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# Youth Truth



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## "Saving" the Lost Kids

Lisa Freeman

Nearly all parents worry about dangers that may threaten their children. The dangers they fear most are, not surprisingly, those that come from outside the home. Parents seem to have a desperate need to believe that they are good for their children, that they always know what's best, that no one else could provide their children with what they need. (Consider the success of Dr. Benjamin Spock's manual *Child and Baby Care*, which encouraged parents to ignore the advice of child-rearing "experts" and rely upon their own instincts.) Thus, many parents easily shrug off well-documented warnings about the harmful effects of parental behaviors on children (such as administering corporal punishment or exposing children to second-hand smoke), but are likely to panic at the thought of outsiders who may kidnap, molest, or corrupt their sons or daughters.

The National Center for Missing & Exploited Children (NCMEC) was founded in 1984 by John and Revé Walsh, a couple who had experienced the worst nightmare of most parents, the kidnaping and murder of their six-year-old son Adam in 1981. Their ordeal convinced them that a special agency was needed to help in the recovery of children like Adam.

NCMEC has been astonishingly successful in gaining widespread support. With five branch offices and an annual budget in 1999 of over \$15 million—over \$10 million of which was "federal funding"—NCMEC now claims to have 349 public-

and private-sector "partners", including the United States Post Office. Their "missing children" photos and descriptions, seen at first on milk cartons, now grace the walls of nearly every federal building and most WalMart stores, not to mention the direct-mail advertising cards delivered to over 80 million mailboxes throughout the nation. In 1999, in an arrangement with the IRS, the photos began appearing in tax booklets as well. John Walsh gained the national spotlight when he became the host of the Fox program "America's Most Wanted".

A non-profit group with a tax status of 501-c-3 (for "charitable" organizations), like NCMEC, is prohibited from "attempting to influence legislation" as "a substantial part" of its activities. We do not know if NCMEC's lobbying activities have ever met the definition of "substantial," but we do know that they have been regular and ongoing since its founding. Their press release of October 13, 1998 states that in 1985

...NCMEC released its first edition of *Selected State Legislation*, which encouraged states to enact strong laws to protect children .... NCMEC's *Model State Sex Offender Policy* is currently on its way to Members of Congress, Governors, Attorneys General, and key state policy-makers nationwide for their consideration. The report was released now to give

federal and state legislators time to compare its recommendations to state laws before they reconvene in January.

One can assume that their efforts to influence legislation have been as remarkably successful as their ability to gain public dollars.

How successful NCMEC has been in its recovery of missing children is much less clear. Their 1999 annual report (the latest available on their web site) states that the organization has achieved a "recovery rate" of 93.3%, having (in its 15-year history) "worked" 75,283 cases, "assisted in" 68,755 cases, and "assisted in the recovery of 50,605 children". (The calculation they use to arrive at the 93.3% "recovery rate" is not explained.) Later in the same report, however, one finds the much more modest—and more believable—claim that, in the history of NCMEC's photo distribution program, 887 children have been safely recovered as a direct result of having been featured. Well, 887 is not an unimpressive number, amounting to nearly 60 recoveries a year—although it is less than 1.18% of the cases NCMEC claims to have "worked". Since the group's expenditures on their hotline and photo-distribution project amounted to nearly \$2 million in 1999, we might figure that each recovery costs them over \$32,750.

*continued on page 9*

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### Successful Student Protest Overseas

Thousands of high school and college students, protesting media censorship and government corruption, massed in the Republic of Georgia's capitol on November 1. The protest, according to <http://www.bostonherald.com/news/international/georgia11022001.htm>, led to the resignation or dismissal of President Eduard Shevardnadze's entire cabinet.

### DC's Trust in Kids Pays Off

According to a study described at <http://www.buildingblocksfor youth.org/dcmd/mdpr.html>, the District of Columbia's substantial reduction in pretrial detention for juveniles during the 1990s did not jeopardize public safety. The study compares the district's youth crime rates with its neighboring state, Maryland, where the use of pretrial detention for kids was increased.

### Supreme Court Examines "Virtual" Minors

The nation's Chief Justices heard arguments on October 30 on whether computer-generated images of apparent minors engaging in sex acts violates child pornography laws; see the story at <http://www.nandotimes.com/technology/story/160573p-1525395c.html>.

