

Spin Doctors and Moral Crusaders: The Moral Panic behind Child Safety Legislation

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Issues of child abduction and molestation have risen so high on social agendas that they have all but eclipsed similarly offensive crimes. Media broadcasts of a rash of child abductions, molestations and homicides have led to a nationwide moral panic concerning the safety of children. The media frenzy surrounding these publicized cases has created a 'fear factor' among parents and caregivers, begging the question as to whether the incidence of child abduction and molestation has increased or whether the nation's heightened sensitivity is a result of increased media reporting. This article explores the present climate of fear by way of five moral panic criteria developed by Goode & Ben-Yehuda. This link between the child predation moral panic and child safety legislation is explored in the context of the recently enacted Amber Alert. Similarities are demonstrated in the origin and empathy of both the Amber Alert and its predecessor, Megan's Law.

Keywords: *Child abductions; Child molestation; Social constructionism; Amber Alert; Megan's Law*

Introduction

Child predation cases are the most vilified in both the media and the criminal justice system (CJS) (Finkelhor & Ormrod, 2000; Jenkins, 1998; Palermo & Farkas, 2001; Pratt, 2000; Scott, 2001). Unlike similarly violent cases, child abduction, child molestation and child homicide consistently receive national media prominence, rendering many equally disturbing cases overlooked. Issues of child abduction and molestation have risen so high on social agendas that they have all but eclipsed neglect, deprivation

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and physical cruelty of children (Scott, 2001). The public considers nothing as frightening as hearing the words, 'missing child' or 'child molestation'; it is at this point that all parents question the safety of their own children.

Media broadcasts of a rash of child abductions, molestations and homicides have led to a nationwide moral panic concerning the safety of children (Bagley & Mallick, 1999; Cohen, 1972; DeYoung, 1998; Edwards & Lohman, 1994; Fox, 2002; Goode & Ben-Yehuda, 1994; Jenkins, 1998; Jewkes, 1999; Scott, 2001; Welch, Price & Yankey, 2002). The summer months of 2002 were informally coined the 'summer of abduction' by the media (Fox, 2002); it was nearly a daily occurrence to hear stories of children taken from their own bedrooms or front yards. The headlines surrounding the recent cases of Danielle Van Damme, Samantha Runnion, Cassandra Williamson, Erica Pratt, Elizabeth Smart and even the more historic cases of Adam Walsh and Polly Klaas, have kept the public riveted at both the community level and the national level (Finkelhor & Ormrod, 2000). This heightened media reporting results in the belief that the country is experiencing an epidemic of crimes against children. The media frenzy surrounding these publicized cases has created a 'fear factor' among parents and caregivers, begging the question as to whether the incidence of child predation has increased or whether the nation's heightened sensitivity is a result of increased media reporting. Nonetheless, the fear of child abductions and molestations has captivated the nation (Fox, 2002; Jenkins, 1998).

While the increased awareness has the beneficial effect of amplified vigilance, it also yields detrimental and counter-productive side effects. Similar to the situation occurring in the early 1990s with the disappearance of Jacob Wetterling and the sexual molestation and death of Megan Kanka, parents are demanding politicians develop legislation that will ensure the well being of their children. This galvanized effort in early 1990 resulted in the passage of the Jacob Wetterling Act, which was later amended into the commonly known 'Megan's Law' (Brooks, 1996; Matson & Lieb, 1997; Rudin, 1996). Although proponents of Megan's Law widely cite its benefits, the legislation, which was passed at breakneck speed, suffers from numerous constitutional challenges and practical drawbacks (Brooks, 1996; Rudin, 1996). With the Amber Alert notification system, the nation is witness to legislation that, at its core, bears a striking resemblance in etiology and empathy to Megan's Law. Similar to Megan's Law, the public has strongly advocated in favor of the Amber Alert, perhaps without recognizing the practical drawbacks that the legislation carries with it. Policies that affect the safety of children rarely meet much resistance, which begs the question of whether such legislation has been thoroughly researched or should be considered a knee-jerk reaction to what the public perceives to be an emergency situation (Jenkins, 1998; Palermo & Farkas 2001).

This article explores the link between a moral panic related to abducted and molested children and child safety legislation, namely the Amber Alert, an early warning system that notifies the community with information on a missing child. The first portion of the article considers the historical context of a moral panic and whether the current climate qualifies as a moral panic by way of Goode and Ben-Yehuda's (1994) criteria. The second portion reviews the history and activation process of the Amber Alert system and its similarities to Megan's Law. The article concludes with a

review of the practical and theoretical challenges of the Amber Alert and Megan's Law and their link to the current climate of fear.

Background of Moral Panics

In the present climate of fear and concern, the words spoken by President Roosevelt in 1933 are relevant now, more than ever. Does the nation really have nothing to fear, but fear itself? This view is consistent with the notion of a moral panic, first introduced by Jock Young (1971) and more widely attributed to Stanley Cohen (1972) in his examination of society's reaction to the Mods and Rockers in 1960s Britain. Moral panics have been described as a condition, episode, person or group of persons, which emerge to become defined as a threat to societal values and interests (Cohen, 1972, p. 9). These threats are designed in a sensationalized fashion by the media as well as other agents of social control, including politicians, law enforcement and religious leaders, with the intention of establishing meaningful parameters for acceptable societal behavior (Welch, 2000). Those behaviors that do not conform to the established parameters are marginalized as unacceptable and cast out of society (Jewkes, 1999). The media-crafted threat of a moral decline perpetuates a collective outrage, which ultimately defines what society perceives as good versus bad.

Moral panics can occur as either contemporary social ills or more established marginalized behaviors that re-emerge as deviant. Nonetheless, society has experienced countless moral panics over time including freeway violence and road rage (Best, 1991, 1999; Glassner, 1999), satanic cult panics (Scott, 2001; Victor, 1994), cyberporn (Jenkins, 1998), school violence and predatory youth (Bennett, DiIulio & Walters, 1996; Glassner, 1999), child abuse in day care centers (DeYoung, 1998), child abuse and serial murder rings (Bagley & Mallick, 1999; Jenkins, 1998) and 'wilding' by dangerous teens (Welch *et al.* 2002). While these societal intimidations have concerned a variety of phenomena, each has threatened the moral foundation of society (Furedi, 1994). It has been suggested that as each one of these moral panic dissipates, there is another one looming on the sidelines (Furedi, 1994). For example, Jenkins (1998, p. 3) states:

in the past decade, stalking, elder abuse and sexual harassment have all become major issues without any evidence that their behaviors have increased, whereas other, once frightening issues like homosexuality, racially mixed marriages and the eugenic decline of the race have all but disappeared as sources of alarm.

