

Journal of Family Strengths

Volume 18

Issue 1 *Critical Issues: Defining and Debunking
Misconceptions in Health, Education, Criminal
Justice, and Social Work/Social Services*

Article 3

10-23-2018

Stranger Danger!

Aimee Wodda

Adler University, awodda@gmail.com

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.library.tmc.edu/jfs>

Recommended Citation

Wodda, Aimee (2018) "Stranger Danger!," *Journal of Family Strengths*: Vol. 18 : Iss. 1 , Article 3.

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.library.tmc.edu/jfs/vol18/iss1/3>

The *Journal of Family Strengths* is brought to you for free and open access by CHILDREN AT RISK at DigitalCommons@The Texas Medical Center. It has a "cc by-nc-nd" Creative Commons license" (Attribution Non-Commercial No Derivatives) For more information, please contact digitalcommons@exch.library.tmc.edu



In the small town of Hawkins, Indiana, on a mild November evening in 1983, a 12-year-old boy named Will Byers was abducted by a creature from the Upside Down, an alternate/parallel reality. This scenario forms the premise of episode 1 of the Netflix throwback series *Stranger Things*. Advance publicity for the show featured flyers¹ asking, “Have you seen this child? Age: 12 Height: 4’ 8” Weight: 102 lbs” (Kutner, 2016). This notice is reminiscent of the public awareness campaigns that appeared on milk cartons and utility bills in the midst of the “missing children” panic that rose to a fever pitch in the early to mid-1980s (Kutner, 2016). The popularity of *Stranger Things* indicates, among other things, that stories about missing kids continue to captivate audiences. As social and cultural historian Paula Fass observes, “For many viewers, the threat of child abduction or disappearance is scarier than any paranormal monster. Perhaps what makes *Stranger Things* so frightening and captivating is that it has both” (Kutner, 2016). Despite efforts to disprove the “stranger danger” myth, many Americans remain under the false impression that large numbers of children are abducted and murdered annually (Pimentel, 2012). Belief in this myth has led to the passage of legislation that not only fails to protect the most vulnerable populations of children from harm but also has created a milieu that leaves children at risk for criminalization and stigma (Bonnar-Kidd, 2010; Center on Youth Registration Reform, 2016; Schiavone & Jeglic, 2009; Shah, 2017; Stillman, 2016).

To demonstrate the roots, scope, and unintended consequences of the myth, in this article I first discuss the historical origins of the myth and the conditions that fueled the spread of panic (Best, 1987). I then explain how the myth was bolstered by increased media coverage, emotional appeals by parents, and public awareness campaigns. Next, I discuss the racial element of the panic—in which a focus on “lost innocence,” largely associated in the public mind with whiteness (Bernstein, 2011; Epstein, Blake, & González, 2017; Goff et al., 2014; Ocen, 2015), means that the victimization of Black children continues to be downplayed in the media in favor of stories that “sell”—namely, those with young white girls as the victims (Liebler, 2010; Min & Feaster, 2010; Simmons & Woods, 2015; Stillman, 2007; Wanzo, 2008).

In the literature review, I define terms, share statistical information about child abductions in the United States, and engage with two bodies of scholarship—constructionist critiques of the “missing children” problem and work that looks at the phenomenon through the lens of moral panic. The next section examines a variety of social, legal, and ethical

¹ The flyer can be viewed at https://www.instagram.com/p/BIGgg6sDLfN/?utm_source=ig_embed.

implications. The final sections assert the dangers of the myth, explain the difficulties involved in debunking the myth, and argue for the need to shift from fear-based responses to more rational responses that actually work to protect the most vulnerable populations of children (e.g., those who reside in abusive homes or experience harm at the hands of those known to them) (Finkelhor, Shattuck, Turner, & Hamby, 2014; Finkelhor, Turner, Shattuck, & Hamby, 2015; Glassner, 2010; Hughes, Kitzinger, & Murdock, 2006; Sedlak et al., 2010).

Early Spread of the “Stranger Danger” Myth

The “stranger danger” myth is most strongly associated with heightened societal concern over what at first appeared to be an upsurge in the number of missing children in the United States and the United Kingdom during the early to mid-1980s (Best, 1993; Johnson, 1988; Kitzinger, 1999). Before the 1980s, stories about children who were abducted by strangers rarely made the national news. This changed with the highly publicized coverage of several disappearances between 1979 and the early 1980s (Best, 1987). Readers across the United States encountered news stories about kids just like their own who had disappeared and either were never found or met tragic ends. Increasing national media coverage and political attention fueled parental and societal concern about the possibility of an epidemic of missing kids (Best, 1988, p. 84). A similar phenomenon was taking place in the United Kingdom (Kitzinger, 1999). Widespread and sensational media coverage led to the mistaken impression that this type of crime was increasing—in both frequency and ferocity. As Karen Ann Joe explains,

The missing children’s issue took on a highly dramatic and intensely emotional quality. This simultaneously elicited sympathy for parents and anger toward those who were not “doing something” about the problem. This emotional description of the problem, drawn from the experience of victimized parents, many of whom were the campaign leaders, dominated emerging definitions of the missing children scare; it also gave competing interest groups an opportunity to gain support for their “causes”. Ultimately an uncontested and highly symbolic image of missing children appeared. (1991, p. 39)

The so-called epidemic of missing children was thought to represent a loss of innocence—for the children who disappeared and also for society. Additionally, the disappearance of young people was (incorrectly)

assumed to be related to a dramatic rise in sexual exploitation, murder, and victimization, yet media reports tended to overstate the scope of the problem (Joe, 1991, p. 42).

For example, increased media coverage of sensational cases of murdered and possibly sexually violated children served to heighten the sense that child abductions by strangers were becoming increasingly common (APM Reports & Baran, 2016; Best, 1987; Fritz & Altheide, 1987; Johnson, 1988). As Jenny Kitzinger writes,

Stranger-danger stories have great appeal to journalists. The random and public nature of such attacks makes every reader or viewer potentially at risk from the “pervert on the loose.” Such cases often combine sex and murder. They also have ongoing narrative momentum (the appeal by parents for the missing child, the eventual tragic discovery) and they come with their own available images (the little girl in her school uniform, the security video footage of her last journey, the police searching wasteland). By contrast, incest cases are far less easy to report. This is sometimes because of ethical and legal restrictions. (2004, p. 128)

The “stranger danger” warning has been used in a generic sense as a device to caution children about dangerous “others” who might harm them—generally, an element of sex panic is associated with this warning (Chenier, 2012; Cowburn & Dominelli, 2001; Kitzinger, 1999; Lancaster, 2011; Levine, 2002). This narrative contributes to inaccurate beliefs about the prevalence of the unknown “dangerous pedophile,” who is thought to be the most common perpetrator of sexual abuse among young people (Kitzinger, 1999). For example, the TV program *To Catch a Predator* extended the “stranger danger” panic to online interactions, with host Chris Hansen stating that sexual predators on the Internet were becoming a “national epidemic” (Radford, 2006).

Child Abduction as an Affront to Traditional Values

In the 1980s, national media outlets began to report cases of missing kids that previously had received only local coverage. Vocal media-savvy parents brought attention to their children’s plight (Mokrzycki, 2015). For example, the disappearance of three paperboys in the Midwest—two in Iowa in 1982 and 1984 and one in Nebraska in 1983—became a national media sensation (Mokrzycki, 2015). The disappearances were considered an affront to traditional values; Paul Mokrzycki explains that the disappearances “signaled a shift away from safety, order, and idealized childhood and toward chaos, criminal depravity, and imperiled childhood”

(2015, p. 31). He goes on to observe that these “tragedies helped advance arguments about pornography, crime, prostitution, law enforcement ineptitude, homosexuality, religious cultism, and other forces ostensibly antagonistic to the ‘traditional’ American family” (Mokrzycki, 2015, p. 31).

For example, when President Ronald Reagan visited Cedar Rapids, Iowa, during his 1984 re-election campaign, he delivered an impassioned speech in which he used the romanticized ideal of the American Heartland as he vowed to get “tough on crime” (Mokrzycki, 2015, p. 64). Toward the end of his speech, Reagan declared, “And I pledge to you that none of us will rest until the streets in Iowa and throughout this nation are once again safe, particularly for our children” (Reagan, 1984 in Mokrzycki, 2015, p. 66). As Mokrzycki points out, Reagan’s re-election campaign was founded on traditional values and the idea of a return to wholesomeness; lost innocence could be reclaimed by ensuring the protection of children from nameless evils. As Elise Chenier points out,

Because the family is the main instrument of modern technologies of power in the biopolitical state, an attack against a (white) child is an attack against the entire social body. It is for this reason that the state mobilises some of its most expensive resources (behavioural scientists, psychiatrists, and other treatment experts) and most coercive powers (the police, the prison) to manage the threat of pedophilia. (2012, p. 182)

Likewise, solutions associated with problem of “missing children,” are similar in some ways to the “duck and cover” drills that arose in response to the nuclear threat during the Cold War—ultimately futile but seen as better than no protection at all (Heath, Ryan, Dean, & Bin, 2007).