### Home-Schooling Advantages Documented

A study released on October 6 by the Canadian "think-tank" the Fraser Institute found home-schoolers "more academically and socially advanced" than their public and private school peers; their press release is at [http://www.fraserinstitute.ca/media/media\\_releases/2001/20011009.htm](http://www.fraserinstitute.ca/media/media_releases/2001/20011009.htm).

### Chemical Rein Stays Mainly on the Brain

A study released on November 11, described at [http://my.aol.com/news/news\\_story.psp?type=1&cat=0200&id=0111116143211876](http://my.aol.com/news/news_story.psp?type=1&cat=0200&id=0111116143211876) finds that Ritalin may cause long-term changes in the brain.

### Adult Dose : 12 Years & Older

I was just looking at various medicines in my cupboard and noticed that all of them have the same dosage recommendations for all people 12 and over. There isn't any difference in dosage or interaction warnings.

From what I understand, for a drug to be certified by the FDA, there have to be studies, simulations, lab analyses, and finally, clinical tests .... Very few tests involve 12-year-olds (or anyone under 18) due to legal nonsense. If they're not using 12-year-olds, how can they be sure that the dosage and interactions should be the same? In these cases, someone, possibly a well-noted doctor or panel of doctors, must have determined that a 12-year-old reacts nearly the same way to a certain drug as a 24 or 42 year old. If not, the drug wouldn't be certified for all people over 12.

The various drug companies, the FDA, and doctors all over the country seem to be telling us that 12 year olds and "adults" react in a nearly identical fashion to nearly all drugs. If this is true, why would 12-20 year olds react so differently to just alcohol?  
Pedro P

### Bay Board Bans Blocking

On October 1, San Francisco's Board of Supervisors voted unanimously *against* complying with the Children's Internet Protection Act (CIPA) by installing filtering software on all public library computers, even if they lose their federal funding as a result; the story appears at <http://www.cnn.com/2001/TECH/internet/10/03/library.filters.ap/index.html>. (If only states had been as gutsy when the National Minimum Drinking Age Act threatened *them* with the loss of federal funds.)

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# The President's Pen

## The End of Activism?

*George Justin Mallone*  
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<president@asfar.org>

Unity is one of those Trojan horse concepts. While no one would argue against the notion that we should come together and help our fellow man in times of tragedy, that it is a most definite good to show courage, bravery, and pride by standing by each other's side against the darkness, the underscoring of this most glaringly obvious fact is generally not the intent of those cynical manipulators who use the word "unity" as cover to guilt trip activists into silence. We are told that we must be beyond partisan politics, for "this is war" after all, that we must put aside our "petty" issues and join in the national spirit of unity and "patriotism".

But what could possibly be more patriotic than actively engaging in the use of the rights which make this country worth defending in the first place? It is ironic, considering that wars have been fought for the defense of liberty, that wartime seems to be the time at which people most frequently forget how precious how precious and how hard-fought for those liberties are.

One of the most essential, basic and oft-derided, is the right of dissent. The right to, even in wartime, point to the government action and say "that is wrong".

Youth are still being persecuted for unpopular political beliefs.

Youth are still in gulag schools.

Youth are still drugged and dumbed down in in that somewhat milder form of concentration camp known as public education.

Youth are still tried as adults with none of the rights thereof.

Youth are still treated as unintelligent second-class citizens when they want to drink, smoke, work, marry, sign contracts, choose their own form of education, buy certain books, go to certain web sites, go to the movies, buy video games, etc. etc. etc.

Many things may have changed since Sept. 11th, but the status of youth rights in the Land of the Free is not one of them.

I have heard of various activist groups, some of which I don't particularly agree with, virtually stopping all efforts at activism in the wake of the tragedy, and I feel torn. Torn because while I do not agree with their aims, it is more than mildly disconcerting to see one's ideological enemies surrendering the battle not due to the realization that their logic is flawed, but due to the fear of defying the almighty god Unity and all his minions who plague our airwaves day in and day out.

I have had friends ask me "How do you think this will affect youth rights, and activism in general?" I have struggled for a coherent answer, but now I realize that the answer is fairly simple. The truth of the matter is that the future of activism within our movement is entirely dependent upon the countless little acts of courage necessary to continue to raise the profile of our cause and have it enter the public consciousness.

It may be difficult to speak up at a time like this, facing such accusations as being "insensitive" and "unpatriotic", our issues "petty" and "unimportant" given "recent events" and in the "larger scope of things". But our issues are still as relevant, our cause as just, and activism as necessary as they were before the tragedy, and all the hastily-spewn cliches and phrases designed to induce guilt and self-censorship cannot change that.