The perceived significance of each moral panic consistently aligns with the propagated view of the agents of social control, namely policy makers and the media. Each fluctuation in moral panic foci has little, if anything, to do with increases in prevalence, but can almost solely be attributed to an increase in attention (Jenkins, 1998; Welch *et al.* 2002).

Moral Panic over Child Abduction and Molestation

The abduction and molestation of children has generated some of the highest levels of public fear and anxiety (Finkelhor & Ormrod, 2000; Pratt, 2000; Scott, 2001). The

media, by way of newspaper and television, has undoubtedly been the most powerful conduit influencing public opinion over child abduction and molestation. Because few other crimes evoke the fear and outrage as crimes against children, the media continuously reports these stories, setting the stage for a widespread panic (Palermo & Farkas, 2001). The process of constructing a social problem or a moral panic begins with the recognition of an event, most notably those involving children (Jenkins, 1998). The media captures hold of the story and continuously escalates the sensationalized aspects, bringing the occurrence from the ordinary, to the extraordinary. This illustrates what Palermo and Farkas (2001, p. xiii) refer to as the *Dilemma of the Sexual Offender*, whereby offenders are, '[c]ondemned and ostracized by the public, mythologized and manufactured by the media, admonished and contained (both criminally and civilly) by the law, and pathologized and treated by psychiatry, society's reaction to rapists, child molesters, lust murderers and other sexual offenders is nothing short of a moral panic'.

The public's concern over child abduction can be traced back as early as 1932 with the media frenzy surrounding the Lindbergh baby kidnapping and homicide (Finkelhor & Ormrod, 2000; McManus, 2002). However, since then, the public's distress has transformed and escalated into fears over child molestation, abduction and homicide, as evidenced by the widely publicized cases of Adam Walsh, Polly Klaas, Megan Kanka and Amber Hagerman (Finkelhor & Ormrod, 2000; McManus, 2002). While this lengthy history appears to illustrate that society has always been highly sensitive to child predation cases, this has not always been true (Jenkins, 1998). The concern over child abduction and sexual molestation has fluctuated throughout the 20th century. For example, as recently as 20 years ago, child sexual offenders were assumed to be confused individuals who had little propensity to re-offend (American Psychiatric Association [APA], 1999; Jenkins, 1998).

The earliest panic over child molestation has been recorded as occurring in 1894, resulting in a wave of legislation geared toward increasing the age of sexual consent (Jenkins, 1998). Concern over children varied in the interim, but was revitalized around the 1930s with the first wave of the sexual psychopath legislation. As stated by Jenkins (1998, p. 16), 'these statutes were never applied to a large number of offenders, suggesting that their main function was symbolic rather than practical'. For the most part, these statutes fell out of favor by the 1970s and only a small number of states continued to abide by this legislation (APA, 1999).

During this time moral crusaders or agents of social control, displayed a departure from the rehabilitative ideology to a more punitive ideology directed toward child molesters and abductors (APA, 1999; Jenkins, 1998; Welch *et al.* 2002). Moral panics over a variety of additionally related topics came to pass, including the satanic murder of children (Jenkins; 1998; Scott, 2001; Victor, 1994) and child abuse in daycare centers (DeYoung, 1998). Furthermore, during this time frame, the National Center for Missing and Exploited Children was established to increase public awareness concerning the safety of children and the National Child Search Assistance Act of 1990 was developed, mandating the immediate reporting of missing children (McManus, 2003). Collectively, these events suggest a constant fluctuation in the level of concern over crimes against children.

After a lapse of a few years, child protection issues again gained optimal importance during the 1990s with the disappearance of Jacob Wetterling in Minnesota, the abduction and murder of Polly Klaas in California and the sexual molestation and murder of Megan Kanka in New Jersey (APA, 1999; Brooks, 1996; Matson & Lieb, 1997; Rudin, 1996). Once again, the public witnessed a revival of the sexual psychopath legislation in the form of sexual predator laws and civil commitment statutes (APA, 1999; Jenkins, 1998; Lieb, Quinsey & Berliner, 1998; Palermo & Farkas, 2001; Schlank & Cohen, 1999; Winick & LaFond, 1998). Seemingly unaffected by constitutional challenges, the statutes continue to gain popularity and momentum (APA, 1999; Lieb & Matson, 1998; Matson & Lieb, 1997; Palermo & Farkas, 2001; Schlank & Cohen, 1999; Winick & LaFond, 1998). The media portrayed child molesters during this time as unstoppable and untreatable 'predators', who were only managed by the sexual offense legislation of community registration and notification (Megan's Law), civil commitment, chemical castration and lifetime supervision statutes (Palermo & Farkas, 2001).

Only two years later the nation was again witness to an increase in attention and concern over child molesters and abductors. Although this fluctuation in concern is nothing new, the current degree is unprecedented (Bagley & Mallick, 1999). The abduction and murder of Amber Hagerman occurred in 1996 but gained national prominence recently with the safe recovery of abduction victim, Elizabeth Smart. Similar to the case of Polly Klaas in 1993, Elizabeth Smart was abducted from her own home in the middle of the night. Recovered months later, Smart has since advocated for the widely sweeping child legislation known in honor of Amber Hagerman, the Amber Alert. The media coverage surrounding the abduction and recovery of Elizabeth Smart far exceeded the initial coverage of the abduction and murder of Hagerman, perhaps suggesting that the present climate is particularly sensitive to the fear and hysteria crafted by the media (Fox, 2002).

