During the 1980s, a small but nasty debate emerged over the number of children abducted by strangers. Competing estimates appeared in speeches, press reports, and testimony before congressional committees. This fall, the federal Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention (OJJDP) will try to resolve the issue by releasing the results of the National Studies of the Incidence of Missing Children. Reporters covering the debate over the stranger-abduction problem seem to assume that these studies' findings will be authoritative.

This debate's history reveals the importance of statistics in bringing social problems to public notice. Proponents of different causes must compete for the attention of policymakers and the public. If missing children capture their attention, then other issues, such as homelessness, are more likely to be neglected. Promoting new social problems becomes a matter of persuasion, and statistics play a key role in this process.

The fear of kidnappings by strangers propelled the missing-children movement into prominence. The movement emerged in 1981, following intense media coverage of the disappearance of Etan Patz, the brutal slaying of Adam Walsh, and the murders of twenty-eight Atlanta schoolchildren. John Walsh, Adam's father, quickly became the most visible missing-children crusader—and a reminder of the reality of stranger abductions. Although the term
“missing children” encompassed runaways and child snatchings (children taken by noncustodial parents), stranger abductions received the lion’s share of the attention. Widely-publicized recommendations that all parents assemble identification files with their children’s photographs, dental records, and fingerprints suggested that every child was in danger.

**Estimating the problem’s magnitude**

The crusaders described a stranger-abduction problem of astonishing dimensions. Then U.S. Representative Paul Simon offered “the most conservative estimate you will get anywhere”—50,000 children abducted by strangers annually. Child Find, a leading child-search organization, estimated that parents recovered only 10 percent of these children, that another 10 percent were found dead, and that the remainder—40,000 cases per year—remained missing. In short, the crusaders described a large number of stranger abductions with very serious consequences.

To be sure, everyone agreed that stranger abductions accounted for only a small minority of missing children; estimates for child-snatchings and runaways were far larger. But stranger abductions served to typify the problem: the television movie “Adam” brought widespread attention to missing children, and Adam Walsh came to represent the larger phenomenon. Sociologist Michael Agopian testified that “there are tens of thousands of additional Adams that are not so prominently reported by the media.”

The public certainly came to perceive child abduction as a serious problem. Surveys revealed widespread concern. Eighty-nine percent of Illinois parents viewed stranger abductions as a “very” or “quite” serious national problem. Thirty-seven percent of California adults believed that “there is a great deal of danger today of children being abducted by a stranger”—and another 47 percent said that there was “some” danger. A national survey of youth (ages 8-17) found that 76 percent reported being very concerned about the kidnapping of children and teenagers. (In comparison, 65 percent were very concerned about the possibility of nuclear war.)

By 1985, the movement was well established. There was a federally funded National Center for Missing and Exploited Children (NCMEC), and pictures of missing children graced billions of milk cartons and utility bills. The NCMEC was now offering a lower estimate of 4,000-20,000 stranger abductions per year, but the early estimates had a life of their own. The 50,000 figure continues to be quoted—and even higher estimates have appeared. One 1987 child-
safety guide put the annual number of stranger abductions at 400,000.

These estimates reflect the typical manner in which neglected social problems gain recognition: activists call our attention to them. One feature of past neglect is the absence of official statistics—no one has been charged with keeping track of the phenomenon. Activists inevitably present themselves as knowledgeable enough about some social condition to bring it to our attention. With no official statistics available, this putative knowledge seems to give the crusaders’ estimates the weight of authority. The activists seek to emphasize the problem’s magnitude and importance; they have nothing to lose by providing big numbers.

In the early stages of social-problem construction, these estimates may be the best—even the only—numbers available. And the media repeat these figures, although they tend to treat them carefully. Thus, the first ABC news story on missing children contained the following statement: “By conservative estimate, 50,000 children are abducted each year, not counting parental kidnappings and custody fights. Most are never found. Four to eight thousand a year are murdered.” Press reports routinely attribute statistics to “authorities,” “experts,” and “estimates.” As long as some source actually gave these figures, the press report is accurate: it is true that authorities gave statistic X, even if X is wildly wrong.