I found a fitting quote for our present situation present situation, from Charles Austin Beard, who said "You need only reflect that one of the best ways to get yourself a reputation as a dangerous citizen these days is to go about repeating the very phrases which our founding fathers used in the great struggle for independence."

For our movement, this is perhaps doubly true, for we do not merely advocate the benefits of free speech, equality before the law, and all the other cherished principles in the spirit of which our nation was created, but we go that mad step farther and apply them to youth as well! And for this we have been attacked, and will be attacked further still. But as we march on, let us remember that we are the true patriots, that we are the ones who carry the true spirit of liberty in our hearts, as well as the concept of its equal application to youth in our minds.

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# Commentary

(An excerpt from an essay by ASFAR member Adam Berger.)

In the 1800's, African-Americans were, as allowed by the government of the United States of America, second-class citizens. Abraham Lincoln led America to change that. An entire war was fought just so that one group of people could be judged by substantial aspects of their character, skill, ability, and intellect, rather than solely by the unimportant classification of black or white.

Currently, the government of the United States of America has laws stating that any people under the age of 18 are second-class citizens. This law is preposterous in that its entire foundation is based upon an irrelevant attribute: age. Many adults will make the argument that age is, in fact, relevant, in that age constitutes experience. However, that is a generalization, and the United States is a country founded on its belief that people should be judged as individuals, and not as part of a general group.

Furthermore, there are many thirteen-year-olds that not only have more worldly experience than some forty-year-olds, but also could fend for themselves better than some forty-year-olds. Women also used to be second-class citizens as dictated by United States law. That was changed. It is, therefore, obvious that America could change the current laws so that the people now labeled "minors" could become full citizens. The current situation in the United States is this: there are many people over the age of 18 making laws governing those people that are under 18. The people that are over 18 are then asked if those laws are fair. They maintain that they are fair even though those laws do not affect them, and therefore, never experience the end result of those laws. The people that are actually affected by those laws then have no way to have those laws changed because they have no representation in the government.



# Poems

In the shadows of society,  
Looked down upon by all,  
Dwell the Teenagers and Children,  
Imprisoned by the wall,  
Of unjust laws and discrimination,  
Because of our young age.  
Our souls are old, our bodies young,  
And so our life's a cage.

We have to live with parents,  
We can not vote or drink,  
We're tied to schooling institutions,  
In "slavery" we sink.  
We're babysat in schools by day,  
We've curfew laws by night,  
We pledge for liberty and justice,  
Yet freedom's still our fight.

For eighteen years we live in chains,  
Still no one sees our tears,  
But now it's time to seize the day,  
Win back those wasted years.  
We sing this song of Liberation,  
We sing it far and wide,  
And one bright day now, all will cherish,  
Our Immortal Teenage Pride.

Jade-Rose Storme

I would like to bring to your attention that a famous man, who also happens to be one of the founding fathers of this nation—Abraham Lincoln—shared his beliefs on this subject in the following quote: "No man is good enough to govern another man without that other's consent." He stated that on October 16, 1854, in the first Lincoln-Douglas debate.

I would like to bring to your attention that a famous man, who also happens to be one of the founding fathers of this nation—Abraham Lincoln—shared his beliefs on this subject in the following quote: "No man is good enough to govern another man without that other's consent." He stated that on October 16, 1854, in the first Lincoln-Douglas debate.



## Five leftovers from the 1990s

After reading one of my recent reviews, my mother remarked, "You don't like anything! Your reviews are all so negative."

Surprised, I reminded her of my reviews of Mike Males' books, which, I thought, were extremely favorable. And even for those books I criticized, I always found *some* good things to say. I maintain that all the books (and one movie) I've reviewed in the pages of *Youth Truth* are worthwhile, or at least important or

significant enough to bother writing about. Maybe I believe that criticism is the sincerest form of flattery.

The following books were among those that I *didn't* want to bother writing about, at least not right away; I postponed them

in favor of other titles of more immediate interest to readers. Now, at year's end, I want them off my desk! I'm not saying these books are awful; they have their good points and they have their uses. But, Mom, here are examples of what I say about books I really don't like very much.

Sacks, Peter. *Standardized minds : the high price of America's testing culture and what we can do to change it.* Cambridge, Mass. : Perseus Books, 1999.

