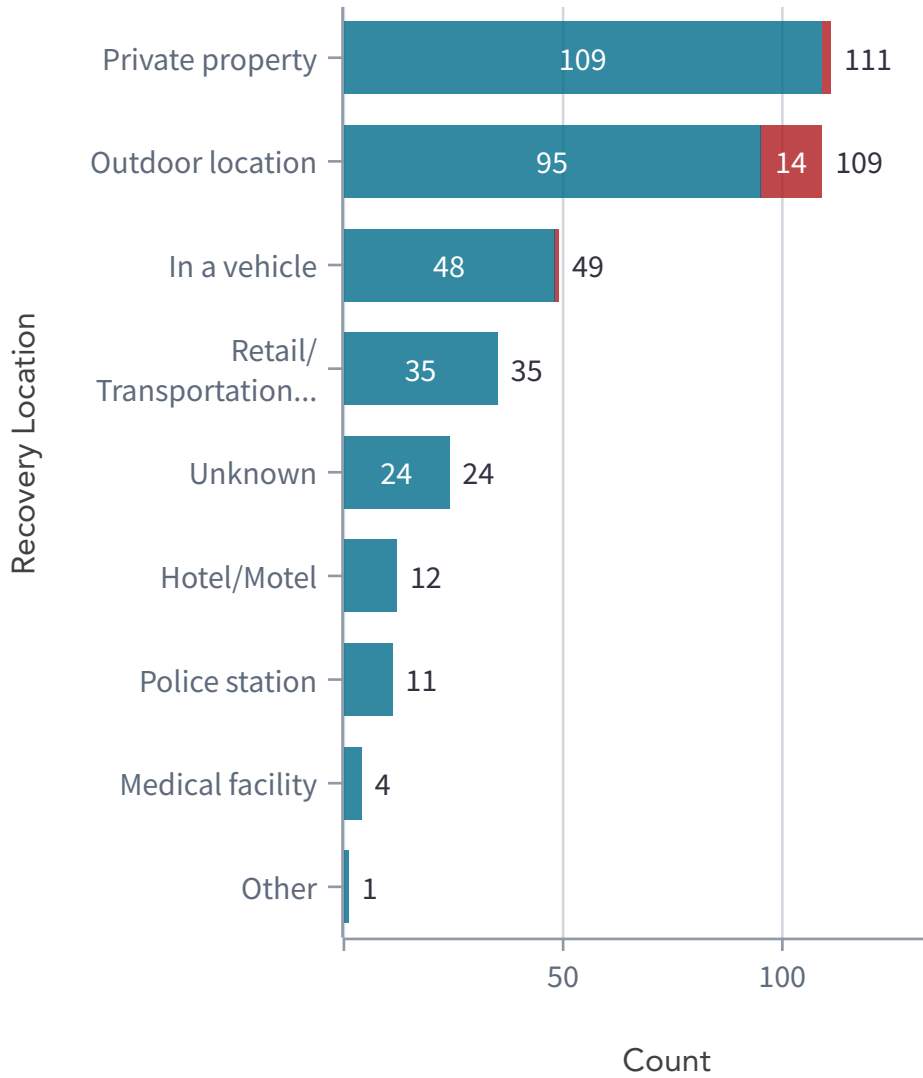
Sexual Assault and Method of Abduction

Children could still be harmed even if they seemingly left willingly after being groomed by the abductor. Over a quarter (28%) of the children abducted in these cases were sexually assaulted during the abduction.
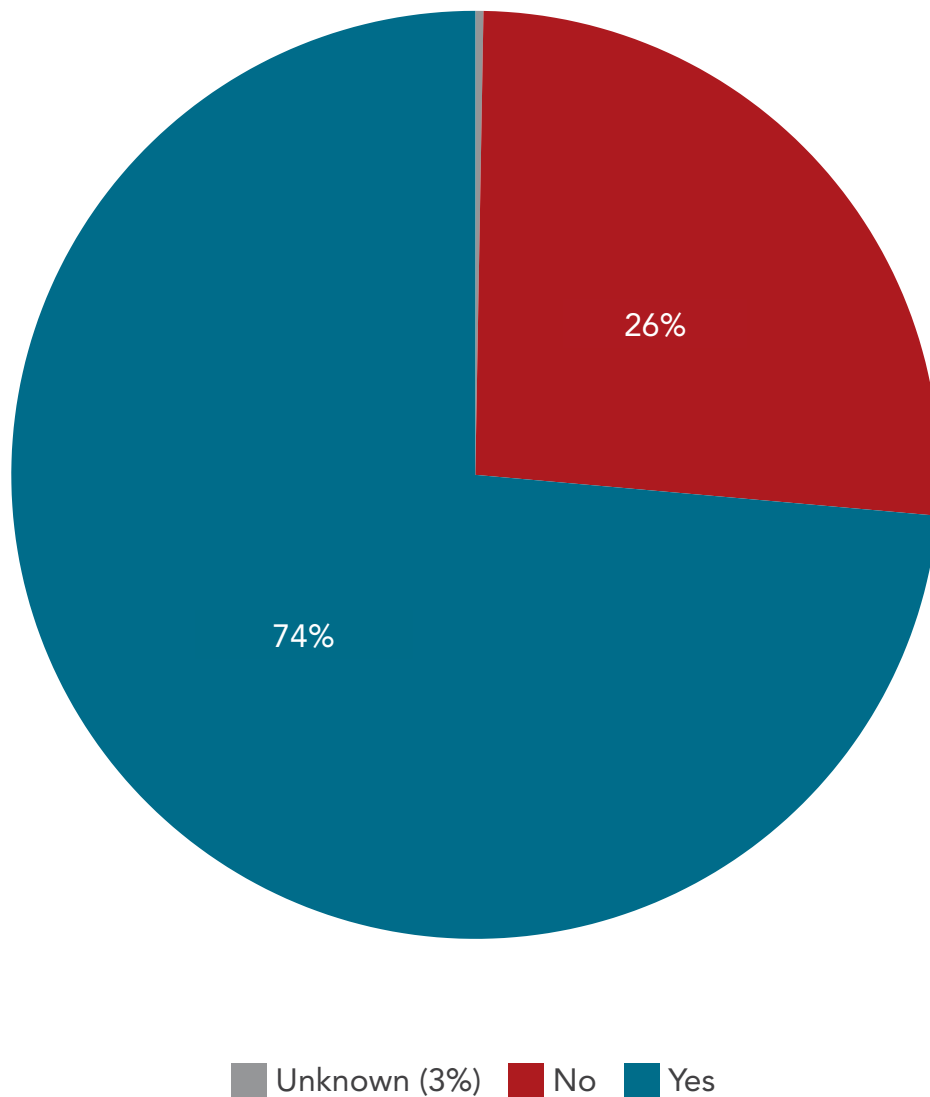
# Deceased Children by Motivation for Abduction

Missing Duration

Children were typically recovered after a short window of time. These cases had a mean missing duration of 3 days and a median missing duration of 1 day.

Was the Child Recovered in 48 Hours?

26%

74%

Unknown (3%) No Yes

Children were least likely to be recovered in 48 hours in sexually motivated cases (51%). Meanwhile, children were recovered within 48 hours in 100% of all cases in which the abductor was motivated by stealing a car.