The authority of official statistics

Given the ease with which activists’ statistics find their way into policy discussions, it is remarkable that the missing-children crusaders’ claims came under closer, more critical attention in 1985. Led by the Denver Post (which received a Pulitzer Prize for its coverage of the issue), the press began suggesting that the risk of child abduction had been blown out of proportion. The Post spoke of a “numbers gap,” contrasting the well-publicized 50,000 figure with the sixty-seven FBI investigations of children abducted by strangers in 1984. A Post editorial suggested that the actual number of stranger abductions was “fewer than the number of preschoolers who choke to death on food each year.” Other journalists and social scientists joined this attack, using the contrast between FBI statistics and the crusaders’ estimates as proof that stranger abductions were uncommon. These critics betrayed a touching faith in official statistics.

The press seemed to share the widespread assumption that the FBI has jurisdiction in all kidnapping cases. This is not true. Before beginning an investigation, the Bureau demands evidence that the
offense somehow violates a federal statute—for example, using the mail to deliver a ransom note, or transporting a hostage across a state line. Only a fraction of the kidnappings “opened”—that is, brought to the Bureau’s attention—are found to involve violations of the Federal Kidnapping Statute. In 1984, the FBI decided to investigate 169 of 1,035 opened cases. Most investigations involved adult hostages; the FBI investigated only sixty-nine cases of abducted children in 1984. (The slightly smaller figure that was quoted in the press came from a preliminary compilation.)

These FBI figures were not authoritative measures of stranger abductions. In fact, missing-children crusaders regularly criticized the FBI’s reluctance to enter these cases. Several congressional hearings featured testimony from parents of children abducted by strangers—most notably John Walsh—who had found the FBI unwilling to investigate; the Senate Subcommittee on Juvenile Justice devoted one 1983 hearing to this problem. If the crusaders’ 50,000 estimate now seemed too high, the FBI figure of sixty-seven repeated by the movement’s critics was certainly too low.

In 1985, the media adopted the FBI statistics with the same uncritical enthusiasm with which they had accepted the activists’ estimates four years earlier. Of course, the official statistics had an advantage. The press seeks authoritative sources, and the FBI, which has served as the principal source of crime statistics for decades, has great authority. In promoting new social problems, official statistics count more than unofficial statistics. Embarrassed by criticism that their estimates were unfounded, the missing-children crusaders turned to making their own figures official.

Redefining child abduction

The contradictory official statistics made the missing-children cause controversial. In a 1986 congressional hearing, Representative Thomas Tauke of Iowa questioned the accuracy of NCMEC statistics. NCMEC President Ellis E. Meredith responded:

I don’t think anything has surprised me more than this preoccupation with numbers, and the “only 67 or only 68 or only 69.” . . . These are little helpless citizens of this country being held hostage, scared to death, totally unable to take care of themselves, being held hostage by terrorists. What is it with the “only,” sir?

The missing-children movement gave great weight to its own estimates—until these became the subject of dispute. Once the controversy emerged, Meredith and other crusaders argued that numbers
were irrelevant; they frequently asserted that "one missing child is too many."

At the same time, NCMEC officials began trying to redefine the missing-children problem: they advocated expanding the domain of stranger abduction, including offenses quite different from those described during the early stages of the missing-children movement. This more inclusive definition will inevitably produce larger numbers, justifying continued concern.