Elikann, Peter. *Superpredators : the demonization of our children by the law.* Reading, Mass, Perseus Books, 1999.

The author of *Superpredators* is a sucker for every theory there is about youth crime. In a work intended to be highly sympathetic to youth (written even before the Columbine shootings occurred), he falls for the various observations, generalizations, and distortions bandied about by the news media, such as:

Teenagers are impulsive, selfish, and incapable of reasoning.  
Kids are unfairly characterized and scapegoated by politicians and media.  
Adolescence is a "crime-prone" age.  
Kids are targeted and treated unfairly by police and the justice system.  
Kids don't have consciences anymore.  
If kids don't get the right start in life, they're probably lost forever.  
Kids in trouble can be rehabilitated by caring intervention.

And he accepts, pretty uncritically, all of the various editorial page solutions:

Crack down on the availability of guns.  
Keep violent TV, movies and video games away from kids.  
Kids need more religion.  
Kids need more parental involvement.  
Communities should provide kids with adult guidance and social services.  
Poverty causes juvenile crime.  
Rap music causes juvenile crime.

The book contains some good information and quotations. Right on the first page, it states that the United States is one of only six countries in the world that permit the death penalty for children (the others are Iran, Nigeria, Pakistan, Saudi Arabia and Yemen)—that's handy to know. Chapter 2 contains a nice little quotation by Logan Pearsall Smith that I'd never read before: "The denunciation of the young is a necessary part of the hygiene of older people and greatly assists in the circulation of the blood." I'll probably use that sometime. And there are plenty of useful horror stories of kids mistreated by caretakers, victimized by ridiculous "zero tolerance" laws, or set up and wrongfully convicted due to coerced confessions, false testimony, and inadequate representation.

But one finds the worthwhile tidbits only by wading through a lot of nonsense. This book is such a hodgepodge of 1990s thought about youth crime, it should serve historians well as a representative work of the pre-millennial years. But I'd warn *today's* readers to maintain a skeptical attitude toward the book's statements and conclusions—and read books by Mike Males, too, for balance!

*Standardized Minds* makes the case for the following three points:

- The ability of standardized tests to predict academic success is questionable.
- Standardized test scores tend to be highly correlated with socioeconomic class.
- Standardized tests reward superficial learning, drive instruction in undesirable directions, thwart meaningful reform.

The evidence: over 300 pages of stories about students or entire school districts affected by these tests, examining the qualities that contribute to high scores and the consequences of the scores on students and schools. Examples are given of distinguished and successful people who have failed or done poorly on tests.

The arguments are strong, but I found the parade of case histories proving the tests wrong, over and over, merely repetitious. Did the author believe that, without the pressure to conform to the demands of tests, schools would become wonderful places, providing all students the kind of education they need? (They wouldn't.)

I couldn't get excited about this book. I guess I feel the whole issue would be unimportant if only schools weren't compulsory. The issue didn't seem worth the number of pages devoted to it. But if you have need of arguments against standardized testing, this is the book for you.

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Editor's note: Content of reviewed books may not represent the views of ASFAR.

Gross, Martin L. *The conspiracy of ignorance : the failure of American public schools*. New York : HarperCollins, 1999.

This is one of those books that just slams the public schools. Its teachers, it claims, are ill-equipped and pathetic, its students virtually illiterate by international standards, its methods too "new-age". According to author Martin Gross, the schools spend too much time promoting students' self-esteem and catering to their special needs. His solutions: return to the "traditional" methods and subjects, institute voucher programs, bar teachers from local "PTAs", eliminate undergraduate teaching degrees, legislatively regulate the NEA to restrict its activities ...

Many ASFAR members would probably agree with much of what is in this book and enjoy it for that reason. For some of us, any attack on the schools is a blow for our side. But the main pleasure I got

from this book was finding the mistakes in the author's snobby, superior, mean-spirited writing. About the only thing he stated that I agreed with wholeheartedly was the following:

Are private schools so overwhelmingly better than public schools, And if so, why?

In terms of decorum, discipline, and behavior of the students, the answer is assuredly yes. There are many reasons for that, but the major factor is that most private schools simply will not countenance poor behavior or, generally, excessively lazy students. They simply ask students to leave, a solution not available to public schools ...