Motivation and Mean Days Missing
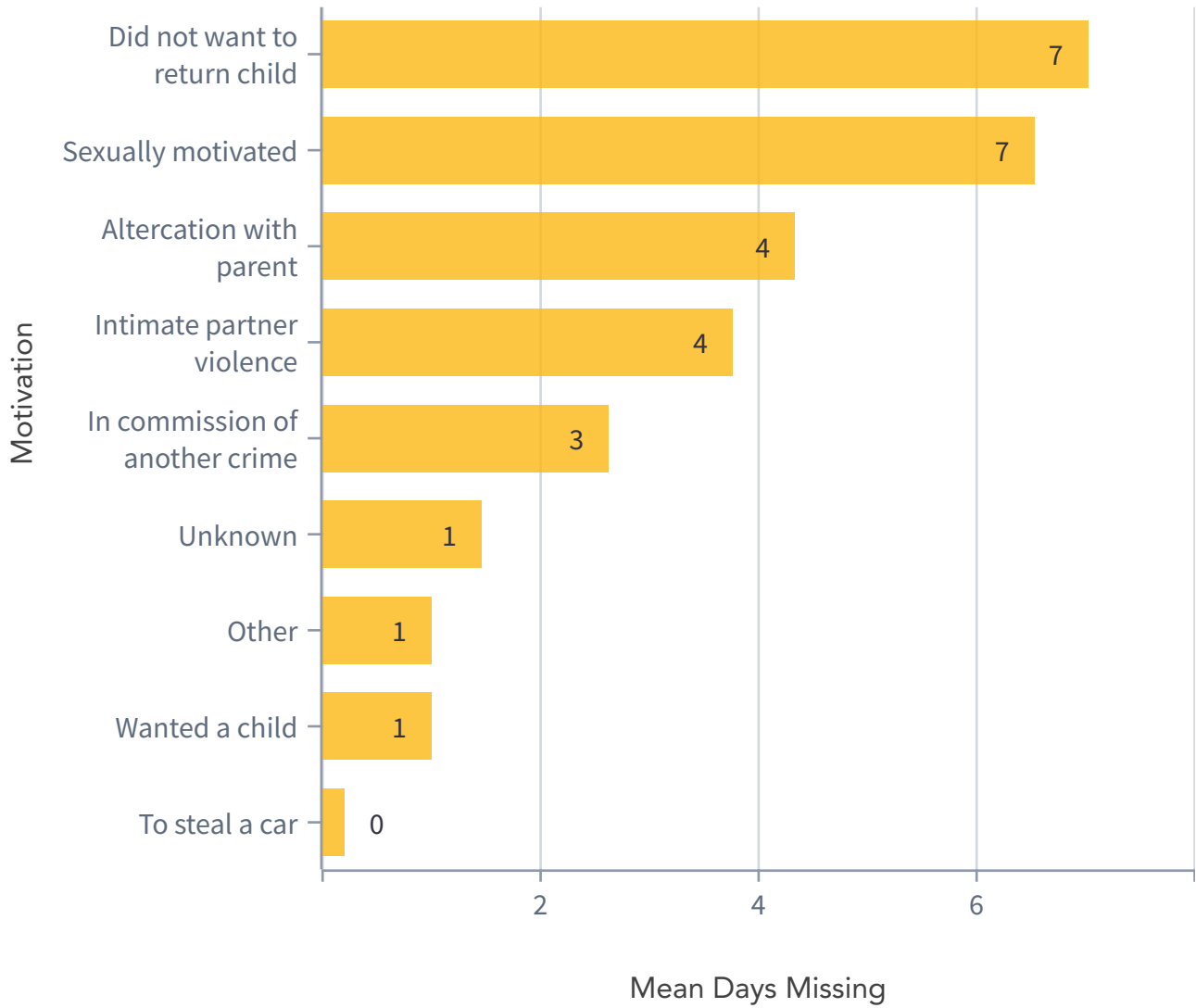
Outliers have been filtered out of this data set.

Case example:

A 3-year-old White male who was abducted by a family acquaintance. The abductor took the child after coming over and seeing that the mother passed out on drugs. When the mother was lucid again, she contacted law enforcement because the child was no longer in the house. After seeing the child's missing poster on social media, the abductor returned the child after less than a day.

