

# A 10-Year Analysis of Attempted Abductions and Related Incidents

The following analyses were conducted on a decade of incidents committed by individuals unknown to the children (Jan. 1, 2005-Dec. 31, 2014). These incidents, which were known to NCMEC and confirmed by law enforcement, consisted of a variety of offender and child interactions, including verbal and non-verbal communication, physical contact (sexual or otherwise), and/or short-term/distance abduction and escapes/releases. More specifically, these incidents included short-term abductions with or without a known sexual assault component, sexual assault without abduction, attempted abductions, indecent exposures and suspicious incidents. For the purposes of these analyses, incidents were only included if the child was not reported missing to law enforcement at the time of the incident and if they occurred solely in person; the online enticement of a child was not included.

Overall, the findings were based on 9,872 children and 9,027 offenders involved in 8,015 unique incidents, most of which lasted minutes or, at most, a few hours. Among these incidents, important patterns emerged regarding the event types, incident timing and location, offenders' methods and how children got away.

## Highlighted Trends

- Regardless of children's age, attempted abductions were the most common event type. However, the older the children, the more likely they were to experience events with a sexual component. ([See pg 3](#))
- Attempted abductions happen more often when a child is going to and from school or school-related activities. Risk was greatest for school-age children on school days before (7-9am) and after school (3-4pm) and again after dinner time (6-7pm). ([See pg 3](#))
- Incidents most frequently occurred on the street while children were playing, riding a bike/scooter or walking. While the youngest children were more likely to be playing or walking with a parent/adult, school-age children were more likely to be walking alone or with peers to/from school, their bus stop or residence on school days and to a variety of other places on non-school days. ([See pg 4](#))
- Overall, hands-on force was the most common specific method that offenders used against children. However, offenders primarily used forceful methods against the youngest and oldest children while verbal ploys were the primary approach used against elementary and middle school-age children. ([See pg 5](#))
- Children got away from offenders in a variety of ways, including ignoring or refusing them, using their cell phones to threaten intervention, fighting, screaming/making noise, child or adult intervention and, ultimately, by the offender or child leaving the area or the child being voluntarily released. Of these ways, screaming/making noise was the only child behavior that increased the likelihood of an offender's arrest because it specifically increased the chances of adult intervention. ([See pg 6](#))

## Child and offender information



### CHILDREN

Of the 9,872 children:

- 67 percent were female and 21 percent were male (for 12 percent of children, gender was unknown).
- Overall, children had an average age of 11 yrs old, although male children had a significantly younger average age (10yrs) compared to female children (12yrs).
- The vast majority of children were of school-age (70 percent) - either elementary (6-10yrs) middle (11-13yrs) or high school-age (14-18yrs). Only six percent of children were before school age (0-5yrs) (For 24 percent of children, age was unknown).

### OFFENDERS

Of the 9,027 offenders:

- 96 percent were male and three percent were female (for one percent of offenders, gender was unknown).
- Offenders ranged widely in age from nine to 94 years old with an average age of approximately 36 years old, although offenders with unknown ages were estimated to be significantly younger (35yrs), on average, than the offenders with known ages (38yrs).
- Overall, children were most commonly victimized by male offenders working alone (87 percent), followed very distantly by male offenders working in same-sex pairs (seven percent). When male offenders were involved in incidents, whether alone or in pairs, older children were more often targeted compared to children that were before school age.
- In contrast, when female offenders were involved in incidents, they were more likely to victimize younger children. More specifically, when incidents involved the youngest children, such as infants and toddlers, female offenders were more likely to work alone, and when they involved elementary school-age children, female offenders were equally likely to work alone or with a male partner.

## What happened

Children were most commonly victimized by attempted abductions (67 percent), followed distantly by short-term abductions with or without a known sexual assault component, sexual assault without abduction, indecent exposures and suspicious incidents. In combination, approximately one in seven children were victims of a successful short-term abduction and/or sexual assault. However, the likelihood of experiencing event types changed as children aged. While younger children were more likely to experience incidents that did not include a sexual component, such as short-term abductions without sexual assault, older children were more likely to experience incidents with a sexual component, such as indecent exposures and sexual assault with or without abduction.

For example, the rate of sexual assault almost doubled between the youngest and oldest children, from 11 percent of children that were before school age to 19 percent of high school-age children. Similarly, indecent exposures also increased, with five percent of children before school-age having experienced an indecent exposure compared to eight percent of high school-age children. In contrast, the rate of events without a sexual component, such as short-term abductions without sexual assault, declined from 13 percent to four percent between these same age groups.