Emotional Appeals Influence Legislation and Popular Culture

The now iconic milk carton campaign was initiated in 1984 after the disappearance of Eugene Martin, the second Iowa paperboy to go missing in 2 years² (Mokrzycki, 2015, p. 66). A Des Moines dairy volunteered to print information about the missing boys on its milk cartons. Dairies in other states followed suit (Howell, 2010; Mokrzycki, 2015, p. 66). Other disappearances that stirred the public imagination included those of 6-year-old Etan Patz (New York City in 1979), whose case was reopened in

² A local campaign to find Johnny Gosch, another Iowa paperboy, had begun in 1982; he was still missing when Martin disappeared (Mokrzycki, 2015).

2010; 6-year-old Adam Walsh (Hollywood Beach, Florida, in 1981), whose head was recovered several weeks after his disappearance; and 24 missing young people between the ages 7 and 17, who were found dead shortly after they had disappeared in Atlanta, Georgia, between 1979 and 1981 (Best, 1987; Gentry, 1988). The milk carton campaign was suspended in the mid-1980s because of concerns about creating anxiety in children as they ate their morning bowls of cereal and also because there were doubts about the effectiveness of the campaign (Howell, 2010).

Not only did the purported phenomenon of “missing [white] children”³ begin to feature more prominently in the news, it also began to influence legislation and pop culture. The made-for-TV movie *Adam* portrayed the emotional story of Adam Walsh’s disappearance and his parents’ attempts to find him (Barnett, Landsburg, & Tuchner, 1983). The movie opens with text suggesting that the abduction of this child represents an affront to traditional values; “This film is dedicated to Adam Walsh and the American ideal” (Barnett et al., 1983). The importance of spreading the word about this “epidemic” was stressed in the movie’s dialogue, particularly in a scene in which Etan Patz’s mother tells Adam Walsh’s father, “We need your voice. Right now you’re in the spotlight and you’re a *father*. Up until now it’s just been mothers of missing children. A father has to speak” (Barnett, Landsburg & Tuchner, 1983). And so he did. The next line in the film echoes John Walsh’s 1983 testimony in front of Congress: “Over a million and a half children are reported missing every year and for 50,000 we have no clue as to where they are” (Barnett et al., 1983). Although these inflated numbers were soon amended, the emotional appeal of claims such as these was retained in subsequent news coverage and in legislative decision making (Best, 1988).

Bereaved parents became forces for legislative change, testifying before Congress and forming organizations such as the National Center for Missing and Exploited Children (NCMEC) and Child Find. These parents had a point—when a child did go missing, the existing law enforcement infrastructure was often not up to the challenge of supporting a widespread search (Mokrzycki, 2015; Walsh & Schindehette, 1998). Additionally, the law enforcement management of child abduction cases was, at times, less than effective. For example, evidence went missing in the Adam Walsh case—in 1996, when a detective wanted to submit for DNA testing carpet samples that had been removed from a suspect’s

³ As Kathryn Boyd Stockton argues, “Children, as an *idea*, are likely to be both white and middle-class” (2009, p. 31, italics in original). Stockton’s observation is well supported by literature that examines representations of missing children in the media (Liebler, 2010; Min & Feaster, 2010; Simmons & Woods, 2015; Stillman, 2007; Wanzo, 2008).

vehicle, both the car and the samples were nowhere to be found (*Miami Herald* Staff, 2017).

Missing Black Children and Media Silence

Unlike the sensationalized cases of missing white children in the late 1970s and early 1980s, the cases of Black children who disappeared were often not taken seriously by the police, or despite evidence to the contrary, the parents were assumed to be the culprits (Bambara, 2000). In her posthumous work *These Bones Are Not My Child*, author Toni Cade Bambara writes,

From the start, the prime suspects in the Atlanta Missing and Murdered Children's Case were the parents. Presumed guilty because, as police logic went in the summer of '79, seven or eight deaths did not constitute "an epidemic of murder," as the parents, organizers of the Committee to Stop Children's Murders, were maintaining; because, as the authorities continued to argue after STOP's media sit-in a year later, eight or nine cases was usual in a city the size of Atlanta; and because, as officialdom repeatedly pointed out, even as the body count rose from one to twelve, the usual suspects in the deaths of minors were the parents. (2000, p. 5)

Additionally, in the essay "The Killings in Atlanta," author Martin Amis writes, "A year passed, and a dozen deaths, before anyone sensed the real scope of the disaster, the serial catastrophe, that was overtaking the city" (Amis, 1987, pp. 13–14). The contrast between the well-publicized panic about "missing [white] children" and the lack of national concern about missing Black children in Atlanta is striking.

The alleged kidnappings of a small number of white youth over a diffuse area received extreme media coverage while, at the same time, the concentrated disappearances and murders of more than a dozen Black young people in one particular location were overlooked (Mancillas, 2018). The Atlanta Child Murders received national media attention only after 14 young people between the ages of 7 and 14 had already disappeared and 13 had been found murdered within a 14-month period (Mancillas, 2018). Camille Bell, the mother of 9-year-old Yusuf Bell, who disappeared in October 1979 and was found strangled on November 8 in an abandoned elementary school, explained, "The fear just grew, all through last year. I just knew it. Someone is stealing the kids off the streets" (Amis, 1987, p. 14). In the case of the Atlanta Child Murders, although the unusually high concentration of young people who

disappeared and were later found murdered indicates that some degree of public caution was warranted, media coverage reporting the plight of the murdered young Black people was lacking and law enforcement coordination was not present (Mancillas, 2018; Bambara, 2000). As Linda Mancillas observes,

These black children were placed on the Atlanta special police task force's list of missing and murdered children, which identified them as victims of serial murder. ... Black celebrities and politicians, such as Jesse Jackson, Marion Barry, and Dick Gregory, and authors James Baldwin and Toni Cade Bambara criticized Atlanta's black political establishment for the controversial racial overtones of the police investigation and the later trial. Neither *Time* nor *Newsweek* did cover stories on the Atlanta child murders. ... Some wondered whether the response would have been different had the murdered children been white. (Mancillas, 2018, p. 76)

This phenomenon has been observed by more-recent scholars as "missing white girl syndrome," in which news outlets have tended to focus on cases with young white female victims (Liebler, 2010; Min & Feaster, 2010; Simmons & Woods, 2015; Stillman, 2007; Wanzo, 2008).⁴ In fact, the victimization of children of color often goes unremarked in the media, and routine messaging portrays children of color as less innocent and more culpable for offenses than their white peers (Bernstein, 2011; Epstein, Blake, & González, 2017; Goff et al., 2014; Mowatt, 2018; Ocen, 2015). The disparity between the treatment of children of color and that of their white peers in educational and juvenile justice settings remains a social justice issue that scholars, educators, nonprofit organizations, and community activists are working to remedy (Lau et al., 2018; Llorente, 2014; Love, 2016; Schlesinger, 2018; Wun, 2016).

Literature Review

The stranger danger myth creates a culture of fear disproportionate to the scope of the problem (Best, 1988; Glassner, 2010). The idea that dangerous others are likely to abduct and harm great numbers of children has influenced parenting style (Wax, 2016) and public policy in damaging and stigmatizing ways (McBride, 2011). Media saturation ensures that we

⁴ An example of this phenomenon can be found in the contrasting media coverage of the disappearances of Jahi Turner and Danielle Van Dam, who both went missing in 2002 in San Diego, California (Moscowitz & Duvall, 2011).

know the names of children who have been abducted and murdered by strangers, creating an emotional response that is difficult to counter with reason (Logan, 2011). As Wayne Logan explains, a phenomenon called probability neglect “encourages individuals to focus on emotionally charged negative occurrences, rather than their empirical likelihood” (Logan, 2011, pp. 406–407). Therefore, although occurrences of stranger kidnapping and murder are extremely rare, the public’s familiarity with missing and murdered children who have become household names prompts people to ignore statistics in favor of an emotional—fear-based—response (Logan, 2011). In this section, I explain the official categories of “missing,” discuss the incidence and prevalence of stranger abductions, and briefly consider scholarly analyses of the phenomenon. This social problem has most often been examined through the lens of social constructionism and the moral panic frame (Best, 1987; Cowburn & Dominelli, 2001; Fritz & Altheide, 1987; Gentry, 1988; Joe, 1991; Websdale, 1996; Zgoba, 2004).

