

FEDERAL BUREAU OF INVESTIGATION INTELLIGENCE BULLETIN



(U) Criminal Actors Likely Reporting False Child Abductions, Overtaxing Law Enforcement Resources

(U) PREPARED BY FBI CRIMINAL INVESTIGATIVE DIVISION

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(U) The FBI assesses criminal actors^a likely^b are reporting false child abductions to solicit a rapid law enforcement (LE) response, misleading LE and overtaxing resources. This assessment is made with medium confidence,^c based on LE reporting to the FBI and open source reporting with varying degrees of corroboration and access.

(U//FOUO) The FBI assumes criminal actors reporting child abductions know that LE will respond rapidly to a report of an abducted child. The FBI assesses criminal actors likely will increasingly file false child abduction reports, in the short term, to elicit a prompt response from LE, given the urgency placed on child abduction, further taxing LE resources. Reports that criminal actors are intentionally misdirecting LE to commit crimes while LE is responding to child abduction reports or reports that criminal actors are reporting true child abductions would cause the FBI to re-evaluate this assessment.

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(U) Source Summary Statement

(U//LES) Reporting in this intelligence bulletin was derived primarily from LE reporting to the FBI and open source reporting that has been corroborated. The totality of the reporting was critical to the key analytic judgment herein. LE reporting was corroborated and provided valuable information that would otherwise not have been reported to the FBI. The open source and LE reporting provided context.

(U//LES) Information obtained from LE reporting to the FBI was a key source for this analysis. This collection occurred between 1 October 2017 and 25 July 2019. The reporting was current as of 5 November 2019.

^a (U) For the purpose of this intelligence bulletin, criminal actors are considered persons who falsely report a child abduction to elicit a faster LE response.

^b (U) See Appendix A: Expressions of Likelihood.

^c (U) See Appendix B: Confidence in Assessments and Judgments Based on a Body of Information.

(U) Criminal Actors Likely Making False Child Abduction Reports, Overtaxing LE Resources

(U) The FBI assesses criminal actors likely are reporting false child abductions to solicit a rapid LE response, misleading LE and overtaxing resources. This assessment is based on evidence of inaccurate missing child reports made to LE and the National Center for Missing and Exploited Children (NCMEC), resulting in a surge in the misalignment of resources. Reports of a missing child elicit swift LE response; criminal actors have used false claims of a missing child as a mechanism to avoid punishment, to aid in the recovery of stolen property, or to gain attention from a significant other.

- (U) On 18 February 2019, in Wyoming, Michigan, a woman reported her 5-year-old daughter was abducted by the child's grandmother. On 19 February 2019, the child was located and recovered alive in Gaithersburg, Maryland. A subsequent investigation revealed the mother made an agreement with the grandmother to take the child. On 5 March 2019, the Kent County Prosecutor's Office authorized charges against the mother for False Report of an Abduction and Lying to Police, according to LE reporting to the FBI.¹
- (U) On 12 February 2019, in Hollywood, Florida, while on his way to work, a man reported witnessing an armed child abduction. He reported the abductors' vehicle and physical appearance; he also reported that one man was armed and said, "I will shoot this place up." The FBI, US Marshals Service, school resource officers, school board investigators, a Broward Sheriff's Office helicopter, and several Hollywood police officers responded to the scene. Further investigation, however, revealed the abduction never occurred and the caller made the report because he wanted an excuse for running late for work, according to open source reporting.²
- (U) As of May 2019, in Oakland, California, a father reported his 3-year-old daughter was in his vehicle when it was carjacked and an Amber Alert was issued. Ten hours later, LE found the child had been with her mother at the time of the carjacking. Further investigation revealed the father lied to the police about his daughter being in the vehicle, hoping they would put greater effort into recovering the vehicle, according to open source reporting.³
- (U) On 6 April 2018, in Nashville, Tennessee, a mother reported her 3-year-old daughter disappeared from her home around 0130 after her father left the front door open. LE dispatched and searched for the child for two and a half hours before the mother admitted she knew her daughter was safe and had fabricated the story in an attempt to get the child's father to return home, according to open source reporting.⁴

(U) Perspective

(U) The primary factor that has consistently contributed to the inaccurate reporting of child abductions is reporting parties wanting a faster response for events less egregious than a child abduction. Parents or guardians admitted to making false statements to increase LE responsiveness, believing that misrepresenting the crime would result in faster LE response and attention.

(U//LES) The child abduction threat is low probability, high impact^d and reactive in nature; it relies mostly on reporting from various sources like the NCMEC, public reporting, request for assistance from local LE, or information obtained from identified victim interviews. Reports of child abductions require immediate action from LE to quickly assess the validity of the information and identify victims and perpetrators. Inaccurately reporting child abductions to elicit a faster LE response is a criminal act that not only drains resources conducting victim recovery efforts, but also jeopardizes the safe recovery of a child who is truly missing.