The one exception to this pattern was in regard to attempted abductions, which did not reveal a steady increase or decrease over time. Instead, attempted abductions were least common among the youngest (67 percent) and oldest children (64 percent), and peaked for elementary (74 percent) and middle school-age children (73 percent). The increased attempts seen among these young children and pre-teens may be explained by the combination of increased independence children gain from their parents/guardians during the school years as well as the perceived vulnerability of these children who may be viewed by offenders as more easily manipulated or physically handled compared to the oldest children.

## When these incidents occurred

More than any other aspect of children's lives, "school" emerged as one of the most influential factors in the timing of these incidents, with the vast majority occurring on school days (70 percent) compared to non-school days, such as weekends or summer break. Not only were there significant changes as younger children transitioned into attending school, which involved increased independence and a more predictable schedule throughout the year, there were also important differences between school days and non-school days for children already attending school.

### BEFORE SCHOOL AGE

For children that were before school age, their patterns of risk were relatively consistent. While there was a slight increase in incidents on school days (58 percent) compared to non-school days (42 percent), incident timing was more stable. Regardless of day, these young children were generally at greater risk later in the day, increasing around 11am and remaining consistent until around dinner time.

### SCHOOL-AGE

In contrast, school-age children were at greatest risk on school days (71 percent) compared to non-school days (29 percent). On school days, incidents most commonly occurred before school (7-9am), after school (3-4pm) and then again after dinner time (6-7pm). However, on non-school days, this pattern differed and was more similar to that of non-school age children, with a continued increase in risk over the course of the day, beginning around 10am and decreasing around 8-10pm, depending on the age of the school-age child.

## Where these incidents occurred

Regardless of child age, the street was by far the most common incident location, although the activities and destinations varied by child age. For the youngest children, they were more likely to be playing or walking with/being carried by a parent/adult. In contrast, school-age children were more likely to be walking alone or with peers going to/from school, the bus stop or their residence on school days, and to a variety of places on non-school days, such as their residence, friends' residences, extracurricular activities or just leisurely walking. Furthermore, incidents sometimes included a secondary location, such as if the child was abducted from one location and assaulted in another.



In addition to the street (62 percent), incidents also occurred outside in the immediate vicinity of children's residences while they were playing, hanging out or doing chores (seven percent), at their bus stop (five percent), at a park or playground (five percent), outside in the immediate vicinity of their school while they were playing or waiting for the bus or a ride (four percent), inside their residences (three percent), in a parking lot/garage (two percent) and in goods/clothing stores (two percent). Less commonly indicated locations included daycare facilities, libraries, grocery stores, public pools, fairs/festivals, parades, bathrooms/changing rooms, campgrounds, medical centers and hotels/motels.



More than any other age group, infants and toddlers were most likely to be inside their residence or at a medical center at the time of the incident. For example, 17 percent of children under two years old were in their residence at the time of the incident compared to 22 percent of children under one year old. Similarly, 12 percent of children under two years old were in a medical center at the time of the incident compared to 20 percent of children under one year old.



The younger the child, the more likely they were to be at their residence, inside or outside, at the time of the incident. While approximately one in 10 school-age children were at their residence at the time of the incident, approximately one in three children before school-age were at their residence at the time of the incident.



The older the child, the more likely they were to be walking or jogging in a secluded area (e.g. trail, woods) and, for the oldest children that were of driving age, in vehicle-related locations, such as parking lots or garages, in a vehicle and at gas stations.



In addition to the original locations of the incidents, sometimes secondary locations were involved, as often occurred during short-term abductions with sexual assault. Of the children who were victimized by this event type, secondary locations most commonly included: (1) a secluded outdoor area (e.g. alleys/behind stores, cemeteries, parking lots/garages, woods/bushes, park/playground, etc.); (2) a secluded indoor area not belonging to the offender (e.g. vacant buildings, bathrooms/changing rooms) or; (3) in or on the offender's property (e.g. offender's vehicle, residence, place of business, hotel/motel).

## Offenders' methods

Offenders used a variety of methods against children, ranging from manipulative verbal ploys, such as requests, offers, questions or demands, to the use of overt forceful approaches, such as the use of force, weapons, breaking and entering and threats of violence. They also used these methods in a variety of ways, either alone or in combination. While 49 percent of children had one method used against them, 33 percent had multiple methods used against them; some with as many as 5+ methods used against them in one incident (For 18 percent of children, either no methods were used or it could not be determined). Whether alone or in combination, there appears to be an important differentiation between hands-on versus hands-off methods, given that it was more common for offenders to strictly use verbal ploys only (25 percent) or forceful methods only (25 percent) against a given child than it was for offenders to use a combination of both (16 percent).