Defining a Child Abduction and Molestation Moral Panic

Goode and Ben-Yehuda (1994) developed five necessary elements that define a moral panic as taking hold. These elements include concern, consensus, hostility, disproportionality and volatility and are discussed in the following section within the context of child molestation and abduction (Goode and Ben-Yehuda, 1994; Welch *et al.* 2002). Welch *et al.* (2002) suggested that these criteria serve as conceptual guideposts for determining whether a moral panic has fixated a society.

Concern

According to Goode and Ben-Yehuda (1994, p. 33), the first indicator that a moral panic has gripped a society is a heightened level of concern (Welch *et al.* 2002). In most cases the level of concern is elevated beyond the actual threat and its increase should be verifiable (Cohen, 1972; Goode & Ben-Yehuda, 1994; Welch *et al.* 2002). Despite the numerous publications citing a low frequency of child abductions and the overall decrease in sexual abuse of both children and adults, media broadcasts persistently

report an 'epidemic' of child abductions, molestations and homicides (Bagley & Mallick, 1999; Cohen; 1972; DeYoung, 1998; Edwards & Lohman, 1994; Fox, 2002; Goode & Ben-Yehuda, 1994; Jenkins, 1998; Jewkes, 1999; Jones & Finkelhor, 2001; Scott, 2001; Welch *et al.* 2002). According to Jenkins (1998, p. 7):

[i]t comes to be believed that legions of sex fiends and homicidal predators stalk the land, that the number of active pedophiles runs into the millions, that tens of thousands of children are abducted and killed each year, that sinister cults have infiltrated pre-schools and kindergartens across the country, that incest affects one-fourth or even one-half of all young girls, that child pornography is an industry raking in billions of dollars and preying on hundreds of thousands of American youngsters each year.

Countless articles and television programs continuously present the public with sensationalized reports circulating these beliefs. For instance, within a two-year time frame from 1989 to 1991, six movies were released depicting the violence of abduction and sexual molestation (Jenkins, 1998). Furthermore, despite the exceptionally infrequent occurrence of stranger abductions, commonly referred to as 'stranger danger', the high level of media reporting during the 1980s did not align with the true frequency of abductions (Fox, 2002; Jenkins, 1998).

The dramatic shift in the terminology used to describe offenders offers an additional indicator of the heightened concern over child predation. Child sexual offenders have most often been described as 'predators' or 'fiends', with the specific intention of metaphorically describing offenders as predatory animals aggressively seeking out innocent prey (Jenkins, 1998; Palermo & Farkas, 2001). While the term 'predator' has no legal or psychological basis, legislation bearing this terminology has recently been enacted and its usage has increased dramatically (APA, 1999; Jenkins, 1998; Lieb & Matson, 1998; Schlank, 2001; Schlank & Cohen, 1999). According to Jenkins (1998), the expression 'sexual predator' did not appear in print between 1985 or 1986, but slowly started appearing between 1987 and 1989. The expression averaged 140 appearances a year between 1990 and 1992, and climbed to 321 appearances in 1993 (Jenkins, 1998, p. 194). Usage of the terminology then skyrocketed, increasing from 865 references during the year 1994 to 924 references in the year 1995 (Jenkins, 1998, p. 194). Having increased by approximately 900 percent in 10 years, the extensive use renders the association between the terms commonplace. Additionally, the extensive use of the expression 'predator' is consistent with the time frame surrounding the molestation and death of Megan Kanka, which is believed to be one of the primary catalysts of the current moral panic.

Unfortunately, little has been done to dispel the circulating myths over the frequency of child molestation and abduction. Because sensationalized concerns are continuously propagated through the media, society becomes witness to galvanized social movements that often result in some form of legislation (Welch *et al.* 2002). According to Palermo and Farkas (2001, p. 154), '[t]he end result of these political and social forces is the passage of sex offender specific laws in a variety of forms'. The largely community-driven, emotion-laden legislation represents an additional indication that the level of concern over child molestation and abduction has increased dramatically. The Jacob Wetterling Act, Megan's Law, the National Sexual Offender Registry and the Amber

Alert collectively illustrate the manner by which social movements and panic have gained momentum and resulted in child protection legislation. Because the moral panic is defined as a problem, it inherently requires some level of a solution. The 'solution' of legislation further qualifies the moral panic as a 'problem' and empowers both the media and the public, resulting in a cyclical dynamic (Jenkins, 1998).

Consensus

In order to qualify as a moral panic, some degree of public consensus is necessary (Goode & Ben-Yehuda, 1994; Welch *et al.* 2002). While researchers state that the level of consensus does not need to be unanimous across all populations, 'there must be a widespread belief that the problem at hand is real, it poses a threat to society, and something should be done to correct it' (Welch *et al.*, 2002, p. 10). A population consensus over the belief in an abduction and molestation panic gains momentum by way of the following example- when a tragic child abduction or molestation occurs, the media attaches to the community outrage and continues to report on the events. From this point, an ongoing cycle is set into motion, with each of the elements acting interdependently. The public is continuously inundated with television and newspaper reports concerning the event, further validating that this epidemic truly exists. The public responds to the epidemic with a galvanized social movement toward a 'solution'. Community meetings are held and the public demands social change, namely in the form of legislation. As previously stated, the Jacob Wetterling Act, Megan's Law and the Amber Alert are examples of this type of community-driven child safety legislation (Brooks, 1996; Fox, 2002; Rudin, 1996; Schlank; 2001). This widespread movement by both the public and the legislature consequently authenticates to the media that the public perceives the situation as a problem and the extensive news coverage continues. Seemingly, the public, politicians and the news media are in consensus over the extent of the problem.

Hostility

The elevated level of community and legislative hostility directed toward those who harm children is especially salient in the present climate of fear and panic (Fox, 2002; Palermo & Farkas, 2001). Similar to the level of hostility felt toward Cohen's folk devils, the Mods and Rockers, an intensive hostility exists towards those who commit crimes against children (Cohen, 1972; Finkelhor & Ormrod, 2000; Fox, 2002; Jenkins, 1998; Scott, 2001). While the Mods and Rockers in Cohen's (1972) initial thesis were not true deviants, at least in a legal sense, child abductors and molesters are undoubtedly criminals. The outrage felt toward these criminals, and the resulting legislation, has grown exponentially compared to other crimes (Bagley & Mallick, 1999; Pratt, 2000).