Categories of “Missing”

The stranger danger myth is predicated on the “stereotypical kidnapping.” The Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) uses the term “stereotypical” not because stereotypical kidnapping is the most common type but because it is the type of kidnapping the public thinks about when it hears that a child has gone missing. The term is a misnomer because stereotypical kidnapping is actually the rarest type of abduction (Hammer, Finkelhor, & Sedlak, 2002; Sedlak, Finkelhor, & Brick, 2017; Shutt, Miller, Schreck, & Brown, 2004; Wolak, Finkelhor, & Sedlak, 2016). Official language describes a stereotypical kidnapping as follows:

A nonfamily abduction in which a slight acquaintance or stranger moves a child (age 0–17) at least 20 feet or holds the child at least 1 hour, and in which one or more of the following circumstances occurs: The child is detained overnight, transported at least 50 miles, held for ransom, abducted with intent to keep the child permanently, or killed. (Wolak et al., 2016, p. 2)

As the term “stereotypical kidnapping” suggests, the phenomenon of “missing children” has become linked with the least prevalent and worst possible outcome: the stranger kidnapping leading to sexual assault and murder (Finkelhor, Hotaling, & Sedlak, 1992; Moscovitz & Duvall, 2011; Shutt et al., 2004; Stokes, 2009; Wolak et al., 2016). Instead, the majority of individuals labeled as “missing children” are young people who have run away from home or are considered “throwaway” (Hammer et al.,

2002). Parental abduction or abduction by another relative forms another class in the “missing children” category—these abductions generally involve a custody dispute, and in some cases the parent who reported their child missing may know the child’s whereabouts and desires intervention from law enforcement to help retrieve the child (Shutt et al., 2004). Other children who are listed as missing are soon found—this category is associated with young people who are temporarily lost or briefly separated from their caregivers through miscommunication or scheduling issues (Wolak et al., 2016).

The term “missing children” includes the larger number of runaway, throwaway, and lost young people as well as those abducted by parents (Best, 1987). The stranger danger panic is excessively focused on “stereotypical kidnapping” (low incidence) but aggregates all categories, including runaway and throwaway youth (high incidence), into the larger “missing children” demographic. As Victor Kappeler and Gary Potter write, “Incorporating runaways into missing children statistics produces the perception of an epidemic. Emphasizing stranger abduction defines the problem as criminal” (2018, p. 90). When the problem is defined as criminal, resources flow toward preventing a rare and random event rather than toward providing prevention and services for those most affected—runaway and throwaway youth (Morewitz, 2016). Likewise, use of the term “children” creates a picture of innocence and helplessness—this conflation ignores the difference between a 5-year-old who was kidnapped by a stranger and a 16-year-old who has run away from an abusive home (Levine, 2002).

Incidence and Prevalence

The majority of young people reported missing are categorized as runaway or throwaway, have been abducted by a family member, or are temporarily lost (Hammer et al., 2002). Reports indicate that approximately 90% of young people younger than 18 who have been listed as missing fall under the “runaway and throwaway” category (Hammer et al., 2002). Young people who fall under the category of “throwaway” are typically asked or told to leave their homes or are prevented from returning home, often for nonconforming and/or non-normative behavior or identities (Hammer et al., 2002). Recent research estimates that approximately 40% of homeless youth are lesbian, gay, bisexual and/or transgender, and/or queer (LGBTQ), the majority of whom have been rejected by their families because of their sexual orientation or gender identity (Durso & Gates, 2012; Judge, 2015).

The percentage of young people who have been abducted by strangers is low (<1%) (Hammer et al., 2002); however, these are the cases most likely to be reported in the news (Fritz & Altheide, 1987; Johnson, 1988; Kitzinger, 2004; Lofquist, 1997). Furthermore, sensational cases in which a child has been murdered are most frequently reported. As mentioned earlier, cases in which white girls and young women are victims also tend to be over-reported (Liebler, 2010; Min & Feaster, 2010; Simmons & Woods, 2015; Stillman, 2007). The phenomenon of over-reporting the abduction of white girls is a familiar media trope, as is the portrayal of gay men as “dangerous pedophiles” (Kitzinger, 1999; Kitzinger, 2004).

As previously mentioned, the rarest category of missing children describes young people who have been kidnapped by a stranger—the “stereotypical kidnapping.” This form of abduction accounts for fewer than 1% of all missing children in the United States per year (or somewhere between 50 and 115 children) (Hammer et al., 2002). Of that number, approximately 50% are typically found and safely returned to their parents (Hammer et al., 2002). Unfortunately, the other 50% (somewhere between 25 and 50 children) may be murdered or never recovered (Hammer et al., 2002). No child should ever be taken and subjected to trauma. Despite all the potential harms (including death) that can befall a young person, however, the dominant narrative continually refocuses on the extreme of “stereotypical kidnapping” while ignoring the very real harms that befall children in much greater numbers. As Warwick Cairns puts it, “It would take your child, left outside, 500,000 years to be abducted by a stranger, and 1.4 million years for a stranger to murder them” (Cairns, 2009, p. 45, in Pimentel, 2012, p. 960). Far more children die every year in car accidents than for any other reason, yet no public outcry is demanding that children avoid riding in cars (Durbin, 2011; Pimentel, 2012). As Dennis Durbin writes, “Motor vehicle crashes represent the leading cause of death for children and youth older than 3 years in the United States. Each year, more than 5,000 children and adolescents under the age of 21 years die in crashes” (2011, p. 1050).

Although stranger abductions ending in murder are indeed terrifying, more children die preventable deaths every year with little associated moral outrage. For example, as David Pimentel observes, “In 2001 it was estimated that 178 children had died from heat-related causes in automobiles. Charges were filed in only sixty-five (37%) of these cases, despite the fact that a child died” (Pimentel, 2012, pp. 981–982). The psychology behind this inconsistency has to do with perceptions of risk (Pimentel, 2012, pp. 983–984). As Bruce Schneier notes, “People

exaggerate spectacular but rare risks and downplay common risks. They worry more about earthquakes than they do about slipping on the bathroom floor, even though the latter kills far more people than the former” (2006, p. 26 in Pimentel, 2012). Of course, parents and schools should continue to teach children about personal safety—including the need to assess people unknown to the child. Many educators and scholars, however, argue for a more nuanced idea of safety that includes the notion of the “helpful” stranger (e.g., finding a mother with children to help), replacing “stranger danger” with the concept of “tricky people,” and teaching children the notion of consent and bodily autonomy from an early age (Coleman, 2016; Long, 2018; “Prevention tips,” 2018; Rudolph, Zimmer-Gembeck, Shanley, & Hawkins, 2018; Shumaker, 2016).

Although the “stranger danger” myth persists, the number of missing children reported each year continues to decline. For example, in 2001, the FBI estimated the total number of reported missing children at about 750,000 (National Crime Information Center, 2000). The FBI estimated this number for 2017 at 464,324, with most cases resolved within a few hours (National Crime Information Center, 2018). These numbers include all categories of missing children: runaways, throwaways, those abducted by family, lost children, and victims of stereotypical kidnapping.

Social Construction of the “Missing Children” Problem

A number of scholars have examined the phenomenon of “missing children” as a social problem through the lens of the constructionist paradigm—that is, looking at the process through which isolated incidents of “stereotypical kidnapping” have become understood as representative of a larger social problem (Best, 1987; Cowburn & Dominelli, 2001; Fritz & Altheide, 1987; Gentry, 1988; Joe, 1991; Websdale, 1996). Constructionist scholars look into how the phenomenon of “missing children” came to be seen as a social problem, examining claims that have been made about the problem as well as group interactions between the various players: parents of children abducted by strangers, missing children’s interest groups, political forces, law enforcement, the media, and the public (Best, 1987; Cowburn & Dominelli, 2001; Fritz & Altheide, 1987; Gentry, 1988; Joe, 1991; Websdale, 1996).

Constructionist scholars who investigate how isolated cases of missing children became regarded as a social problem posit claims-making as a crucial component of the phenomenon. Cynthia Gentry defines claims-making about “missing children” as stage 1—a period in which “media reports and transcripts from congressional hearings on

missing children were not only filled with the very real tragedies of parents of abducted children, but also with an abundance of unsubstantiated statistics used to legitimize child abduction as a serious problem” (1988, p. 414). Before this time, although several cases of missing children had been widely reported, there as yet had been no call for action. As Joel Best recounts, “By 1981, child-snatching had received a good deal of attention, but the response of the press, law enforcement, and the general public was ambiguous” (1987, p. 103). This changed when the label “missing children” was linked with emotional claims made by the parents of missing kids—the public’s sympathy was stirred most particularly by the made-for-TV movie *Adam*, which aired in October 1983 and “ended with a roll call of 55 missing children” (Best, 1987, p. 103).

The time was right for political involvement—this issue aligned with Reagan’s “tough on crime” platform and allowed discussions about a return to family values. More importantly, the issue was considered “noncontroversial” and therefore perfect for politicians seeking re-election. As Best writes, “One Congressional aide called it ‘the apple pie of the ’80’s’—missing children received widespread, bipartisan support” (1987, p. 103). Although social constructionist analyses of the “missing children” problem differ in their particulars, constructionist scholars agree that “missing children” became a social problem because of the definition of the problem as that of “missing children,” which was animated by claims about the prevalence, seriousness, and political dimensions of the issue. The media contributed to the perception of “missing children” as a social problem by amplifying the voices of claims-makers and politicians, and subsequent social control policies, including legislation, established the problem as legitimate (Best, 1987; Gentry, 1988; Joe, 1991).