Distance

A majority (57%) of recovered children were recovered within 20 miles of their missing location. However, there was a great deal of variation in distance based on the motivation for the abduction. For example, 87% of children abducted during a car theft were recovered within 20 miles of their abduction location. Meanwhile, only 28% of children abducted in sexually motivated abductions were recovered within 20 miles of their abduction location.
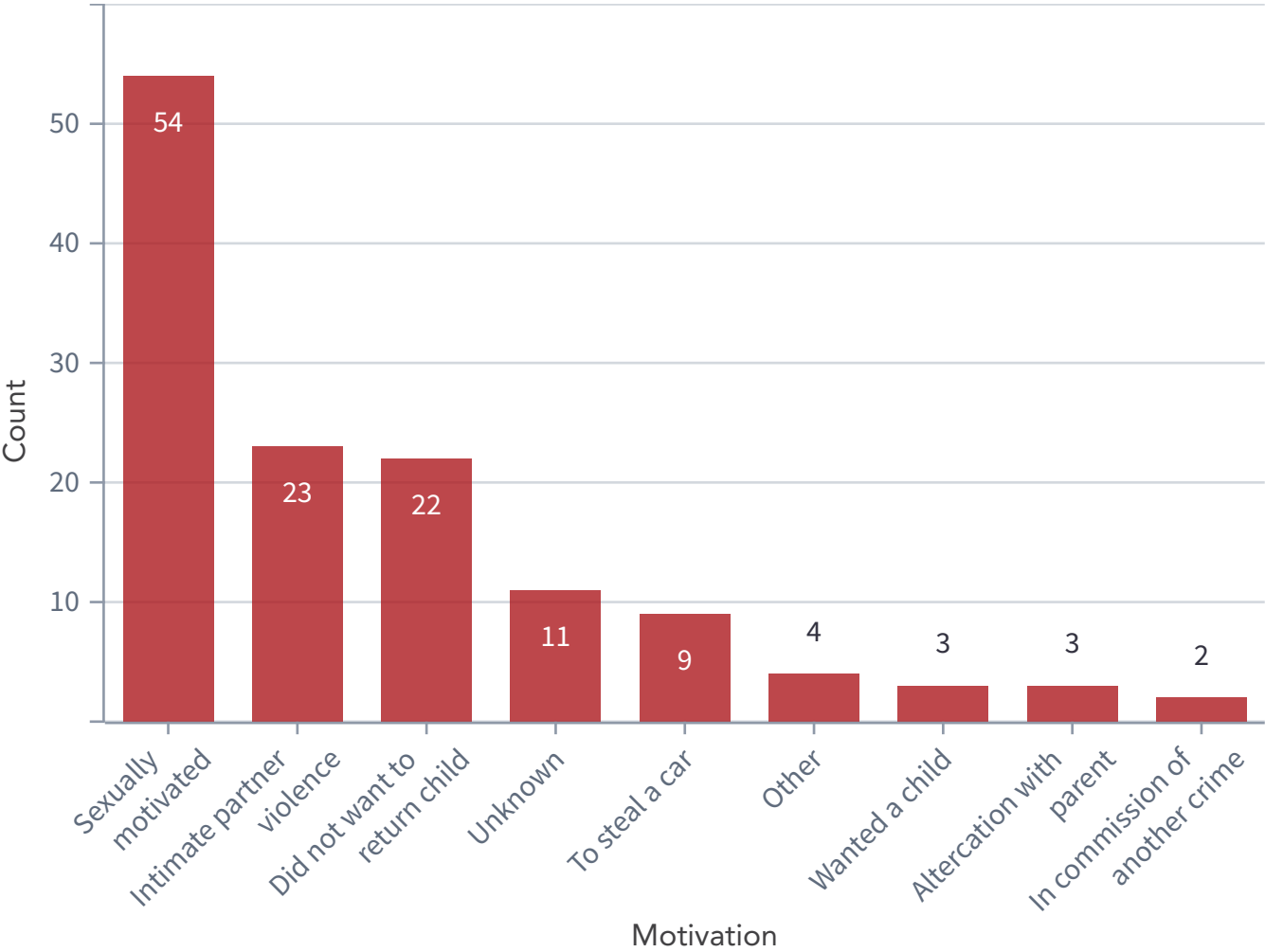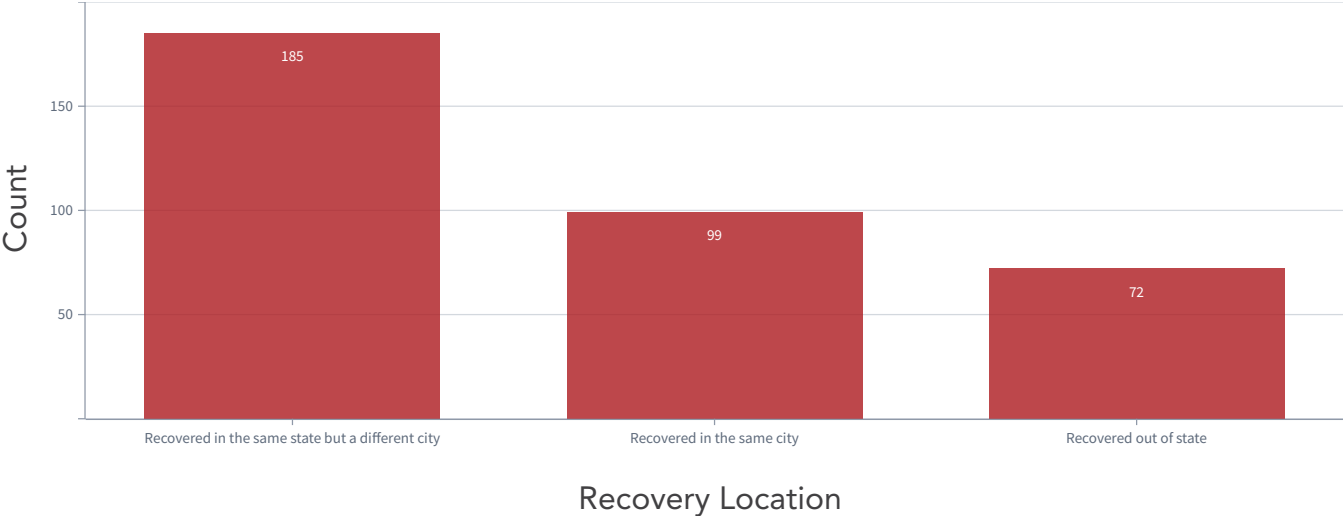
Missing Distance
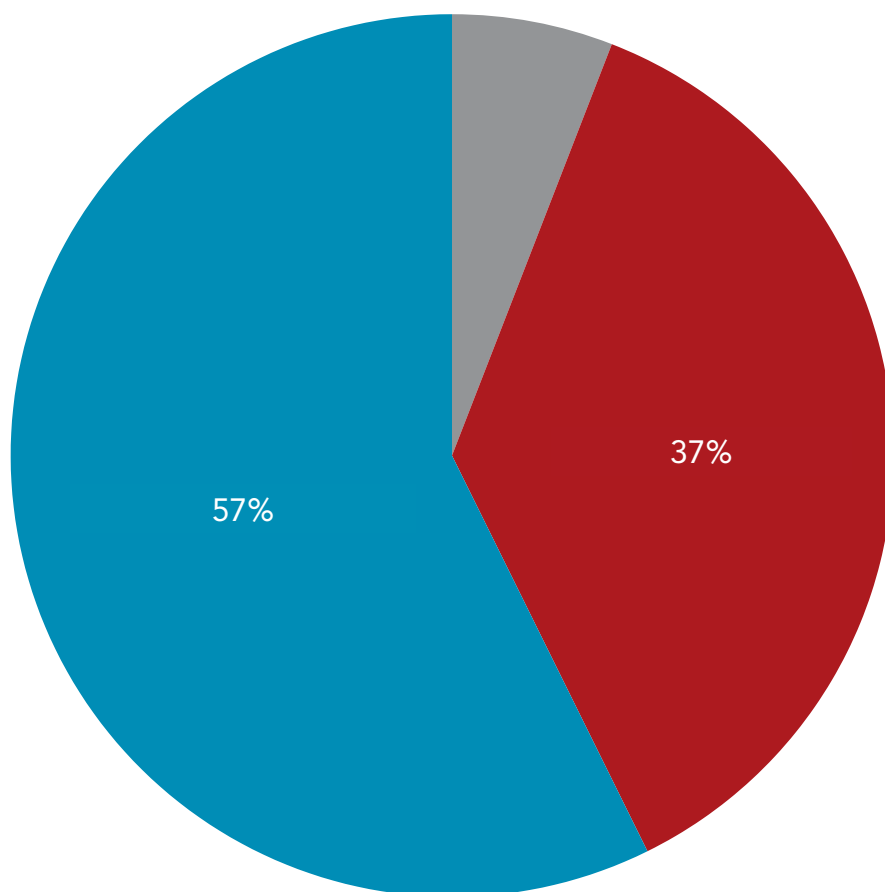
Distance