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 (APA, 1999; Brooks, 1996; Meisenkothen, 1999; Rudin, 1996; Schlank & Cohen, 1999). These separate statutes

foster the belief that child predators are somehow different and more dangerous than other offenders, thereby facilitating the belief that the public needs to be both cognizant and fearful. Given the public nature of this legislation, namely community notification and registration, the levels of public hostility directed at child predators continue to increase. Although the rationale behind the notification and registration laws is aimed at providing the offender's identity for the purpose of promoting a safer community, many community members are obtaining the names and addresses of offenders and taking the law into their own hands. Galvanized vigilantes acts toward child predators have been increasing for the past 10 years as the public becomes disenchanted with the criminal justice system (Brasier, 2002; Center for Sex Offender Management [CSOM], 2000). According to James Alan Fox, '[m]ore people are likely to cheer than condemn vigilantes. They turn them into folk heroes, even when what they have done is not heroic' (Brasier, 2002, p. 3). This is evidenced by a recent case in Detroit where three men branded a neighborhood child molester on the genitals and buttocks with a metal spatula, a case that elicited nods of approval from courtroom observers and jurors (Brasier, 2002). The CSOM (2000), along with national and local newspapers, documents cases of community hostility and outrage toward child molesters and abductors. The majority of cases have included offenders terrorized by gunfire, arson, physical assault, property damage and threats directed at the offenders' families (CSOM, 2000). In many of these instances the offenders have been terrorized dangerously close to the point of suicide (Milloy, 2001). Ironically, most computerized state registries provide strict warnings over the use and dissemination of the offender's information. A number of legal organizations also provide online documentation governing the responsible use of registration information and the penalties incurred if they are disregarded.

In addition to the public's hostile feelings, the CJS has emphasized more punitive legislation and increased the amount of time sexual offenders and abductors serve in prison (Winick & LaFond, 1998; Palermo & Farkas, 2001; Pratt, 2000). For example, since 1980 the annual growth in prison populations for individuals convicted of sexual offenses, other than rape, was 15 percent, which is nearly twice the increase in the overall prison population (Greenfeld, 1997; Palermo & Farkas, 2001). This number increased faster than all other categories except drug trafficking (Greenfeld, 1997). Moreover, while the average sentence for sexual offenders has remained stable at about 10 years, the time served has increased from 3.5 years to 5 years (Greenfeld, 1997; Palermo & Farkas, 2001). Because few other crimes evoke the hostile feelings that crimes against children do, the public and the CJS are responding with both increases in formal sanctions and informal, vigilante actions.

Beyond the formalized punitive legislation, a small number of politicians have also advocated to increase sanctions for child predators by mandating vehicle bumper stickers and lawn signs that would further notify the community of the offender's presence (Milloy, 2001). Furthermore, child predators in many facilities are separated from general population offenders for the purpose of protective segregation, suggesting that even behind bars other offenders exhibit unparalleled levels of hostility and outrage toward child molesters and abductors.

Disproportionality

In order to qualify as a moral panic, the perceived danger must outweigh the realistic degree of danger (Goode & Ben-Yehuda, 1994; Welch *et al.* 2002). Despite the publicity warnings over rampant sexual molestation and abduction, both crimes have been decreasing in the past years (CSOM, 2000; Jones & Finkelhor, 2001). First, the arrest rate for sexual offenses dropped by 16 percent between the years 1993 and 1998 (CSOM, 2000). More specifically, child molestation cases have reportedly decreased between 25 percent and 30 percent for the years 1992 through 1998 (Jones & Finkelhor, 2001). Second, the reported frequency of stranger child abduction has been exaggerated and does not align with the facts (Fox, 2002). Making up only 2 percent of all crimes against juveniles, the constant media attention surrounding the 'stranger danger' of abduction in the 1980s and early 1990s no longer holds sway when the rates are examined. Rather, the media cultivates a panic by 'exaggerating claims ... [and] generating and disseminating statistics and figures' (Welch *et al.* 2002, p. 16). For instance, NISMART2, the National Incidence Studies of Missing, Abducted, Runaway and Thrownaway Children, reported 115 cases of stranger child abduction for 1999 (Finkelhor, Hammer & Sedlak, 2002). Of these 115 cases, 50 children were murdered or not recovered. Additionally, of these 50 children who were murdered, 37 were murdered within three hours (Finkelhor *et al.*, 2002). Sound bites were extracted from these results and consequently taken out of context when the media and national child protection organizations began reporting that 44 percent of all stereotypically kidnapped children would be killed, most within three hours, without reporting the low frequency with which these abductions occurred. Jenkins (1998, p. 220) reports, '[s]tatistics and research findings gain credibility to the extent that they fit public expectations, and they are often simplified or even distorted into some easily remembered format that is repeated until it becomes a truism'.

The following section discusses more detailed findings of the divergence between reported rates of abduction and child molestation and the perceived rates. A review of recent data on child abduction from both NIBRS and NISMART 2 illustrates the disparity between these rates. The disproportion is further demonstrated by an examination of recent rates of substantiated and unsubstantiated child sexual abuse. Collectively, these findings lend support to the belief that a wide divergence exists between the danger perceived by the public and the reality of their frequency (Welch *et al.* 2002).

Reported incidence of abducted children

The results from NISMART 2, National Incidence Studies of Missing, Abducted, Runaway and Thrownaway Children, report that approximately 800,000 children are reported missing on an annual basis (Hammer, Finkelhor & Sedlak, 2002).^{1,2} While most caretakers read about and fear stranger abductions, the type of abduction eligible for an Amber Alert, approximately 3.5 times as many children are abducted by family members.³ With the exception of voluntarily absconded or thrownaway children, family members represent the greatest threat for abduction (Hammer *et al.* 2002). Forty-four percent of children abducted by family members were under the age of six

with an almost equal split between male and female victims (Hammer *et al.* 2002). While children are at the greatest risk for abduction by family members, they also have the second highest rate of recovery and return to their family, approximately 91 percent of children were returned and an additional 6 percent were located but not returned (Hammer *et al.* 2002). Only in an extremely rare case would a family abduction constitute grounds for an Amber Alert.