In 1986, the NCMEC responded to its critics by releasing a study of 1,299 recent cases of stranger abduction. Most of these data were collected haphazardly, making it impossible to generalize from the findings. However, the study did include an analysis of police records of every reported crime involving a kidnapping or attempted kidnapping of a child by a non-relative in Jacksonville, Florida and Houston, Texas during 1984. There were 269 such cases. Since these two cities held 0.9 percent of the U.S. population, extrapolation suggests that there were roughly 29,889 stranger abductions nationwide during 1984—a figure that many might consider to be in the same ballpark as 50,000. This extrapolation is easy to challenge, however, because both cities have unusually high rates of serious violent crimes. In 1984, the national rate for murder and non-negligent manslaughter was 7.9 per 100,000; but Jacksonville's murder rate was 17.7 and Houston's 26.2. Similarly, the rates for forcible rape were 35.7 nationwide, 100.8 in Jacksonville, and 70.3 in Houston. Since the two cities had two to three times the national incidence of serious violent crimes, we can probably halve the extrapolated number of kidnappings, to something like 15,000.

It is important to understand, moreover, what sorts of offenses fell within this study's definition of stranger abduction. The NCMEC researchers included both attempted and completed kidnappings. (Over a fifth of the cases involved an unsuccessful attempt.) And the Jacksonville and Houston cases reveal another pattern: 88 percent of the victims were female, 97 percent were missing for less than twenty-four hours, and the police recorded 61 percent of the cases as sex offenses. In short, most were cases of molestation, albeit technically involving kidnapping (that is, moving the victim to a different place). Nor did the authorities list these offenses as kidnappings: "Only 15% of the reports had classifications that included the words kidnapping, attempted kidnapping, or abduction" (emphasis in the original). In some cases, the victim might have been missing for no more than a few minutes. Without discounting the seriousness of these experiences for the victims, these crimes do not fit the
image of child abduction promoted by the early missing-children crusaders.

The Jacksonville/Houston data did include some very serious cases: six children were murdered, and at least four were gone for more than twenty-four hours. Unfortunately, the NCMEC's report doesn't reveal whether these categories overlapped. Assuming that the two cities had ten very serious incidents, extrapolation yields a nationwide figure of 1,111 stranger abductions involving either murder or a child's being missing for more than one day. And considering the two cities' high rate of violent crime, we might reasonably cut the estimate in half, to roughly 550 very serious cases.

The importance of definitions

Definitions make a difference. Defining stranger abduction broadly, so as to include attempted offenses and short-term abductions (typically for the purpose of sexual molestation), will produce a statistic of perhaps 15,000 cases annually. A narrower definition—which takes into account, for example, only children who are killed or missing overnight—will lead to a much smaller number, perhaps 550 cases a year.

There are signs that the broader definition is gaining acceptance. Other official agencies have begun to adopt the NCMEC's definition. Thus, a review of missing-children reports in New York State found that 85 percent of all cases involved teenagers, half of all cases were cancelled—i.e., the child was reported found—within four days, and 99 percent of the cases reported in 1985 had been cancelled by May 1986. While the New York records do not classify types of missing children, these findings might seem consistent with a high proportion of runaways. However, citing the NCMEC's claim that many stranger abductions are short-term crimes, the report warns that "there is no evidence that would justify defining New York State's missing children as essentially a 'runaway' problem."

Missing-children activists also support the more inclusive definition. The Kevin Collins Foundation for Missing Children (an organization specializing in the problem of stranger abduction) has criticized criminal-justice record-keeping practices for misclassifying stranger abductions:

Current police statistics (including the FBI statistics) fail to show that stranger abduction of children is a significant problem requiring national attention to correct it. . . . There is a reason why the current crime statistics fail to reflect a true picture of the numbers of stranger abductions. That reason is that whenever a previous or subsequent crime occurs in
conjunction with stranger abduction . . . the crime of abduction (kidnap-
ing) most often ceases to be shown. . . . [Stranger abduction] would be a
recognized problem if statistics were kept. . . . When statistics make the
problem graphic, police/public attention will be directed to the problem
and it will be diminished.

John Walsh put the case for a broad definition in more dramatic
terms: "If it was your daughter, . . . and you were waiting for her
and she didn't come home for four hours and after that time she
came home with bloody underpants and she had been raped, was
she a missing child? Damn well she was."

The use and abuse of statistics

The debate over stranger abduction reveals the importance of
statistics in the discussion of social problems. Three principles seem
clear: big numbers are better than little numbers; official numbers
are better than unofficial numbers; and big, official numbers are
best of all.