True. Schools, public or private, shouldn't have to tolerate students that violate their rules. On the other hand, students shouldn't be forced to submit to rules

Bracey, Gerald W. *Setting the record straight : responses to misconceptions about public education in the United States*. Alexandria, Va. : Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development, 1997.

*Setting the Record Straight* answered objections of public school bashers even before Gross' *Conspiracy of Ignorance* was written, fiercely defending the public schools and their performance. It certainly provides some valuable insights into the ways people can distort studies and statistics to promote their own viewpoints.

In answer to the claim that SAT scores have "plummeted", the author explains how the elite group of 10,654 college-bound test takers of 1941 has grown to include 1,067,000 high school seniors in 1995—nearly half of all high school seniors (with another 35% taking the ACT exam instead); it would have been astonishing if the average scores had not fallen. The belief that "young people don't know as much as they used to" is answered with a list of studies comparing students' knowledge in various years (largely favorable to today's kids); quotes from

1943 and 1957 newspapers, bemoaning the lack of knowledge of college students of *their* day, are also included.

Some of the arguments are quite strong; others, not so impressive. Bracey uses some statistical "adjustments" himself, although his manipulations are mentioned and explained. He also concedes some of the points made by critics of public education. Sadly, this honesty and rea-

sonableness has the effect of making his arguments less forceful and convincing. involuntarily—they should be able to reject school just as school should be able to reject them. But this book's author would hardly agree with this reasoning.

The author really despises public school teachers and administrators, but he seems to be a big fan of parents and parental involvement in schools. So while he calls for much tougher standards for educators, he's not troubled by the lack of certification of parents, or by the fact that their qualifications to participate in curriculum decisions may be abysmal.

If you're looking for an elitist tirade against public schools, this is it.

*reviews continued on next page*

## Sue's Review

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## News Links

### Who Needs Probable Cause—They're Kids

An Oklahoma school district's practice of random drug tests of students was deemed "unreasonable" searching by an appeals court since drug problems in the district were so rare. The school system, according to <[http://www.salon.com/news/wire/2001/11/08/drug\\_test/index.html](http://www.salon.com/news/wire/2001/11/08/drug_test/index.html)>, wants to keep testing, and on November 8 the U.S. Supreme Court agreed to hear the case.

## Sue's Review

continued from page 5

Ohanian, Susan. *One size fits few : the folly of educational standards*.  
Portsmouth, N.H. : Heinemann, 1999.

This book against standards made me wish for standards in book writing. The stream-of-consciousness, chatterbox prose often made it difficult for me to figure out what this author, a long-time schoolteacher, was trying to say.

In fact, her stories are often compelling, if difficult to follow. They mostly tell of non-conforming, "bad" students who showed a love of learning after a teacher was willing to throw out the rule book. She makes some good points about the proposed standards themselves, listing bits of "esoterica" that have been proposed for inclusion on the list of what students should know, including "covalent bonds, the Edict of Nantes, non compos mentis, Planck's constant, the Slough of Despond, and scrotum." She states from experience, "Nobody who has taught for more than sixty-eight minutes believes that everybody can learn everything."

Her stories about interactions with those who believe in standards are also telling. One such person was a newspaper editor who had asked her to write an op-ed piece:

"I know my daughter's teacher is excellent," he said, adding, "I know you're probably an excellent teacher, too, but we need high standards to raise up all those teachers out there who aren't excellent."

This is the tactic made infamous by Joseph McCarthy. Point to the unnamed dastardly creatures who are bringing the country to the point of disaster. In the old days we were going to make the country safe for democracy by instituting loyalty oaths. These days, we'll do it by testing kids ...

These arguments, effective as they may be, are scattered more or less randomly

throughout the book, which is loosely and arbitrarily divided into "chapters". There is no index, no list of references. There is a bibliography made up of (appropriately) *non-standard* and inconsistent entries.

I got the impression of the author as a wildly undisciplined, impulsive person, intelligent and caring, but unwilling or unable to meet the demands of any system but her own. Next time she sets out to write a book, she should team up with a methodical, detail-oriented perfectionist. Maybe then she can get her stories and arguments into a form that will be coherent and persuasive to people who don't already agree with her.

### Texas Schools Controlling Off-Campus Behavior

An item at [http://www.dallasnews.com/metro/stories/449292\\_pledge\\_21met.A.html](http://www.dallasnews.com/metro/stories/449292_pledge_21met.A.html) describes the "good-conduct pledges" students are forced by some schools to sign to be allowed to participate in extracurricular activities; the students are expected to abide by the pledges after school and on weekends too.

