



Written by [Lenore Skenazy](#) on April 2, 2024

The Odds of Your Kid Getting Kidnapped

Kidnapping remains one of the top three fears of American parents despite its (thank God!) rarity.

One way to fight that outsized fear is to consider the actual odds of your child being kidnapped by a stranger. To gain some perspective, I gathered a whole lot of stats.

Note: It is hard to find stats that exactly match up with each other. One organization will study children ages 0-13. Another will study all kids under 17, etc. What's more, I'm not a statistician. But I'm giving it my best shot in the hopes that parents can see how NOT unsafe it is to send their kids outside, unsupervised, especially compared to ... driving them someplace!



Lenore Skenazy

Unintentional Motor Vehicle Traffic Injuries Are the Leading Cause of Death for Kids 0-19

The average rate is 4.4 out of 100,000 kids, from 2016-2019.

According to the Insurance Institute for Highway Safety, 715 children under age 13 died as car passengers in 2021 and 3,058 teens ages 13-19.

The Risk of a Child Being Kidnapped by a Stranger

The media like to report that “460,000 children go missing every year.” But that number does not represent “children who are kidnapped and given new names and enrolled in a new elementary school,” says University of Delaware Sociology & Criminal Justice professor Joel Best.

Instead, that number comes from a 2017 report by the Department of Justice on missing children. To qualify — I realize that's a strange word — a person UNDER AGE 18 *just had to be missing for more than an hour*.

Why don't the reporters ever mention THAT?

Anyway, the DOJ report used police data as well as results from a national survey that asked parents: Did your kids ever go missing? Yes, said some parents. For instance:

- An 8-year-old got off at the wrong bus stop and his frantic parents called the cops.
- A 10-year-old came home from the beach and went to bed — but her parents thought she was still outside.
- A divorced mom violated a court order by taking her 9-year-old out of state.
- A 17-year-old girl, pregnant, ran away.

So, of the 460,000 missing children, the report concluded (in a footnote), about 105 were “stereotypical kidnappings” — police-speak for abductions like you see on “Law & Order.” Most of those victims were teens. And 92% of *them* made it home safe.



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Another more recent DOJ study concluded that “The data do not demonstrate any change in rates” from the earlier study.

So: The odds of a minor getting abducted by a stranger?

There are about 72 million kids 0-17 in America. And the number kidnapped by strangers is about 100. So the odds of being kidnapped are about 1 in 720,000.

Putting the Risk of Child Kidnapping in Perspective

One way to look at that number: The odds of having conjoined twins is 1 in 200,000 according to the University of Maryland’s Medical Center. Way more common!

One Last Bit of Perspective

The risk of kids dying is going DOWN.

50 years ago, the death rate was 6 children per 10,000 kids ages 1-19. Now it’s 2 per 10,000, says Today’s Parent.

And to those who say, “Aren’t kids safer today because we don’t let them out of our sight?” I must note that the adults are far safer today too, and we don’t “helicopter parent” them.

I know it doesn’t feel that way, but as the FBI reported in February of this year: The violent crime rate today is about half of what it was 30 years ago.

It takes some bravery to buck the culture of fear. But maybe it’s time to man (or mom) up. Send your kids out to be part of the world. That’s what they’re built for.

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