Moral Panic and the “Missing Child”

Societal concern about “missing children” has also been studied under the complementary lens of moral panic (Cohen, 1972). Erich Goode and Nachman Ben-Yehuda (1994) examine moral panics through a social constructionist perspective. They argue that although moral panics tend to be short-lived, they “always leave an informal, and often an institutional, legacy” (Goode & Ben-Yehuda, 1994, p. 149). In the case of the “missing children” moral panic, the institutional legacy continues to develop. Goode and Ben-Yehuda describe a moral panic in the following terms:

In a moral panic, the reactions of the media, law enforcement, politicians, action groups, and the general public are out of proportion to the real and present danger a given threat poses to the society. In response to this

exaggerated concern, “folk devils” are created, deviant stereotypes identifying the enemy, the source of the threat, selfish, evil wrongdoers who are responsible for the trouble. The fear and heightened concern are exaggerated, that is, are above and beyond what a sober empirical assessment of its concrete danger would sustain. Thus, they are problematic, a phenomenon in need of an explanation; they are caused by certain social and political conditions that must be identified, understood, and explicated. (1994, p. 156)

In short, the five elements of a moral panic identified by Goode and Ben-Yehuda (e.g., Concern, Hostility, Consensus, Disproportionality, and Volatility) are eminently applicable to the positioning of “missing children” as a social problem. During the 1980s, growing political conservatism contributed to fear and over-reaction as a response to isolated cases of children who went missing; this response can be regarded as a classic example of a moral panic (Mokrzycki, 2015). As Karen Ann Joe explains,

The missing children’s issue arrived on the political stage at a time when broader policy concerns over the protection and care of children emerged. In the early 1980’s, the political conservatism of the Reagan administration started to replace the liberal “free spirit” philosophy of the 1960’s and 1970’s. Reacting to the missing children’s crisis as well as other child saving “causes”, political conservatives grew more and more dissatisfied with, what they saw, namely, the demise of the traditional American family - weakening of its structure and attenuating its value system - and more generally, the loosening of state social control over young people. In the midst of this growing conservatism, the missing children’s movement provided a vehicle for its advocates to call for a return to the values of the traditional American family and stricter control policies over children. (1991, pp. 7–8)

First, missing (white) children became a social issue subject to heightened concern (Goode & Ben-Yehuda, 1994; Simmons & Woods, 2015). This concern manifested as increased hostility toward “dangerous pedophiles,” resulting in the “stranger danger” myth (Cowburn & Dominelli, 2001; Goode & Ben-Yehuda, 1994). Following a rising consensus that the issue of “missing children” was a social problem, the response (e.g., formation of the NCMEC and legislation first mandating a missing persons registry and then a sex offender registry) was disproportionate to the threat.

Although corrected statistics were quickly provided and the legitimacy of an epidemic of missing children was disproved, concern about missing children remains volatile and waxes and wanes with media coverage (Goode & Ben-Yehuda, 1994). The media continue to contribute to this panic by overemphasizing harms to children by strangers. As Pimentel puts it,

The media has learned quickly that stories about harm to children captivate audiences. The perfect teaser for a news story is “could your child be next?” Such a come-on virtually guarantees that the parent will watch. The story will be compelling only if the risk to children in general, and the risk to the viewer’s own children, appears to be immediate and serious. The result is that public opinion on these topics is being shaped by profoundly misleading media reports, consistently calculated to overstate risks to children. (2012, pp. 964–965)

The disproportionate response to the problem of “missing children” is aided by erroneous media reports about the prevalence and misleading fear-based rhetoric that obscures the exact nature of the reasons why young people go missing.

The Sex Panic Element of the “Missing Children” Panic

Emotional, rather than rational, responses to the problem of “missing children” have resulted in social policy aimed at preventing dangerous others from abducting and harming children (Logan, 2011). Many of these social policies mandate stricter controls over those who have committed sex offenses, even though sex offenses are not directly related to the kidnapping and murder of a child (Logan, 2011). In fact, the sex offender registry can contribute to panic, as the list of legal infractions that can mandate entry to the registry include public urination, prostitution-related offenses, consensual sex between teenagers, and teen sexting as well as more serious harms.

The wide variety of transgressions lumped under the heading of “sex offenses” increases the population of those labeled sex offenders, but most are not violent offenders. Unfortunately, the public is led to believe that most people forced to register as sex offenders are violent criminals, and worse, that they harm children (Quinn, Forsyth, & Mullen-Quinn, 2004). Under the earnest guise of “child protection,” measures put in place in an effort to protect children from being abducted and killed by a stranger have had the effect of criminalizing, rather than safeguarding, the very children these laws are ostensibly meant to protect. Young people are

added to the sex offender list for sexting and for consensual sexual relationships with peers. In some states, underage same-sex relationships are penalized more harshly (Wodda & Panfil, 2017). In fact, the Center on Youth Registration Reform estimates that as many as 200,000 people are listed on sex offender registries for offenses that occurred before they were 18 years old (Shah, 2017).

Individuals as young as 8 years of age⁵ have been included on the registry for sex play characterized as “criminal sexual conduct” and for pulling down the pants of a classmate, characterized as “indecent with a child” (Stillman, 2016; Zimring, 2009). As Roger Lancaster writes,

In addition to producing new layers of statutory law, contemporary panics have produced an expansive and more or less permanent civil, government, and media apparatus dedicated to the production of a constant state of panic. In the process, ongoing sex panics have shifted the basis of legal debates away from ideals of informed argument and toward expressions of raw emotionality. (2011, p. 88)

Initial legislation required those charged with sex offenses to register with law enforcement (Zimring, 2009). As a result of Megan’s Law, this registry was required to be made available to the public (Zimring, 2009), and later iterations included current address and photo identification, as well as the legalese that characterized the offender’s crime. Laws also mandated classes or tiers of offenders. The legal description of the offense can be misleading in nature, as is evidenced by the case of a child who pulled her classmate’s pants down; 10-year-old Charla Roberts was charged with “indecent with a child” and placed on the registry (Stillman, 2016). As children charged with sex crimes grow older, the stigma of the charge attaches more firmly. Requiring recent photos of people like Charla Roberts, who was charged with “indecent with a child” at the age of 10, strikes a discordant tone. Profiles of people in their twenties or forties who offended as children can be misconstrued, leading to public assumptions that the violations occurred more recently (Stillman, 2016). Whereas some states require registration for a limited amount of time, say 10 to 25 years, in some states, 8-year-olds can be placed on the sex offender registry for life (Center on Youth Registration Reform, 2016; Stillman, 2016).

⁵ According to the Center on Youth Registration Reform (2016), “In 39 states, laws exist that require children as young as 8 years old to be placed on sex offender registries, often for life, when adjudicated of what the courts deem sexual crimes.”

As Sarah Stillman (2016) observes, “A growing number of parents—along with legal advocates, scholars, and even law-enforcement officials—are beginning to ask whether the registry is truly serving the children whom it was designed to protect.” Indeed, the initial purpose of creating a publicly available list of offenders was to protect children, but mounting evidence suggests that laws mandating registration often harm the children they are meant to protect (Zimring, 2009). Unintended consequences, such as social isolation, difficulty finding employment, being prevented from living with and seeing their children, and fear of vigilantism, continue to haunt young people accused of sex crimes (Stillman, 2016). These consequences emanate directly from the panic related to the “stranger danger” myth. As Judith Levine concludes, “the sexual politics of fear is harmful to minors” (2002, p.7).

Implications of the Myth

Although the “stranger danger” myth has been discredited over and over again, sensational news stories featuring children who have been abducted and killed by strangers continue to capture the public’s imagination (Pimentel, 2012). Belief in this myth has contributed to a number of interrelated social, legal, and ethical implications.

Social Implications

To manage risk, parents must routinely make decisions that potentially affect the health and well-being of their children. Misleading statistics and inflated concerns about stranger abduction encourage unwarranted levels of parental concern about this uncommon risk. At the same time, more potent hazards with a greater potential for creating lasting harm have been downplayed (Cairns, 2009; The Annie E. Casey Foundation, 2017; U.S. Department of Health & Human Services, 2018).

Although scholars have been debunking the “stranger danger” myth since the mid-1980s, this fear-based narrative maintains its hold on society (Pimentel, 2012). The statistical likelihood that any particular child will be abducted and murdered by a stranger remains extremely rare, but the thought of this ever occurring to a child is so terrible that an emotional response is created in individuals that manifests as reactive legislation (Griffin & Miller, 2008). Likewise, these preventative measures tend to be unrelated to the most prevalent risks faced by children. The measures include the following: maintaining constant surveillance over children and their activities, instructing children to avoid interactions with strangers, and enacting legislation that paints “sex offenders” as the core of the problem (Pimentel, 2012; Zimring, 2009).

For example, the term “sexual predator” was coined to describe a particularly opportunistic category of person (Fass, 1997; Filler, 2003). Special interest groups such as the NCMEC and legislative outcomes focus on sexual offending even though it is extremely rare that a child meets with sexual violence at the hands of a complete stranger (Levine, 2002). As Leslie Moran and Beverly Skeggs point out, “Most instances of violence take place in the context of situations in which the perpetrator and victim have a prior relationship” (2004, p. 149). Indeed, most of the sexual violence that young people experience comes at the hands of family members or close acquaintances (Finkelhor et al., 2014; Finkelhor et al., 2015). A report issued by the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (2013) in conjunction with several other agencies determined that the perpetrators in an estimated 30% of cases of child sexual abuse are family members, about 60% of perpetrators are known to the child (they may be family friends, coaches, babysitters, child care providers, or neighbors), and only about 10% of perpetrators are strangers (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2013). Furthermore, the study found that “an estimated 23% of reported cases of child sexual abuse are perpetrated by individuals under the age of 18” (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2013). The term “sexual predator” contributes to the panic associated with the “missing children” problem and positions the issue as one of pedophiles preying on young children (Chenier, 2012; Cowburn & Dominelli, 2001; Kitzinger, 1999; Radford, 2006). Although there are indeed practical reasons to instruct children to remain wary of strangers, framing the problem as simply that of “stranger danger” does not protect children from harm at the hands of family members and other persons known to them.