### Boy Punished for Attempting to Follow Rules

An Ohio high school freshman, realizing he had forgotten to remove a pellet gun from his backpack before leaving for school, went straight to the office to turn in the forbidden item and immediately received a 10-day suspension with an "automatic" recommendation for expulsion. According to the Dayton Daily News article at [http://www.activeday.com/ddn/local/0908\\_gun.html](http://www.activeday.com/ddn/local/0908_gun.html), the school's superintendant believes this incident demonstrates how well zero-tolerance laws work.

### Students Learn Not to Trust Anybody

Responses to a "confidential" survey on race relations filled out by Massachusetts students last January led to the suspension of five students for "making racist comments" and "causing a dangerous condition", according to <http://www.freedomforum.org/templates/document.asp?documentID=14665>.

### Forming Student Club Inappropriate Behavior

West Virginia high school student Katie Sierra was suspended for three days for trying to start an anarchy club; see <http://www.nandotimes.com/nation/story/162154p-1542312c.html>. A circuit court judge upheld the school's decision, but Katie plans to pursue the dispute further.

### More Technology to Punish Students

A high school in Dunlap, Illinois arranged for polygraph tests for twelve students suspected of attending an October 6 party where alcohol was served. The story at <http://fyi.cnn.com/2001/fyi/teachers.ednews/11/06/football.polygraphs.ap/> says that two were suspended for refusing to take the test and seven were suspended after failing it.

## News Links

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## “Saving” the Lost

*continued from page 1*

The Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention estimates that about 1.5 million minors are “missing” for some period of time each year (not counting kids thrown out of their homes by their parents). These cases fall into several different categories.

### Non-Family Abductions

The scariest scenario for parents is a “non-family” abduction of a child. This scenario accounts for only about 0.3% of all missing child cases, with 3200-4600 incidents per year. However, over half of all non-family abductors are actually acquaintances of the child, 15% of these “kidnapers” are other kids, and over 90% of these children return home within 24 hours. Only 200-300 children a year are truly victims of long-term involuntary detention (or worse) by a stranger. As of the end of 1998, NCMEC claimed to have received 1969 reports of non-family abductions, which is about 3% of all the calls they had received; how many of those cases were true “stranger” kidnappings is unknown.

To stir up greater anxiety among parents and others about the threat of non-family abductions, NCMEC has begun to focus on the issue of “online victimization” of kids, especially the type in which a child is lured into actually meeting a predatory individual in person. New NCMEC posters asking “Is Your Child Safe Online?” have begun to appear in post offices around the country, and the organization released a study in June 2000 to publicize the seriousness of the danger.

For this study, called *Online Victimization: A Report on the Nation's Youth*, the researchers conducted telephone interviews with 1501 youth ages 10-17 who used the Internet regularly. They found that, over the previous year, about 6% reported having been threatened or

harassed online, 19% had received a sexual solicitation or approach over the Internet, and 3% reported an “aggressive” sexual solicitation, in which the solicitor asked to meet them in person or followed up with a telephone call or letter or gift sent to their home. Anyone who has ever visited an online chat room will not be surprised that chat rooms accounted for 65% of these solicitations. As for actual in-person meetings between solicitors and “victims”, the study found none.

These rather dull, unshocking facts are sensationalized as much as possible in the report, which includes descriptions of some of the messages or images to which kids were exposed. Never mind that nearly half of the “sexual solicitors” were kids themselves and many were schoolmates of the “victims”. Never mind that nearly all the youth interviewed handled the problem themselves (by leaving the site, changing their screen name, asking the offender to stop, ignoring the offender, blocking the offender, or logging off), and that 75% were not upset by the encounter, “treating it as a minor annoyance”.

The report’s authors are concerned all the same. They’re concerned that the Internet is drawing young people into “risky behavior” reflecting “a new dimension of deviance”. They’re concerned about the 25% of youth who reported distress and embarrassment, warning that “We cannot assume these are just transient effects”. And they are concerned that nearly half of these unwanted encounters were not reported to anyone—authorities, parents, or even friends—even though most kids found them so trivial as to hardly warrant mentioning to anyone else.

### Family Abductions

Kids who are missing as a result of abduction by family members, about 354,000 children per year, account for about 29% of all missing kids, and about 25% of the calls received on NCMEC’s

hotline. In about 80% of the cases, a non-custodial parent is responsible; in 43% the abductor is female. The child taken is generally younger than six.