While the majority of these verbal and forceful methods were used to some degree across child age, important patterns emerged in the likelihood of certain methods or the ways in which they were used against younger and older children. Across child age, force was the top method used against children (34 percent). However, it was most commonly used against the youngest children that were before school age (and nearby parents/adults) (57 percent) and the oldest children that were in high school (50 percent). In contrast, there was an important shift that occurred between the youngest and oldest children, when manipulative verbal methods became the predominant approach against elementary and middle school-age children. By middle school, however, there was some indication of the increasing use of forceful methods that were primarily used against high school-age children.

For the youngest children that were **before school age**, in addition to force, other common offender methods included directing or demanding the child to come with them (13 percent); engaging in conversation with the child or their parent (eight percent); impersonating someone, such as a trusted family friend/acquaintance, medical professional/patient, social worker or police officer and; (seven percent) breaking and entering into their residence, most commonly at night between 6pm-6am (six percent).

Similar to the youngest children, offenders commonly tried to engage **elementary school-age** children in conversation (10 percent) or make directives and demands for them to come with them or get in their vehicle (25 percent). However, new verbal ploys emerged, such as offering a ride (11 percent); offering food, candy or drinks (10 percent) and; asking children to help locate or see something/someone, often an animal or their own child (six percent). In addition, less common methods included attempted force; offering gifts/toys; offering to play with them/join in a game; asking to bring them somewhere fun and; impersonating someone, such as a police officer, a trusted family friend/acquaintance sent to pick them up or a maintenance person requesting to enter their home.

Through **middle school-age**, offenders continued to use verbal ploys most often, such as offering children a ride (16 percent); engaging in conversation (14 percent) making directives and demands for them to come with them or get in their vehicle (28 percent) and, as children got older, increasingly stopping and asking them for directions (two percent). However, forceful methods were becoming more common again as children got older. In addition to actually using force (31 percent), offenders also attempted to use force (five percent) and made threats of physical and sexual violence (three percent) against middle school-age children.

By **high school-age**, offenders' methods shifted back to primarily using forceful methods rather than verbal ploys. Force was still the most common specific method (50 percent), followed by making demands/directives for them to come with them or get in the vehicle (21 percent); offering a ride (15 percent) and; engaging in conversation (15 percent). However, the presence/use of a weapon also emerged as another forceful approach among the top methods (10 percent). In addition, less common methods included offering substances, such as alcohol, cigarettes or drugs (two percent); asking for directions (three percent); giving compliments (two percent) and; making threats of physical and sexual violence (three percent).

## How children got away

Overall, children got away from offenders in a variety of ways, directly dependent upon the methods offenders used against them and the victimization offenders were trying to accomplish. Generally, when only verbal methods were used, as was common in hands-off offenses such as suspicious incidents, indecent exposures and some attempted abductions, children were most likely to get away by ignoring or refusing the offender, using their cell phones to threaten possible adult intervention and/or by actual adult intervention. Ultimately, offenders either left the area or children left the area. However, when forceful methods were used against children, as was common in hands-on incidents such as short-term abductions, sexual assaults and some attempted abductions, children most commonly got away from offenders by fighting, screaming/making noise and/or by adult intervention. Ultimately, either offenders or children left the area or offenders voluntarily released the children; any of which could have occurred during or after the completion of the victimization.

While 46 percent of children appeared to get away from the offender as the result of one method, 38 percent of children used multiple methods to get away (For 16 percent of children, the ways in which they got away were unknown).

The younger the child, the more likely they were to have an adult intervene, especially among the youngest children before school age who were more commonly with a parent/adult. While 61 percent of the youngest children had an adult intervene, only 10 percent of high school-age children had an adult intervene.

The older the child, the more likely they were to use their cell phone, ignore or refuse the offender or fight and break free. For example, nine percent and 14 percent of elementary school-age children ignored/refused the offender or fought/broke free, respectively, compared to 11 percent and 25 percent of high school-age children.

A particular pattern emerged for the youngest school-age children, whereby they were most likely to scream/make noise. For example, nine percent of elementary school-age children screamed/made noise compared to six percent each of the youngest children and oldest children and only five percent of middle school-age children.

Adult intervention was especially important because it not only helped children get away or caused offenders to leave, but increased the likelihood of offenders' arrests. While 47 percent of offenders were arrested after an adult intervened, only 24 percent were arrested when an adult did not intervene. One child behavior that helped increase the chances of adult intervention was screaming/making noise. When children screamed/made noise, adults were more likely to notice and take action (22 percent) compared to when children did not scream/make noise (16 percent).



**Please contact a NCMEC Analyst at [attempts@ncmec.org](mailto:attempts@ncmec.org) if you have any questions about this analysis; want to contribute information regarding an attempted abduction in your area; or to request analytical support.**