Instead, researchers argue that the kind of intensive parenting that subjects children to constant surveillance and control is unhealthful for a number of reasons (Pimentel, 2012). Intensive parenting creates “geographies of fear” in which public spaces are assumed to be dangerous for children and contributes to the (mistaken) belief that the only safe place is the home (Hughes et al., 2006, p. 261). Of course, as the numbers of runaway and throwaway young people indicate, the opposite is true for some young people (Hammer et al., 2002). As Pimentel suggests, “Close control of children’s environments and the insistence on constant supervision has been shown to impair the child’s ability to develop independence, responsibility, and self-reliance” (2012, p. 958).

Additionally, children who are intensively parented do not only experience a loss of independence, their health may also suffer (Kimbell

et al., 2009). The Centers for Disease Control (CDC) recommends that children engage in at least 60 minutes of physical activity per day, yet in a recent study, “only 21.6% of 6- to 19-year-old children and adolescents in the United States attained 60 or more minutes of moderate-to-vigorous physical activity on at least 5 days per week” (National Physical Activity Plan Alliance, 2016). Pediatricians associate lower levels of activity with an increased incidence of childhood obesity and diabetes (American Academy of Pediatrics, 2006). Also, young people who are prevented from making their own way to school are forced to travel in a more statistically risky manner, as Pimentel points out:

Unwillingness to let children walk to school or even ride their bikes in response to a virtually nonexistent risk of stranger abduction has not only deprived children of the benefits of physical exercise, but has exposed them to the far greater risks of injury in automobile accidents. Indeed, the American Academy of Pediatrics has published statistics suggesting that “being driven to school in a passenger vehicle is by far the most dangerous way to get there.” (Brody, 2007, in Pimentel, 2012, p. 959)

When children are allowed the freedom to walk or bike to school or to play in a nearby park on their own, the criminalization of parents who allow their kids such independence becomes a possibility (Pimentel, 2012). A prime example of this cultural shift can be observed in the case of Debra Harrell, a working mother who was arrested for allowing her 9-year-old child to play in a nearby park as she worked at her nearby job (Friedersdorf, 2014).

During her daughter’s summer break, Ms. Harrell allowed her child to work on her laptop and take advantage of the free Wi-Fi at the McDonald’s where she worked. Unfortunately, their apartment was robbed and the laptop stolen. When Harrell’s daughter asked permission to play at the nearby park, usually teeming with kids, Harrell agreed and gave her a cell phone to use, should the need arise. The child spent two uneventful days playing at the park. On the third day, when an adult asked where her mother was and the child replied, “at work,” law enforcement became involved, Ms. Harrell was arrested, and her daughter was placed in foster care (Friedersdorf, 2014). This situation traumatized both mother and daughter and placed the child at risk for greater harm than playing in the park would have done. As Conor Friedersdorf (2014) explains, “The state’s decision is coming at a time when it is suffering from a shortage of foster families, as well as a child protective services workforce so

overwhelmed that serious child abuse inquiries are regularly closed in violation of policy.” The Harrell family story is an obvious example of a child unnecessarily placed at risk precisely because of institutional efforts to protect children from harm.

Legal Implications

Reactive “pathological” public policies have arisen as a result of pressure from interest groups concerned about the problem of “missing children” (Stuntz, 2001). As Logan argues, “By focusing on ‘stranger danger,’ harsh laws have been adopted and Americans, while optimistically comforted by the notion that danger emanates from unfamiliar others, have been distracted from the troubling reality that the people they should fear most are relatives, friends, and acquaintances” (2011, p. 395). Congressional hearings prompted by special interest groups were held between 1981 and 1984. According to Joe,

These federal congressional hearings did more than simply modify reporting procedures and provide more resources to families and law enforcement. They led to passage of federal acts which legitimized the missing children’s crisis. They also served as a symbol of the national pledge to save missing children, and as a policy directive for the states and U.S. territories. (1991, p. 38)

The resulting legislation focuses on sex offenders, and each round of subsequent legislation (Table) relies on false notions of recidivism rates for sex offenders (Langan, Schmitt, & Durose, 2003). As Lancaster writes, “In mid-2010 the number of people publicly registered for sex offenses under Megan’s Law exceeded 700,000 and was growing rapidly” (2011, p. 62). Memorial or personalized legislation (e.g., Megan’s Law, the Jacob Wetterling Crimes Against Children and Sexually Violent Offender Registration Act, the Adam Walsh Child Protection and Safety Act) can be problematic, as Roger Lancaster argues:

Personalization bends lawmaking to the passions of the populace; it reinforces punitive trends to strip away rights of the accused and protections for the convicted; and it ratifies the power of the special case to steer the general rule. Whereas the use of surnames lends gravitas to laws and policies, the use of first names condescends to the public and has the effect of infantilizing the law and patronizing the public. Stoking raw emotions, it prepares the public for political manipulation: Who but a moral monster would oppose a law, no matter how draconian, named for a murdered child? (2011, p. 98)

Table. Legislation Enacted Through Activism by the Bereaved Parents of Missing and Murdered Children

1982	Missing Children Act of 1982 (S. 1701 – 97th Congress)	Mandated creation of the National Crime Information Center (NCIC) Unidentified Person File (UPF) to keep track of missing persons
1984	Missing Children’s Assistance Act (S. 2014 – 98th Congress)	Law enforcement coordination at state and federal level. Mandated the National Incidence Studies of Missing, Abducted, Runaway and Thrownaway Children (NISMAART). Established the National Center for Missing & Exploited Children.
1984	National Center for Missing & Exploited Children (NCMEC)	Established by Congress, funded by the Department of Justice (DOJ). Acts as an information clearinghouse and educational resource.
1990	National Child Search Assistance Act of 1990 (S. 2317 – 101st Congress)	Eliminated waiting period to file a missing person report, called for coordination between law enforcement agencies and missing person clearinghouses.
1994	“Three Strikes” Law (California)	Habitual offender laws; 28 states have some form of this law (e.g., Jessica’s Law, enacted in Florida in 2005).
1994	Jacob Wetterling Crimes Against Children and Sexually Violent Offender Registration Act (Federal Violent Crime Control and Law Enforcement Act of 1994)	Required registration of sex offenders.
1996	Megan’s Law: subsection of the Jacob Wetterling Act of 1994	Required law enforcement to notify communities about people named in sex offender registry.

1996	America's Missing: Broadcast Emergency Response (AMBER) Alert ⁶	Began as a local emergency alert program in Texas and grew to cover all 50 states as well as the District of Columbia, Puerto Rico, and the U.S. Virgin Islands.
1999	Missing, Exploited, and Runaway Children Protection Act (S. 249 – 106th Congress)	Called for annual funding for the NCMEC. Required the NCMEC to set up a 24-hour hotline. Mandated that “NCMEC must also coordinate public and private programs that locate and recover missing children and reunite them with their families; assist families and law enforcement in locating and recovering missing and exploited children; and provide training and technical assistance in the prevention, investigation, prosecution, and treatment of cases involving missing and exploited children” (Girouard, 2001, p. 1).
2006	Adam Walsh Child Protection and Safety Act	Created three tiers of sex offenders. National registry with identical criteria for each state. Felony if offenders do not update/register. Civil commitment for “sexually dangerous” people.

Ethical Implications

Ethical concerns related to the stranger danger myth are myriad and include profiting from fear. The phenomenon more generally described as the “fear industrial complex” (Glassner, 2010) manifests when politicians and special interest groups, like the NCMEC, benefit from the millions of taxpayer dollars allocated to the prevention of “missing children” (Glassner, 2010; Klein, 2017). The NCMEC has attempted to remain relevant and retain its funding by turning its attention to the problem of “sex trafficking,” which many consider as socially constructed and based on moral panic—very much like the problem of “missing children” (Cojocar, 2015; Klein, 2017; Lancaster, 2011; Weitzer, 2007).

Other industries that have profited from the “stranger danger myth” include companies offering identification services for parents, on the basis of the idea that fingerprints and current photos maintained in a database will come in handy should a child be abducted by a stranger (Renfro, 2016). In the 1980s, at the height of “missing children” panic, entire

⁶ By 2005, all 50 states had AMBER programs. Since 2013, AMBER alerts have been sent automatically through the Wireless Emergency Alerts (WEA) Program (Griffin et al., 2007; Griffin & Miller, 2008).

industries sprang up overnight to catalogue the particulars of thousands of children across the United States (Renfro, 2016).