Family abductions are less worrisome than “stranger” kidnappings because injury or other physical harm to the child is very rare. Further, 62% of the children are returned to the custodial parent within a week. However, this still leaves over 134,500 cases of children “stolen” by relatives and missing for extended periods of time.

One can only speculate about the history and motives that lead a parent or relative to take a child away from another. In some cases, one parent may have good reason to believe that a child will be endangered by remaining with the other; in other cases, it may be the egotism of the parent or relative that leads them to feel that, even in hiding or on the run, the child is “better off” with them. To their credit, NCMEC has sometimes succeeded in negotiating compromises between the relatives involved—but almost certainly without considering any preference the child might express.

### Lost, Injured, or Out-of-Touch Children

Even more common than child abductions (both family and non-family) are cases of kids who are lost, accidentally left behind, unable to return or contact home due to illness or injury, or out-of-touch with their families due to miscommunication, forgetfulness, or other misunderstandings. This category, in which intervention by an agency such as NCMEC could be viewed as truly helpful, involves 438,200 children per year, accounting for 35% of all missing child episodes but only 4% of calls to NCMEC’s hotline—probably because nearly all of these kids are located within 24 hours, usually without the involvement of any “authorities”.

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## “Saving” the Lost

### Runaways

*continued from page 9*

Over 450,000 kids a year—36% of all missing kids—are those who run away from home. Reports of runaways account for 68% of NCMEC’s hotline calls.

The image of runaways has been a part of American culture going all the way back to Tom Sawyer. Our nation’s most famous fictional runaway, known to millions of Americans from annual broadcasts of *The Wizard of Oz*, concludes after her adventure that “there’s no place like home”. The story does not tell us, however, whether Dorothy truly lived happily ever after, or if the evil Mrs. Gulch, unharmed by the tornado, reappeared, still just as determined to destroy the dog Toto, causing Dorothy to remember why she ran away in the first place. Many runaways, after all, do run away again after returning (or being returned) home.

There’s no place like home. Home is where the heart is. And home is where the poverty is: in 1997, 14,100,000 kids lived in poverty conditions, defined as under \$16,400 annually for a family of four. Home is also where the abuse is. According to FBI statistics, 80.7 of all sexual assaults on kids up to age 17—even including assaults by acquaintances and strangers—occur inside the child’s home. The several million instances of child abuse each year occur almost exclusively

within the home. In 1996, 1077 children died as a result of maltreatment, and about 89,600 were removed from their homes by child protection agencies due to substantiated abuse.

According to the National Runaway Switchboard, 52% of runaways cite “family problems” as the reason they left home. An additional 16% specify some type of abuse in the home. More than 60% of youths who stay in homeless shelters report physical or sexual abuse by their parents. Kids considering running away are often warned of the danger of being forced into prostitution, but according to some sources, 99% of teenage prostitutes were sexually abused before they ever left home.

Life as a runaway can be extremely hard and brutal. The National Collaboration for Youth states that runaways cannot usually find jobs because they lack “the prerequisite education, skills and job experience”; other sources state more honestly that employers don’t want to hire teenage runaways, fearing that they may be implicated in aiding their “crime”.

So life on the run is usually tough, but what happens to runaways after they are found? We know that over 196,000 were arrested by police in 1996 for having run away (others may have been arrested on

other charges). We know that over 25,000 were referred, as runaways, to the juvenile court. Of these, over 1500 were held in a juvenile detention facility for some period of time.

In short, we don’t know much. Do the reunited families work out their problems, learning to live in harmony and mutual respect? Are the kids grateful that they were found? Do they continue to rebel or run away again? Do the parents arrange to have them sent to private treatment centers or “gulag schools” to “straighten them out”? Do their lives turn out okay?

We won’t find out the answers to these questions from the NCMEC. Once a child is recovered and removed from the “active” case files, their identity then becomes secret. NCMEC lists a few “success stories” on its web site and in its annual report, always changing the names of the “child victims” featured “to protect the privacy of the families”. A child whose photo, name, birthdate, and description has been plastered like a criminal’s in “Wanted” posters all over the U.S. is suddenly, once returned to parental custody, entitled to “privacy”.

While NCMEC claims to be in the business of child protection, it is really in the business of protecting parental rights of custody and control over their children. The two are not synonymous.

### Sources

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