According to NISMART 2, over 1,000 children are abducted per week by non-family members,⁴ a much rarer occurrence than family abductions (Finkelhor *et al.*, 2002). Unlike family abductions, the most recurrent victims of non-family abductions were female teenagers. Approximately 98 percent of non-family abductions result in a child recovery, surprisingly representing the highest rate of recovery (Finkelhor *et al.*, 2002). Non-family abductions are eligible for an Amber Alert only if they represent a potential fatal threat to the abducted child, rendering many of these cases ineligible for an alert.

Stereotypical kidnappings characteristically produce the most fear (Finkelhor *et al.* 2002). These kidnappings are those most frequently depicted in the media news coverage and are the type of abductions most eligible for an Amber Alert. A non-family abduction escalates to a stereotypical kidnapping⁵ case if the child is transported 50 miles, held overnight or for ransom or if the child is taken with the intent of being withheld indefinitely or murdered (Finkelhor *et al.*, 2002). While the frequency of stereotypical kidnappings is low, 115 cases occurred for the year 1999, they present the most danger. Furthermore, approximately half of the victims of stereotypical kidnappings experienced sexual assaults. Similar to non-family abductions, female teenagers were at the greatest risk of becoming victims of stereotypical kidnappings (Finkelhor *et al.* 2002).

Consequently, children are at a very low risk for the abductions that would warrant an Amber Alert, making the constant panic claims of the 1980s and early 1990s seem nonsensical (Jenkins, 1998). The newest estimates appearing from a compilation of NIBRS data states kidnapping makes up less than 2 percent of all juvenile violent crimes reported to the police. Additionally, only one death and a limited number of injured victims were associated with stranger abductions (Jones & Finkelhor, 2001). According to Jenkins (1998), there were 13,600 murdered children below the age of 12 from 1980 to 1994, averaging in 900 deaths per year. Most strikingly, despite the inundated reports of child abductions and homicides, 6 percent of the annual total, or 54 children a year, were murdered by a stranger (Jenkins, 1998, p. 10). Fox (2002) reports that a more conservative average estimate of 100 stereotypical kidnappings a year lends a child's chances of being kidnapped by a stranger at one in a million (Table 1).

Reported incidence of sexually molested children

Given the private nature of sexual crimes and the limited forum provided for children to speak about sex crimes, it is a commonly accepted belief that reports of child sexual victimization are under-counted (Prentky, Knight, & Lee, 1997). While it is impossible to determine the true extent of child molestation, official reports and offender and victim surveys provide some insight into the frequency. A national

Table 1 Results from NISMART2- 1999 sample

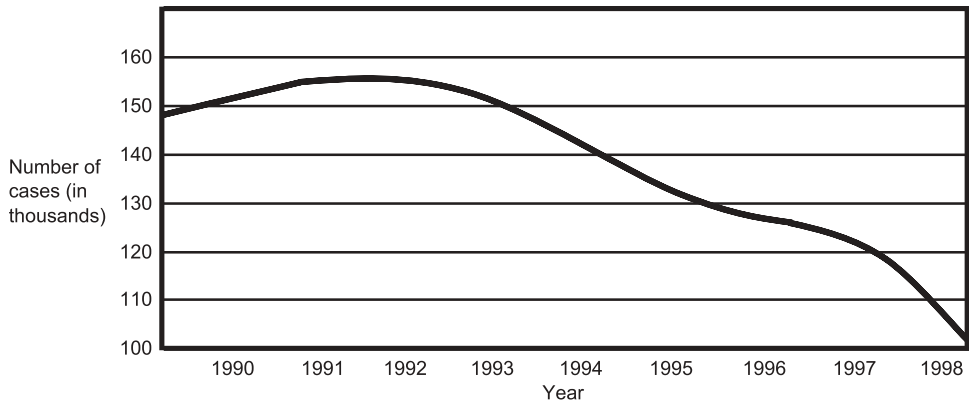
Category	Number Abducted
<i>Missing Children</i>	797,500
<i>Family Abducted</i>	203,900
<i>Non-Family Abducted</i>	58,200
<i>Stereotypical Kidnapping</i>	115
<i>Runaway/Thrownaway Children</i>	1,682,900

Source: Finkelhor et al. 2000

estimate provided by Jones and Finkelhor (2001) reports 103,600 cases of substantiated child sexual abuse for the year 1998, a 31 percent decrease from the 149,800 cases in 1992. This decline did not display a regional pattern, with a decrease of substantiated cases in 36 of the 47 states that provided complete data. In addition, the number of reported, yet unsubstantiated, cases of child sexual abuse decreased from an estimated 429,000 cases in 1991 to 315,400 cases in 1998, a decrease of 26 percent (Jones & Finkelhor, 2001). Furthermore, despite the increasing rates of child maltreatment during the 1980s and 1990s, the rate of child sexual abuse has continued to decrease. The majority of information-providing states report a decline in child sexual abuse unparalleled to any other type of child maltreatment, illustrating a climate cultivated by fear (Jones & Finkelhor, 2001). This decline in both substantiated and unsubstantiated cases of child sexual abuse is widely divergent from the 10 percent increase in child sexual abuse caseloads that social workers reported during the 1980s (Jones & Finkelhor, 2001). Examining the reported frequency of child sexual abuse lends evidence to the belief that media claims tend to sensationalize and exaggerate (Figure 1).

Volatility

The final criterion set forth by Goode and Ben-Yehuda (1994) explores the volatility of a moral panic. Volatility can be described as consistent fluctuations or sudden eruptions in the level of panic (Welch *et al.*, 2002). As discussed more comprehensively in the third section, the level of panic over child abduction and molestation has varied over the past century, with each phase demonstrating some degree of interdependency for the other. While the topic of child abduction first evolved with relatively little concern over molestation, this changed when caregivers recognized that children were the victims of both abduction and child molestation. The nature of these threats shifted dramatically and it is now difficult to separate the two (Jenkins, 1998; Palermo & Farkas, 2001). Yet, the continuity of concern over the two topics has not reflected stability, as each of the issues has been received differently at various points in time (Jenkins, 1998). Concern has fluctuated greatly over the past century, where issues of child safety, ‘... rise and fall, evolve and mutate, depending on such intertwined factors as demographic changes, shifting gender expectations, economic



Note: Extrapolated to the US child population

Source: Jones & Finkelhor's (2001) analyses of 1990-1998 data (US Department of Health and Human Services, 1992-2000).