Dangers of the Myth

Perils associated with the “stranger danger” myth have been discussed throughout this article, but I highlight a few of the more potent hazards in this section: the over-criminalization of people labeled as “sex offenders” and their (sometimes permanent) inclusion on the publicly accessible U.S. Department of Justice National Sex Offenders Public Website (NSOPW) and the overshadowing of child sexual abuse most often perpetrated by persons known to young people.

The “stranger danger” myth over-criminalizes sex offenders and portrays them as a criminal class largely comprising people who harm children (Schiavone & Jeglic, 2009). As Hughes et al. explain, “The predatory paedophile is a monster of common imagination” (2006, p. 277). And as Kristen Zgoba puts it, “Unlike other offenders, child predators (as well as other sexual offenders) are subject to community registration and community notification, with the possibility of lifetime supervision, civil commitment or chemical castration” (2004, p. 391). Misleading statistics and false media reporting about recidivism rates legitimize social disgust and lead to overly punitive policies and vigilante responses (Stillman, 2016). Sex offender registries create a false sense of security; most people charged with a sex offense are first-time offenders not present on any list (Vásquez, Maddan, & Walker, 2008). Furthermore, lists are not always updated—even if they did work, some states (e.g., California, Oklahoma, and Massachusetts) have less than ideal rates of participation (Logan, 2011).

Mandatory registration with photo and location information stigmatizes people on the list and has placed them in danger of violent reprisals (Stillman, 2016). Realistically, risk cannot be contained by putting people on a list and tracking them. In fact, most child victimization takes place in private spaces and is perpetrated by persons known to the child (Finkelhor et al., 2014; Finkelhor et al., 2015; Freeman-Longo, 2000; Moran & Skeggs, 2004). As mentioned earlier, 90% of the perpetrators in cases of child sexual abuse are family members or otherwise known to the child; only about 10% of perpetrators are strangers (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2013). These statistics provide clear evidence that “the fear of ‘stranger danger’ is misplaced and should not be used to justify the proliferation of registered sex offender laws” (Bonnar-Kidd, 2010, p. 414). Yet, fear of strangers has undoubtedly led to policies that punish people charged with sex-related offenses in overly harsh

ways. For example, judges in some jurisdictions use the same criteria to charge teens who have sent several sexts as they would to charge an adult with a hard drive containing child pornography (Stillman, 2016).

Debunking the Myth

As mentioned earlier, although the “stranger danger” myth has been discredited over and over again, sensational news stories featuring children who have been abducted and killed by strangers continue to capture the public’s imagination (Pimentel, 2012). Wayne Logan attributes the persistence of the “stranger danger” myth, in part, to a phenomenon called the availability heuristic, which “causes individuals to mispredict the likelihood of readily imagined events” (2011, p. 406). To support this assertion, he calls upon Cass Sunstein’s description of the mechanics of the heuristic. Sunstein explains, “When people use the availability heuristic, they assess the magnitude of risks by asking whether examples can readily come to mind. ... If people can easily think of relevant examples, they are far more likely to be frightened and concerned than if they cannot” (Sunstein, 2005, p. 26 in Logan, 2011, p. 395). Therefore, the media frenzy that has accompanied the abductions of (white) children by strangers over the past few decades, especially when the children are named and details of their stories are shared, acts as an availability heuristic, even though the incidence of cases such as these remain rare (Logan, 2011, p. 395).

The effort to prevent an uncommon harm wrongly identified as a major social problem has led to the creation of laws that stigmatize and criminalize a category of person when only a miniscule percentage of this population has actually harmed a child (Logan, 2011). This linkage between the “dangerous pedophile” and “missing kids” is related to moral panic, not to facts or evidence (Lancaster, 2011; Zgoba, 2004). It is a “tough on crime” stance that does not actually protect children. Sex offender registries are expensive to build and maintain and are not proven to work. Moreover, states have not been successful in tracking sex offenders. Finally, only a small percentage of individuals on sex offender lists are there because they are adults who have harmed a child (Logan, 2011). In fact, many people (200,000 of 700,000) on the publicly accessible U.S. Department of Justice National Sex Offenders Public Website (NSOPW) are themselves children or were placed on the list as children (Shah, 2017; Zimring, 2009). Sex offender registries over-criminalize and stigmatize registrants and place them in the way of potential violence. Additionally, false information about recidivism rates and lack of understanding about the spectrum of offenses that can result in being added to the registry contribute to the general public’s

(mis)perception that most people on the list are child molesters who are likely to reoffend (Bonnar-Kidd, 2010; Feige, 2017).

The reality that a child is more likely to be harmed by a person known to them rather than by a stranger on a list is not reflected in policy and legislation. Furthermore, incidents of child sexual abuse are not reported in the news because they are not unique; their frequency precludes newsworthiness (Hughes et al., 2006). Solutions include less dialogue about “stranger danger,” and more informed conversations about young people’s bodily autonomy. Additional solutions include less discussion about “sex predators,” and more awareness of harms that occur in the home (Letourneau, Eaton, Bass, Berlin, & Moore, 2014; “Prevention tips,” 2018). As Emma Hughes, Jenny Kitzinger, and Graham Murdock put it, “Ninety-six per cent of newspaper articles about how to protect children focus on threats from strangers whilst only 4 per cent even partially address abuse by fathers, uncles, step-fathers, brothers, and other family members, the most common category of abuse identified through organizations which work with children” (Hughes et al., 2006, p. 261).

The kidnap and murder of Adam Walsh in 1981 seemed to beg for a massive response with harsh measures, ironclad protections, and swift justice. The problem remains—we cannot predict who might kidnap and murder a child. One child harmed is one too many; however, the apparatus that has been established in an attempt to protect children from an exceptional event is not only weakly protective but also shifts the narrative away from the most prevalent threats to young people. These include car accidents and harm at the hands of people known to them—their parents, relatives, family friends, and known authority figures (Hughes et al., 2006; Sedlak et al., 2010). Ultimately, the “stranger danger” panic has prompted individuals and institutions to apply extreme prevention practices to an unpredictable and rare event, thus shifting resources away from the prevention of youth homelessness, child sexual abuse, and other harms that young people are more likely to encounter in their everyday lives.

References

- American Academy of Pediatrics. (2006). Active healthy living: Prevention of childhood obesity through increased physical activity. *Pediatrics*, 117, 1834–1842. Retrieved from <http://pediatrics.aappublications.org/content/pediatrics/117/5/1834.full.pdf>
- Amis, M. (1987). *The moronic inferno and other visits to America*. New York, NY: Viking.
- APM Reports & Baran, M. (2016, October 4). Season 1, episode 6. *Stranger danger. In the dark*. [Podcast]. Retrieved from <https://www.apmreports.org/story/2016/10/04/in-the-dark-6>
- Bambara, T. C. (2000). *Those bones are not my child*. New York, NY: Vintage.
- Barnett, J., Landsburg, A., & Tuchner, M. (1983). *Adam* [Made-for-TV-movie]. Alan Landsburg Productions.
- Bernstein, R. (2011). *Racial innocence: Performing American childhood and race from slavery to civil rights*. New York, NY: New York University Press.
- Best, J. (1993). *Threatened children: Rhetoric and concern about child-victims*. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press.
- Best, J. (1988). Missing children, misleading statistics. *Public Interest*, 92, 84–92.
- Best, J. (1987). Rhetoric in claims-making: Constructing the missing children problem. *Social Problems*, 34(2), 101–121.
- Bonnar-Kidd, K. K. (2010). Sexual offender laws and prevention of sexual violence or recidivism. *American Journal of Public Health*, 100(3), 412–419. Retrieved from <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC2820068>
- Brody, J. E. (2007, September 11). Turning the ride to school into a walk. *The New York Times*. Retrieved from <http://www.nytimes.com/2007/09/11/health/11brod.html>
- Cairns, W. (2009). *How to live dangerously: The hazards of helmets, the benefits of bacteria, and the risks of living too safe*. New York, NY: St. Martin's Griffin.
- Center on Youth Registration Reform (CYRR). Impact Justice. (2016). *The facts about youth registration*. Retrieved from <http://impactjustice.org/cyrr/youth-registration-reform-resources/why-end-youth-registration>
- Chenier, E. (2012). The natural order of disorder: Pedophilia, stranger danger and the normalising family. *Sexuality & Culture*, 16(2), 172–186.
- Cohen, S. (1972). *Moral panics and folk devils*. London, UK: MacGibbon & Kee.
- Cojocar, C. (2015). Sex trafficking, captivity, and narrative: Constructing victimhood with the goal of salvation. *Dialectical Anthropology*, 39(2), 183–194.
- Coleman, P. A. (2016, December 20). The better way to teach 'stranger danger' without scaring your kid. *Fatherly*. Retrieved from