For several years, journalists, politicians, and missing-children
crusaders have suggested that research will provide an authoritative
measure of the number of missing children. Obviously, how many
stranger abductions are counted will depend upon what counts.
There are indications that the National Studies of the Incidence of
Missing Children will adopt a broad definition. One of the pilot sur-
veys sponsored by OJJDP used a broad definition in phrasing a key
question: "Since the first of this year, was there any time when
[name] was missing from your household and you were worried
about where (he) (she) was, . . . even if it was only for a few
hours?" In addition to surveys, the proposed research design
includes "a separate study of law enforcement records," in which
researchers will select a representative sample of law-enforcement
agencies, from which "records concerning all nonfamily abduction
situations will be identified." While this says nothing about the
definition of stranger abduction, the methodology is similar to that
of the NCMEC study.

The problem, of course, is that this research will have policy con-
sequences. However sophisticated the research design, the results
are likely to be presented in a manner that will maximize their rhe-
torical effect. A research report—perhaps several hundred pages
long—will be condensed into a brief press release, and that press
release is likely to give a single, official number for stranger abduc-
tions. If that number is large, it will establish that stranger abduc-
tion is indeed widespread.
In advocating the broad definition of stranger abduction, moreover, those who make claims continue to use frightening language and horrifying examples. Thus, NCMEC President Meredith speaks of little children “held hostage by terrorists,” and Jay Howell, the NCMEC's Executive Director, has provided the following testimony:

Unfortunately, a lot of the children, whether it is Adam Walsh, Vicki Lynn, a lot of the kids that are well known in this country were killed in a very short period of time, so you typically have a scenario where one person kidnaps a child, takes them to a second location, usually somewhere in that geographic area, sexually assaults them and releases them hours later, and sometimes they are murdered.

There is a rule of thumb that the more serious the crime, the less common it is. But activists are aware of the advantages of typifying a problem by drawing their examples from the most serious cases.

A broad definition of stranger abduction will generate high incidence rates. And high incidence rates—especially when they are illustrated with atrocity tales about raped or murdered children—will lead to perceptions that the problem is serious, that new policies are needed. Most missing-children crusaders advocate two sorts of policies: education/prevention and expansion of the social-control apparatus. Currently, parents can choose among dozens of anti-kidnapping books, games, videotapes, ID kits, and other commercial products designed to educate children about the dangers of abduction. Most are reasonably priced, but it is more difficult to calculate the social costs of encouraging both children and adults to believe that terrifying crimes are commonplace. The missing-children movement also emphasizes the need for greater social control: schools should require detailed identification records for every student; police should have the power to hold runaways; federal police powers should be expanded; courts should accept testimony from very young children; and so on. The unspeakable threat posed by the stranger-abduction epidemic justifies these changes; the new policies' potential costs and dangers receive little attention.

Former U.S. Senator Paula Hawkins of Florida, a leader of the missing-children movement, asks: “When you think about it, does it really matter whether the number [of stranger abductions] is 4,000, 20,000, or 50,000? . . . No abstract statistics should distract us from the plight of even one innocent child who is in danger of any kind of exploitation.” In fact, those abstract statistics shape our sense of a problem's urgency, which in turn affects policy.

There is nothing unique about the rhetoric of the missing-children movement. Activists routinely offer large estimates. This is particularly true in making claims about crime. Because crime is secretive,
because it inevitably involves a "dark figure," there are few constraints on the crusaders' imaginations. One million is a nice round number that routinely turns up; we frequently hear that there are a million abused children, and equal numbers of boy prostitutes, runaways, and victims of elder abuse. In each case the problem, because of its magnitude, demands action.

Activists use statistics to persuade; but these numbers must be understood for what they are—part of the rhetoric of social-problems promotion. Statistics are products of social processes, and they can have social consequences. When trying to understand social problems, we need figures we can count on, but we especially need to know what it is we're counting.