* Revised from original for format and resolution purposes

Figure 1 Substantiated Cases of Child Sexual Abuse, 1990-1998*

strains, and racial conflicts as well as the social, political, and religious ideologies built upon these underlying realities' (Jenkins, 1998, p. 216). Jenkins (1998) additionally warns that if concepts of childhood danger are to be studied, they must be understood within the context of shifting social foundations. For instance, concern over children and sexual crimes was at its lowest when the country had a high level of tolerance for sexual experimentation, namely the 1920s and 1960s (Jenkins, 1998). This sexual freedom disappeared around the 1980s with the advent of sexually transmitted disease and AIDS, and as agents of social control again began establishing their presence (Jenkins, 1998). During this time frame panic over child abduction and molestation began increasing again as religious and moralistic groups promoted their goals and issues of recovered memories and therapy increased awareness (Jenkins, 1998).

In a similar vein, the fluctuating concern over child protection has also been intricately linked to the prevailing ideology of the criminal justice system (APA, 1999; Jenkins, 1998; Palermo & Farkas, 2001). Early legislation was rehabilitative in nature, concentrating on the treatment of offenders (APA, 1999; Pratt, 2000). Little blame was placed during this time, as the offender was assumed to be confused and the victim overly seductive (Belknap, 2000). This belief fell out of favor as the CJS adopted a more punitive position and widespread reports of child victimization began to paralyze the nation (APA, 1999; Jenkins, 1998). Thought of as a seemingly reasonable solution, states soon thereafter started adopting stricter child protection legislation. According to Palermo and Farkas (2001, p. 154), '... [t]he real impetus to enact laws and control strategies has typically followed a *sex panic*, the heightened fear engendered after a highly publicized sex crime or series of sex crimes'. As reports of these abductions and molestations fluctuate, so does the level of panic.

What's in a Name? The History and Activation Process of the Amber Alert

In an effort to address, and consequently validate, the growing panic and concern over abducted and molested children, President George W. Bush signed the Amber Alert into federal law in April 2003. Accompanied by both Elizabeth Smart and Donna Norris, mother of the victim for whom the plan is named, President Bush warned that kidnappers and sexual offenders should fear their imminent capture ('Amber Alert', 2003). Publicized as one of the widest sweeping child protection acts in history by its proponents, Texas Republican and Senate Majority Leader Tom De Lay and Utah Republican Senator Orrin Hatch, proclaimed the Amber Alert as a major victory in the struggle to prevent child predation ('Amber Alert', 2003).

The Amber Alert, which stands for America's Missing: Broadcast Emergency Response, was named after Amber Hagerman, a nine-year old who disappeared in Arlington, Texas, while riding her bike in 1996 (Polly Klaas Foundation, 2003). Although a neighbor was able to provide law enforcement officers with a description of the vehicle into which Amber was lured, there was no existing system that provided for the dissemination of information to local residents. Much to the outrage of community members and family, Amber Hagerman's body was discovered four days later. In an effort to prevent similar occurrences, the Dallas/Fort Worth Association of Radio Managers collaborated with the local law enforcement agencies in Texas to develop the warning system presently known as the Amber Alert (Polly Klaas Foundation, 2003). The main goal of the Amber Alert is the swift transmission of vital information to local residents, ultimately for the safe return of abducted children. The foundation of this system is embedded in the belief that as more time elapses, the likelihood of recovering a missing child decreases. Consequently, the notion of 'beating the clock' is of primary importance when recovering missing children.

The Amber Alert system is set into motion when a child is abducted and substantial information about the victim, the offender or the offender's vehicle, is available to aid in the recovery of the victim. The activation of the Amber Alert system also requires a confirmation that a child has been abducted and the belief that the abducted child is in imminent danger and may face harm or death (Peters, 2003). Bulletins are then posted with the relevant information and communicated via changeable message signs on highways, radio, television and the Internet (Peters, 2003).

Having languished from late 1996 until March 2003, the Amber Alert Bill was revived after the extensive news coverage surrounding the recovery of Elizabeth Smart. Collectively, the pleas from the Smart family and the widely publicized successes from individual state implementations of the Amber Alert paved the way for Congress to take a second look at the legislation (Polly Klaas Foundation, 2003). Amended in late March 2003, the bill went before Congress and received a 400–25 vote in the House and a subsequent Senate vote of 98–0. President George W. Bush swiftly signed it into federal law stating that any resource must be utilized to find abducted children and punish child predators (Kenen, 2003). As evidenced by the nearly bipartisan support in the House and Senate, both Congress and the public are in consensus with the

President's assertion that an epidemic of child abductions and sexual molestations exists and must be stopped.

The Amber Alert and Megan's Law: Similar Cases, Obstacles and Legislation?

The 1994 sexual molestation and death of Megan Kanka in Hamilton Township, New Jersey re-awakened a social panic that had initially focused on child abductions (Brooks, 1996; Matson & Lieb, 1997; Rudin, 1996). This level of fear lay dormant for some time but was re-awakened when society was re-introduced to the sexual offender. The panic over child molestation was considered a new terror for this generation of parents and caregivers, redefining what society had to fear. The New Jersey legislature responded to this fear only two months later when they bypassed other hearings on the agenda to render a decision about the 'emergency situation' of child molesters living anonymously in the community (Brooks, 1996; Jenkins, 1998; Palermo & Farkas, 2001; Rudin, 1996). Public outrage provided the necessary pressure for the creation and passage of the widely known Megan's Law (Brooks, 1996; Rudin, 1996). Modeled after the Washington Law, the centerpiece of Megan's Law was the ability for both law enforcement and the public to track offenders through the use of community registration and notification (Jenkins, 1998).