- <https://www.fatherly.com/parenting/better-way-teach-stranger-danger-without-scaring-kid>
- Cowburn, M., & Dominelli, L. (2001). Masking hegemonic masculinity: Reconstructing the paedophile as the dangerous stranger. *British Journal of Social Work, 31*(3), 399–415.
- Durbin, D. R. (2011). Technical report—Child passenger safety. *American Academy of Pediatrics*. Retrieved from <http://pediatrics.aappublications.org/content/early/2011/03/21/peds.2011-0215>
- Durso, L. E., & Gates, G. J. (2012). *Serving our youth: Findings from a national survey of service providers working with lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender youth who are homeless or at risk of becoming homeless*. Los Angeles, CA: The Williams Institute, True Colors Fund, and The Palette Fund. Retrieved from <https://williamsinstitute.law.ucla.edu/wp-content/uploads/Durso-Gates-LGBT-Homeless-Youth-Survey-July-2012.pdf>
- Epstein, R., Blake, J., & González, T. (2017). *Girlhood interrupted: The erasure of Black girls' childhood*. Center on Poverty & Inequality: Georgetown Law. Retrieved from <http://www.law.georgetown.edu/academics/centers-institutes/poverty-inequality/upload/girlhood-interrupted.pdf>
- Fass, P. S. (1997). *Kidnapped: Child abductions in America*. New York, NY: Oxford University Press.
- Feige, D. (2017, September 12). When junk science about sex offenders infects the Supreme Court. *The New York Times*. Retrieved from <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/09/12/opinion/when-junk-science-about-sex-offenders-infects-the-supreme-court.html>
- Filler, D. (2003). Terrorism, panic and pedophilia. *Virginia Journal of Social Policy & the Law, 10*(3), 345–382.
- Finkelhor, D., Turner, H. A., Shattuck, A., & Hamby, S. L. (2015). Prevalence of childhood exposure to violence, crime, and abuse: Results from the national survey of children's exposure to violence. *JAMA Pediatrics, 169*(8), 746–754.
- Finkelhor, D., Shattuck, A., Turner, H. A., & Hamby, S. L. (2014). The lifetime prevalence of child sexual abuse and sexual assault assessed in late adolescence. *Journal of Adolescent Health, 55*(3), 329–333. Retrieved from [https://www.jahonline.org/article/S1054-139X\(13\)00854-9/fulltext](https://www.jahonline.org/article/S1054-139X(13)00854-9/fulltext)
- Finkelhor, D., Hotaling, G. T., & Sedlak, A. J. (1992). The abduction of children by strangers and nonfamily members: Estimating the incidence using multiple methods. *Journal of Interpersonal Violence, 7*(2), 226–243.

- Freeman-Longo, R. (2000). *Myths and facts about sex offenders*. Center For Sex Offender Management. Retrieved from <http://www.csom.org/pubs/mythsfacts.html>
- Friedersdorf, C. (2014). Working mom arrested for letting her 9-year-old play alone at park. *The Atlantic*. Retrieved from <https://www.theatlantic.com/national/archive/2014/07/arrested-for-letting-a-9-year-old-play-at-the-park-alone/374436/>
- Fritz, N. J., & Altheide, D. L. (1987). The mass media and the social construction of the missing children problem. *The Sociological Quarterly*, 28(4), 473–492.
- Gentry, C. (1988). The social construction of abducted children as a social problem. *Sociological Inquiry*, 58(4), 413–425.
- Girouard, C. (2001, July). *The National Center for Missing & Exploited Children*. OJJDP Fact Sheet #28. Retrieved from <https://www.ncjrs.gov/pdffiles1/ojjdp/fs200128.pdf>
- Glassner, B. (2010). *The culture of fear: Why Americans are afraid of the wrong things*. New York, NY: Basic Books.
- Goff, P. A., Jackson, M. C., Leone, D., Lewis, B. A., Culotta, C. M., & DiTomasso, N. A. (2014). The essence of innocence: Consequences of dehumanizing Black children. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 106(4), 526–545.
- Goode, E., & Ben-Yehuda, N. (1994). Moral panics: Culture, politics, and social construction. *Annual Review of Sociology*, 20(1), 149–171.
- Griffin, T., Miller, M. K., Hoppe, J., Rebideaux, A., & Hammack, R. (2007). A preliminary examination of AMBER Alert's effects. *Criminal Justice Policy Review*, 18(4), 378–394.
- Griffin, T., & Miller, M. K. (2008). Child abduction, AMBER Alert, and crime control theater. *Criminal Justice Review*, 33(2): 159–176.
- Hammer, H., Finkelhor, D., & Sedlak, A. J. (2002). *Runaway/throwaway children: National estimates and characteristics*. U.S. Department of Justice, Office of Justice Programs, Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention. NISMART. Retrieved from <https://www.ncjrs.gov/pdffiles1/ojjdp/196469.pdf>
- Heath, M. A., Ryan, K., Dean, B., & Bingham, R. (2007). History of school safety and psychological first aid for children. *Brief Treatment and Crisis Intervention*, 7(3), 206–223.
- Howell, P. (2010). Got worry? Missing children notices on milk cartons in the United States. *Interactions: Studies in Communication & Culture*, 2, 35–46.

- Hughes, E., Kitzinger, J., & Murdock, G. (2006). The media and risk. In P. Taylor-Gooby & J. O. Zinn (Eds.), *Risk and social science* (pp. 250–270). Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press.
- Joe, K. A. (1991). *Milk carton madness: The heart of the missing children's crisis*. (Doctoral dissertation). University of California, Davis.
- Johnson, H. F. (1988). *Media and the creation of myth: The role of print media in the popularization of stranger-danger in child abduction* (Doctoral dissertation). School of Criminology, Simon Fraser University, Burnaby, British Columbia, Canada.
- Judge, C. (2015). Thrown away for being gay: The abandonment of LGBT youth and their lack of legal recourse. *Indiana Journal of Law and Social Equality*, 3(2), 260–280. Retrieved from <http://www.repository.law.indiana.edu/ijlse/vol3/iss2/5>
- Kappeler, V. E., & Potter, G. W. (2018). *The mythology of crime and criminal justice*. Long Grove, IL: Waveland Press.
- Kimbell, A. R., Schuhmann, A., Brown, H., Kellert, S. R., Bruyere, B., Teel, T., & Newman, P. (2009). More kids in the woods: Reconnecting Americans with nature. *Journal of Forestry*, 107(7), 373–377. Retrieved from <https://academic.oup.com/jof/article-abstract/107/7/373/4598887>
- Kitzinger, J. (2004). *Framing abuse: Media influence and public understanding of sexual violence against children*. London, UK: Pluto Press.
- Kitzinger, J. (1999). The ultimate neighbour from hell? Stranger danger and the media framing of paedophiles. In R. Franklin (Ed.), *Social policy, the media and misrepresentation* (pp. 207–221). London, UK: Psychology Press.
- Klein, M. (2017, April 1). NCMEC hypocrisy on “stranger danger” [Web log post]. Retrieved from <http://www.martyklein.com/ncmec-hypocrisy-stranger-danger>
- Kutner, M. (2016, August 10). How ‘stranger things’ captures ’80s panic over missing kids. *Newsweek*. Retrieved from <http://www.newsweek.com/stranger-things-missing-children-netflix-488605>
- Lancaster, R. N. (2011). *Sex panic and the punitive state*. Oakland, CA: University of California Press.
- Langan, P. A., Schmitt, E. L., & Durose, M. R. (2003). *Recidivism of sex offenders released from prison in 1994*. Washington, D.C., U.S. Department of Justice, National Criminal Justice Reference Service (no.198281).
- Lau, K. S., Rosenman, M. B., Wiehe, S. E., Tu, W., & Aalsma, M. C. (2018). Race/ethnicity, and behavioral health status: First arrest and outcomes in a large sample of juvenile offenders. *The Journal of Behavioral Health Services & Research*, 45(2), 237–251.

- Letourneau, E. J., Eaton, W. W., Bass, J., Berlin, F. S., & Moore, S. G. (2014). The need for a comprehensive public health approach to preventing child sexual abuse. *Public Health Reports, 129*(3), 222–228.
- Levine, J. (2002). *Harmful to minors: The perils of protecting children from sex*. Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press.
- Liebler, C. M. (2010). Me(di)a culpa?: The “missing white woman syndrome” and media self-critique. *Communication, Culture & Critique, 3*(4), 549–565.
- Llorente, M. (2014, April 10). Help us dismantle the school-to-prison pipeline. *Children’s Rights Litigation, 16*(3), 13–21.
- Lofquist, W. S. (1997). Constructing “crime”: Media coverage of individual and organizational wrongdoing. *Justice Quarterly, 14*(2), 243–263.
- Logan, W. A. (2011). Megan's Laws as a case study in political stasis. *Syracuse Law Review, 61*, 371–411.
- Long, E. (2018, January 18). The new way millennial parents are teaching their kids about ‘stranger danger.’ *Cafemom*. Retrieved from https://thestir.cafemom.com/big_kid/209883/millennial-parents-handling-stranger-danger
- Love, B. L. (2016). Anti-Black state violence, classroom edition: The spirit murdering of Black children. *Journal of Curriculum and Pedagogy, 13*(1), 22–25.
- McBride, N. A. (2011). Child safety is more than a slogan: “Stranger-danger” warning not effective at keeping kids safer. National Center for Missing & Exploited Children. NCMEC Order PDF-10A.
- Mancillas, L. K. (2018). *Presidents and mass incarceration: Choices at the top, repercussions at the bottom*. Santa Barbara, CA: ABC-CLIO.
- Miami Herald Staff. “When this boy was abducted from a mall, the crime became an all-time mystery.” (2017, July 17). *Miami Herald* [Online]. Retrieved from <http://www.miamiherald.com/news/local/community/broward/article87486547.html>
- Min, S., & Feaster, J. C. (2010). Missing children in national news coverage: Racial and gender representations of missing children cases. *Communication Research Reports, 27*(3), 207–216.
- Moran, L. J., & Skeggs, B. (2004). *Sexuality and the politics of violence and safety*. New York, NY: Routledge.
- Morewitz, S. J. (2016). *Runaway and homeless youth: New research and clinical perspectives*. Cham, Switzerland: Springer International Publishing.
- Mokrzycki, P. (2015). Lost in the heartland: Childhood, region, and Iowa's missing paperboys. *The Annals of Iowa, 74*(1), 29–70.