◼ Unknown   ◼ Over 20   ◼ Under 20 miles

This only accounts for the distance between missing and recovery locations. It does not account for any locations the child might have been taken during the abduction.

Children Recovered Over 20 Miles from Missing Location
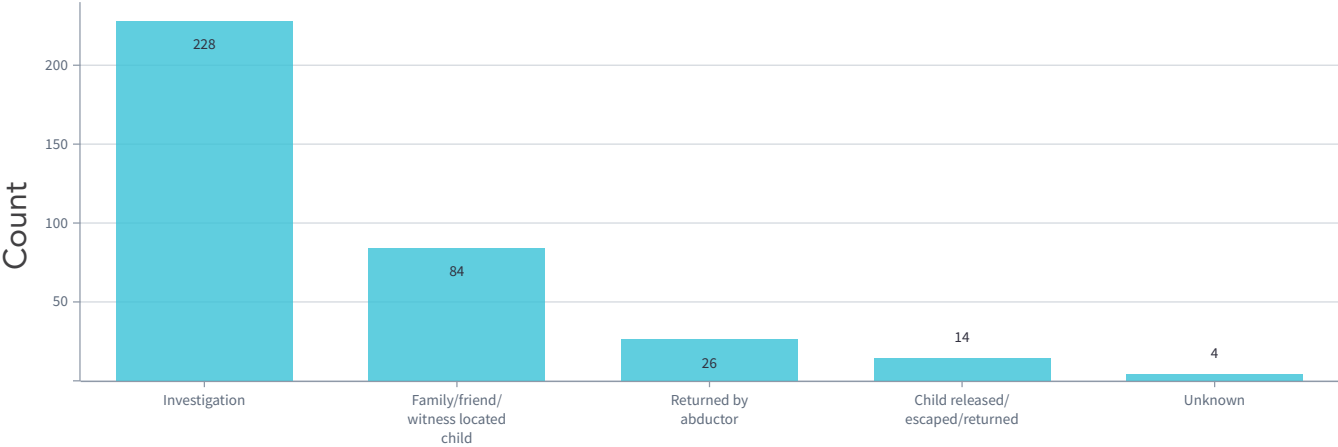
Where was the Child Recovered?