The Amber Alert and Megan's Law share a number of striking commonalities. Both children, Amber Hagerman and Megan Kanka, met the same fate when they were abducted and murdered (Teir & Coy, 1997). As a result, both have had consecutive Presidents, Clinton and Bush, sign legislation bearing their names into effect. The enactment of legislation had been virtually automatic due to the public's outcry and political crusading (Palermo & Farkas, 2001). Limited opposition was confronted during the formulation and enactment phases, as politicians were concerned with maintaining traditional morality and appearing tough on child predators. The issues gained a highly politicized status as the level of concern escalated beyond the death of Amber Hagerman and Megan Kanka (Palermo & Farkas, 2001).

Second, both forms of legislation are the result of increased publicity and community pressure applied to legislatures (Jenkins, 1998). The community responded to the increased level of media attention with heightened sensitivity and panic, believing that the problem was pervasive. In the aftermath of these notorious crimes, politicians and media figures established a child protection platform and the local citizens began the fight for legislation (Jenkins, 1998). According to Palermo and Farkas (2001, p. 154), these politicians were '... answerable to their constituents' concerns, including the worries of victims' families and victims' groups, and no politician wants to appear callous or unresponsive to a frightened community worried about their safety and the safety of their children'. The Amber Alert and Megan's Law are examples of this type of emotion-driven legislation, fueled by the fear of protecting innocent children from violent 'predators'. Public support for Megan's Law and the Amber Alert was elevated to the degree that they barely met resistance. New Jersey's version of Megan's Law was enacted only months after the death of Megan Kanka, while the Amber Alert was swiftly signed into effect after the safe return of Elizabeth Smart.

Third, the legislation resulting from these crimes ‘... exhibit[s] the classic signs of panic legislation, namely, poor conception and drafting, overly broad scope, and inadequate consideration of the likely side effects’ (Jenkins, 1998, p. 6). Having been designed amid a state of panic, both forms of legislation can be described as underdeveloped and ill conceived (Fox, 2002). The conciliatory legislation affords the public a sense of security often believed to be superficial because the possibility of offenders avoiding detection is reasonably high, and there is the likelihood that the most egregious offenders will not be targeted. As previously stated, the majority of abductions and child molestations are committed by an individual known to the victim, namely a family member (Greenfeld, 1997; Jenkins, 1998; Jones & Finkelhor, 2001). Alerting victims to ‘stranger danger’ or targeting stranger abductions may be misdirected and unknowingly place many victims in harm’s way (Palermo & Farkas, 2001).

This flaw applies to both Megan’s Law and the Amber Alert notification system equally. Offenders targeted by the notification and registration statutes of Megan’s Law have illustrated sexual offense recidivism rates at similar levels both before and after the implementation of the legislation, with the majority of sexual offense arrests reflecting a first time arrest (APA, 1999; Zgoba, Sager, & Witt, 2003). In addition, states are not solely responsible for monitoring the registration of sex offenders because the offenders themselves are ultimately responsible for complying with the registration requirements of Megan’s Law. Recent newspaper publications have uncovered that many states lose track of their sex offenders, most notably California, where more than 33,000 sexual offenders have absconded (Associated Press, 2003). Together this information may undermine the value and efficacy of the basis of operation for Megan’s Law.

Reports of high recidivism rates that are impervious to treatment provide the foundation and erroneous validation for Megan’s Law (Furby, Weinrott, & Blackshaw, 1989; Presser & Gunnison, 1999). While the majority of methodologically sound research demonstrates that child molesters and other sexual offenders do not re-offend at the level propagated by the media and perceived by the public, legislative proponents continue to rely on previously skewed results (CSOM, 2000; Hanson & Bussiere, 1998; Nicholaichuk, Gordon, Gu, & Wong, 2000; Quinsey, Rice, & Harris, 1995; Zgoba *et al.*, 2003). Perhaps the most comprehensive and current information is contained in a recent US Department of Justice report (Langan & Levin, 2002) that tracks various offenders post-release. This study found that sexual offenders had among the lowest recidivism rates of all offenders released, with 11.2 percent of rapists committing a new sexual offense after their release from prison (Langan & Levin, 2002; Zgoba *et al.*, 2003). Additionally, studies examining recidivism rates of sexual offenders within particular institutions have found low recidivism rates for sexual offenders, approximately 11 percent recidivism, as well as more comprehensive meta-analytical reviews reporting 12 percent recidivism among released sexual offenders (Hanson, Gordon, Harris, Marques, Murphy, Quinsey, & Seto, 2002; Nicholaichuk *et al.*, 2000; Zgoba *et al.*, 2003). Interestingly though, these low recidivism rates do not result in a re-formulation of legislation or a change in the perception of the media, politicians or the concerned public. For the most part, child offenders are viewed as predators solely prevented from re-offending by way of the current legislation, including both Megan’s

Law and the Amber Alert. The propagated theories of highly recidivating child predators pave the way for child safety legislation, but may also create the counterproductive result of misleading the public and misdirecting funds (Simon, 1997). The public is led to believe they are safe with this legislation in place, but the research illustrates that the majority of sexual offenders are not re-offending, elucidating that already convicted child molesters should not necessarily produce the most concern among community members.

The Amber Alert suffers from similar faults. The key issue concerning the basic capability of the Amber Alert notification system is that alerts are not issued for the most frequent classification of missing children, those who have voluntarily absconded or who have been abducted by family members. The missing children determined eligible for an Amber Alert represent only 7.3 percent of all missing children (Finkelhor *et al.*, 2002). While issuing alerts for other types of abductions would be akin to a constant 'crying wolf' and eventually lead to an overly sensitized community, the current criteria for an Amber Alert raises concerns over the extent of its efficacy. If alerts are only issued for the small portion of non-family child abductions, more specifically for the 115 stereotypically kidnapped children a year, the Amber Alert system appears extremely functional on the surface; however it increases concern over whether the Amber Alert is confronting the true nature and extent of child abductions. The plan, by pure coincidence, may actually serve to promote a false sense of security within communities. By recognizing only non-family abductions, authorities are making an unofficial statement that other cases are less serious or a secondary priority, potentially creating a hierarchical system of ranking child abductions.