- Moscowitz, L., & Duvall, S. S. (2011). "Every parent's worst nightmare": Myths of child abductions in US news. *Journal of Children and Media*, 5(02), 147–163.
- Mowatt, R. A. (2018). The case of the 12-year-old boy: Or, the silence of and relevance to leisure research. *Leisure Sciences*, 40(1–2), 54–70.
- National Crime Information Center (NCIC). (2018). *2017 NCIC missing person and unidentified person statistics*. Washington, D.C.; National Crime Information Center, Federal Bureau of Investigation, U.S. Department of Justice. Retrieved from <https://www.fbi.gov/file-repository/2017-ncic-missing-person-and-unidentified-person-statistics.pdf>
- National Crime Information Center (NCIC). (2000). *NCIC missing and unidentified person file report for 2000*. Washington, D.C.; National Crime Information Center, Federal Bureau of Investigation, U.S. Department of Justice.
- National Physical Activity Plan Alliance. (2016). *2016 U.S. report card on physical activity for children and youth*. Retrieved from <http://www.physicalactivityplan.org/projects/reportcard.html>
- Ocen, P. A. (2015). (E)racing childhood: examining the racialized construction of childhood and innocence in the treatment of sexually exploited minors. *UCLA Law Review*, 62, 1586–1640.
- Pimentel, D. (2012). Criminal child neglect and the "free range kid": Is overprotective parenting the new standard of care? *Utah Law Review*, 2, 947–999.
- Prevention tips. (2018). Safely Ever After, Inc. [Website]. Retrieved from <http://safelyeverafter.com/tips.html>
- Quinn, J., Forsyth, C., & Mullen-Quinn, C. (2004). Societal reaction to sex offenders: A review of the origins and results of the myths surrounding their crimes and treatment amenability. *Deviant Behavior*, 25, 215–232.
- Radford, B. (2006, May 16). Predator panic: Reality check on sex offenders. *LiveScience*. Retrieved from <https://www.livescience.com/776-predator-panic-reality-check-sex-offenders.html>
- Reagan, R. (1984, September 20). Remarks at a Reagan-Bush rally in Cedar Rapids, Iowa. G. Peters & J. T. Woolley (Eds.), *The American Presidency Project*. Retrieved from <http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/?pid=40407>
- Renfro, P. M. (2016). Keeping children safe is good business: The enterprise of child safety in the Age of Reagan. *Enterprise & Society*, 17(1), 151–187.
- Rudolph, J., Zimmer-Gembeck, M. J., Shanley, D. C., & Hawkins, R. (2018). Child sexual abuse prevention opportunities: Parenting, programs, and the reduction of risk. *Child Maltreatment*, 23(1), 96–106. Retrieved from <http://journals.sagepub.com/doi/abs/10.1177/1077559517729479>

- Schiavone, S. K., & Jeglic, E. L. (2009). Public perception of sex offender social policies and the impact on sex offenders. *International Journal of Offender Therapy and Comparative Criminology*, 53, 679–695.
- Schlesinger, T. (2018). Decriminalizing racialized youth through juvenile diversion. *Future of Children*, 28(1), 59–81.
- Schneier, B. (2006). *Beyond fear: Thinking sensibly about security in an uncertain world*. New York, NY: Springer Science & Business Media.
- Sedlak, A. J., Finkelhor, D., & Brick, J. M. (2017). *National estimates of missing children: Updated findings from a survey of parents and other primary caretakers*. Washington, D.C.: U.S. Department of Justice, Office of Justice Programs, Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention. Juvenile Justice Bulletin. Retrieved from <https://www.ojjdp.gov/pubs/250089.pdf>
- Sedlak, A. J., Mettenburg, J., Basena, M., Petta, I., McPherson, K., Greene, A., & Li S. (2010). Fourth national incidence study of child abuse and neglect (NIS-4): Report to congress. Washington, D.C.: U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Administration for Children and Families. Retrieved from https://www.acf.hhs.gov/sites/default/files/opre/nis4_report_congress_full_pdf_jan2010.pdf
- Shah, R. S. (2017, October 18). How sex offender registries impact youth. *Teen Vogue: Kids Incarcerated*. Retrieved from <https://www.teenvogue.com/story/how-sex-offender-registries-impact-youth>
- Shumaker, H. (2016, March 21). Yes, let your kids talk to strangers. *Daily Beast*. Retrieved from <https://www.thedailybeast.com/yes-let-your-kids-talk-to-strangers>
- Shutt, J. E., Miller, J. M., Schreck, C. J., & Brown, N. K. (2004). Reconsidering the leading myths of stranger child abduction. *Criminal Justice Studies*, 17(1), 127–134.
- Simmons, C., & Woods, J. (2015). The overrepresentation of white missing children in national television news. *Communication Research Reports*, 32(3), 239–245.
- Stillman, S. (2016, March 14). The list: When juveniles are found guilty of sexual misconduct, the sex-offender registry can be a life sentence. *The New Yorker: Annals of Justice*. Retrieved from <https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2016/03/14/when-kids-are-accused-of-sex-crimes>
- Stillman, S. (2007). 'The missing white girl syndrome': Disappeared women and media activism. *Gender & Development*, 15(3), 491–502.
- Stockton, K. B. (2009) *The queer child, or growing sideways in the twentieth*

- century. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.
- Stokes, M. A. (2009). Stranger danger: Child protection and parental fears in the risk society. *Amsterdam Social Science*, 1(3), 6–24.
- Stuntz, W. J. (2001). The pathological politics of criminal law. *Michigan Law Review*, 100(3), 505-600.
- Sunstein, C. R. (2005). *Laws of fear: Beyond the precautionary principle*. New York, NY: Cambridge University Press.
- The Annie E. Casey Foundation. (2017). *2017 KIDS COUNT Data Book*. Retrieved from www.aecf.org/databook
- U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Administration for Children & Families, Administration on Children, Youth and Families, Children's Bureau. (2018). *Child maltreatment 2016*. Retrieved from <https://www.acf.hhs.gov/cb/research-data-technology/statistics-research/child-maltreatment>
- U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Administration for Children & Families, Administration on Children, Youth and Families, Children's Bureau. (2013). *Child maltreatment 2012*. Retrieved from <https://www.acf.hhs.gov/cb/resource/child-maltreatment-2012>
- Vásquez, B. E., Maddan, S., & Walker, J. T. (2008). The influence of sex offender registration and notification laws in the United States: A time-series analysis. *Crime & Delinquency*, 54(2), 175–192.
- Walsh, J., & Schindehette, S. (1998). *Tears of rage: From grieving father to crusader for justice: The untold story of the Adam Walsh case*. New York, NY: Simon & Schuster.
- Wanzo, R. (2008). The era of lost (white) girls: On body and event. *Differences*, 19(2), 99–126.
- Wax, N. (2016). *Parenting styles-the concept of 'stranger danger' and instilling child safety skills*. (Doctoral dissertation), North Carolina Central University, Durham.
- Websdale, N. S. (1996). Predators: The social construction of 'stranger-danger' in Washington state as a form of patriarchal ideology. *Women & Criminal Justice*, 7(2), 43–68.
- Weitzer, R. (2007). The social construction of sex trafficking: Ideology and institutionalization of a moral crusade. *Politics & Society*, 35(3), 447–475.
- Wodda, A., & Panfil, V. R. (2017). Insert sexy title here: Moving toward a sex-positive criminology. *Feminist Criminology*. Retrieved from <http://journals.sagepub.com/doi/10.1177/1557085117693088>
- Wolak, J., Finkelhor, D., & Sedlak, A. J. (2016). *Child victims of stereotypical kidnappings known to law enforcement in 2011*. Washington, D.C.: U.S. Department of Justice, Office of Justice Programs, Office of Juvenile

- Justice and Delinquency Prevention. Juvenile Justice Bulletin. Retrieved from <https://www.ojjdp.gov/pubs/249249.pdf>
- Wun, C. (2016). Unaccounted foundations: Black girls, anti-Black racism, and punishment in schools. *Critical Sociology*, 42(4-5), 737–750.
- Zgoba, K. M. (2004). Spin doctors and moral crusaders: The moral panic behind child safety legislation. *Criminal Justice Studies*, 17(4), 385–404. Retrieved from http://nj.gov/corrections/pdf/REU/Moral_Panic.pdf
- Zimring, F. E. (2009). *An American travesty: Legal responses to adolescent sexual offending*. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press.