Bar chart titled "Where was the Child Recovered?" showing Count by Recovery Location:
- Recovered in the same state but a different city: 185
- Recovered in the same city: 99
- Recovered out of state: 72
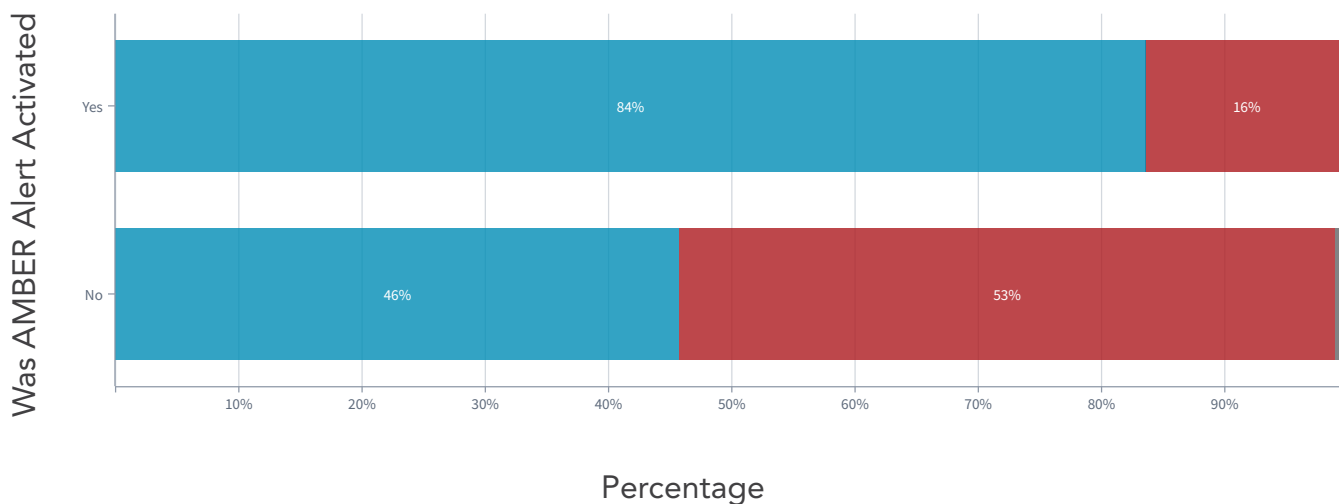
Investigation of the Abduction

How was the Child Recovered?

How was the Child Recovered?

'Investigation' is an umbrella term for when outside sources and experts were involved in the recovery of the child.

AMBER Alert Activation and Missing Duration

Was the Child Recovered in 48 Hours?

■ Yes ■ No ■ Unknown

An AMBER Alert was activated for 72% of these cases.

Conclusion

This analysis seeks to shed light on the diverse array of motivations and outcomes that can occur during this case type. Nonfamily abductions are a rare occurrence, and most children abducted in them are recovered alive. However, despite the diverse array of circumstances and motivations involved, the data set clearly indicates that many of the children abducted in these cases are often subjected to very traumatic situations. Some of these children were sexually abused by internet acquaintances, while other children were held against their will by significant others. Some very young children were abducted by abusive individuals to cause distress to the child's parents, while other very young children were subject to total strangers driving away with them. Circumstances could still be very dangerous even when the abductor just wanted to raise the child. Those cases could also involve violence towards the parent and to the child. Furthermore, abductors ranged from total strangers to well-regarded family friends. Although this is a rare case type, it can also have severe consequences and the abduction circumstances can take many forms.

Disclaimers:

The information provided in this report does not reflect all cases of missing or abducted children, only those reported to NCMEC. As the national clearinghouse for missing and exploited children, NCMEC will assist in any missing-child case at the request of law enforcement.

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