Moreover, the majority of children abducted by family members are young; almost 50 percent are six-years-old or younger, while most victims of non-family abductions are teenagers (Finkelhor *et al.*, 2002). Because the Amber Alert can only be issued for children under the age of 18 and the majority of non-family abduction victims are teenagers, the pool of potential cases is further narrowed. This undermines the community perception that the Amber Alert is protecting younger, more vulnerable children. It raises additional concerns over whether the Amber Alert is helpful in protecting the children most in need of its safeguards.

A final commonality that applies to both Megan's Law and the Amber Alert is the public participation and surveillance as a means of crime control (Presser & Gunnison, 1999). Within the context of these two forms of legislation, the public holds the responsibility of maintaining social control. Under Megan's Law, community members are expected to inform themselves and their family members of dangerous offenders, relying on the principle, 'the more eyes, the better'. Public safety is supposedly achieved 'through the sharing of information and education' by community members (CSOM, 1997, p. 5). According to Beatty (1997, p. 20) sex offender notification is designed to allow citizens to 'actively participate in reclaiming the safety of their neighborhoods, cities and towns' (Presser & Gunnison, 1999, p. 302). Moreover, by way of an Amber Alert, law enforcement officers actively recruit the public's attention and aid in identifying offenders. News broadcasts supply identifying information on a fleeing abductor

and encourage the public to call in any sightings. Similar to Megan's Law, the Amber Alert relies upon the public as a means of maintaining the safety of the community.

Summary and Conclusion

Panic and concern over child safety, both in the form of abduction and child molestation, has fluctuated greatly over the past century (Jenkins, 1998). As evidenced by the five criteria developed by Goode and Ben-Yehuda (1994), concern, consensus, hostility, disproportionality and volatility, a child molestation and abduction moral panic has currently taken hold of society. Since its conception in the mid-1970s, the notion of a moral panic has gained recognition of its existence and its ramifications, with its problems most widely cited as misdirection of funds and attention, vigilante action and ill-conceived legislation (Cohen, 1972; Goode & Ben-Yehuda, 1994; Jenkins, 1998; Welch, 2000; Welch *et al.*, 2002). Each of these problems has been experienced within the context of child abduction or molestation and the resulting molestation. Interestingly, a number of agencies and organizations may also be benefiting from these moral panics, including therapists, law enforcement, politicians and community action groups (Jenkins, 1998). While these individuals or agencies may not independently benefit, a cycle of interdependence exists, in which each gains as the cycle progresses (Jenkins, 1998). Moreover, these moral panics clearly define the parameters of social acceptance, while reinforcing a moral agenda and an acceptable family structure (Palermo & Farkas, 2001).

As demonstrated, the primary catalyst toward these panics has not been the increased frequency of child abduction and molestation; rather, sensationalized media reports and political crusading are responsible for the moral panic that has fixated society. Despite the infrequent occurrence of these offenses, 'they generate an enormous amount of media attention and ignite fear, passion, and outrage of various individuals and groups in the community' (Palermo & Farkas, 2001, p. xv). The personalized nature of the death and molestation of Megan Kanka and Amber Hagerman becomes real to the public, rather than a horrible and infrequent event (Palermo & Farkas, 2001). This perceived threat of child abduction and molestation plays an important role in the generation of legislation. The resulting panic legislation, or feel-good legislation, is most often a knee-jerk reaction developed by the legislature to resolve the publicly perceived 'emergency situation'. More often than not, these types of laws are crafted amid a state of panic and lack the calm deliberation that effective legislation exhibits (Fox, 2002). While in theory, both the Amber Alert and Megan's Law are laudable attempts to keep children safe, the practical obstacles to each may outweigh their efficacy (Brooks, 1996; Rudin, 1996). Plagued by issues of misdirection of attention and vigilantism, the enactment of legislation begs the question of whether its initial implementation was necessary.

As is the case with any moral panic, the concern and panic over child molestation and abduction will continue to fluctuate throughout the upcoming years. As cycles ebb and flow, many phenomena that are considered benign now, may be a reason for concern in the future (Jenkins, 1998; Palermo & Farkas, 2001). New panics will be

cultivated as the media circulates new fears and politicians continue to enact conciliatory legislation. According to Jenkins (1994, p. 3), '[a]nother category rises or falls according to an intermittent cycle that shapes public fears over, say, drugs, juvenile delinquency, or immoral music'. As latent fears erupt, one can clearly see the new moral panics on the horizon – concern over clergy sexual abuse and computerized, virtual sexual offenders will be take the place of today's child molesters and abductors (Bagley & Mallick, 1999; Jenkins, 1998; Palermo & Farkas, 2001).

Notes

- [1] According to Finkelhor and Ormrod (2000, p. 1), 'confusion over the extent of abduction is exacerbated by the absence of reliable statistics'. Because individual jurisdictions lack the capabilities to compile their own statistics and the FBI does not collect this information in the Uniform Crime Report, it has been difficult to achieve a reliable national assessment of the extent of child abduction. In an effort to provide a solution, the Office of Juvenile Justice Delinquency Prevention (OJJDP) has completed a recent report, NISMART – National Incidence Studies of Missing, Abducted, Runaway and Thrownaway Children. The information provided here reflects information from NISMART2 (Finkelhor & Ormrod, 2000; Finkelhor *et al.*, 2002; Hammer *et al.*, 2002).
- [2] While direct comparisons between NISMART1 and NISMART2 are not possible, a decrease in stranger abductions by approximately 85 cases was detected (Flores, 2002).
- [3] The category of family members includes biological, adoptive or foster family members, individuals acting on behalf of the family and/or the romantic partner of a family member (Hammer *et al.*, 2002).
- [4] Perpetrators of non-family abductions include all individuals not fitting the qualifications for the previously defined family members, but have also been broadly written to include friends, acquaintances and strangers (Finkelhor *et al.*, 2002).
- [5] It is important to note that stereotypical kidnappings and non-family abductions are overlapping categories. Perpetrators of stereotypical kidnappings and non-family abductions do not fall into mutually exclusive categories.

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