(U//LES) US Department of Justice and Attorney General of Washington research has shown that 74 percent of children who were abducted and murdered were killed within the first three hours of their abduction, while 89 percent of total victims were killed within 24 hours.⁵ When a child is reported missing, LE responds with an immediate sense of urgency; however, it is difficult to determine the veracity of the report due to several factors, including lack of multiple witnesses to corroborate the report and no mandate that state or LE report to NCMEC or validate attempted abductions. Although a child abduction is a reactive threat and the exact number of child abductions are unknown, a timely LE response when a child is reported missing increases the chances of recovering the child unharmed and reduces the impact on the respective community.

(U//LES) This is the first externally disseminated finished intelligence product written by the FBI on criminal actors likely reporting false abductions.

(U) Analysis of Alternatives

(U) The FBI considered the alternative hypothesis that criminal actors likely make inaccurate child abduction reports to divert LE attention from the scenes of criminal activities. The FBI discounted this alternative because there is no identified evidence of organized criminal activity related to false child abduction reports based on information provided from LE and the results of investigations reported to NCMEC. If reports indicated criminal actors were intentionally misdirecting LE to commit crimes while LE is responding to child abduction reports or reports that criminal actors are reporting true child abductions, the original hypothesis will be re-evaluated.

(U) Outlook

(U//LES) The FBI assesses criminal actors likely will increasingly file false child abduction reports, in the short term, as they see the desired prompt response from LE, further taxing LE resources. The FBI assesses, in the long term, criminal actors likely will increase use of inaccurate child abduction reporting as a diversion to conduct other criminal activity, eroding LE confidence and urgency when responding to child abduction reports, and leading to fewer resources dedicated to a reported child abduction. Should this occur, the FBI assesses criminal actors actually engaged in child abduction likely will be more successful, increasing the risk to children in the long term. Opportunities exist to improve reporting and collection to validate the accuracy of child abduction reports through corroboration, personal narratives, NCMEC reporting, cell phone location data, and liaison reports to provide LE with a better ability to determine appropriate use of resources.

^d (U) For the purpose of this intelligence bulletin, “Low probability, high impact” is defined as there being a low chance of the crime occurring, though the imminent threat to the child is undeniable and has an immense impact on the community and country as a whole.

(U//LES) Since LE response to all reports of a missing child is mandatory, completely eradicating the issue of inaccurate reporting is challenging. LE's ability to verify a child abduction would improve by having those who receive the report ask specific questions based on motivation indicators to determine whether the report is valid. Opportunities exist to identify specific questions for responding officers to ask based on motivation indicators, to improve LE's ability to determine whether a report is valid. Increased false reporting of child abductions to elicit a faster LE response to a lesser crime would indicate criminal actors' continued use of this method, draining LE resources. An additional indicator would be a documented surge of LE resources being used to respond to these false reports and how the aforementioned affects LE's ability to respond to true child abductions.

(U) If you would like to provide qualitative feedback on this product, please send an email to the appropriate address with the product title as the subject line: DI_Customer_Feedback@fbi.gov; DI_Customer_Feedback@fbi.sgov.gov; or DI_Customer_Feedback@fbi.ic.gov;

(U) This intelligence bulletin was prepared by the Criminal Investigative Division Crimes Against Children and Human Trafficking (CACHTIU) Intelligence Unit of the FBI. Comments and queries may be addressed to the CACHTIU Unit Chief at 1-410-981-8724.

(U) Appendix A: Expressions of Likelihood

(U) Phrases such as “the FBI judges” and “the FBI assesses,” and terms such as “likely” and “probably” convey analytical judgments and assessments. The chart below approximates how expressions of likelihood and probability correlate with percentages of chance. Only terms of likelihood should appear in FBI products; the chart includes terms of probability strictly for comparison, as they sometimes appear in reporting of other government agencies. Furthermore, the FBI does not arrive at judgments through statistical analysis and will not use terms of probability to convey uncertainty in FBI external intelligence products.

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Terms of Likelihood	Almost No Chance	Very Unlikely	Unlikely	Roughly Even Chance	Likely	Very Likely	Almost Certain(ly)
Terms of Probability	Remote	Highly Improbable	Improbable (Improbably)	Roughly Even Odds	Probable (Probably)	Highly Probable	Nearly Certain
Percentages of Chance	1-5%	5-20%	20-45%	45-55%	55-80%	80-95%	95-99%

(U) Table showing terms of likelihood aligned with terms of probability and percentages of chance.

(U) Appendix B: Confidence in Assessments and Judgments Based on a Body of Information

(U) Confidence levels reflect the quality and quantity of the source information supporting a judgment. Consequently, the FBI ascribes high, medium, or low levels of confidence to assessments, as follows:

(U) **High confidence** generally indicates the FBI's judgments are based on high quality information from multiple sources. High confidence in a judgment does not imply the assessment is a fact or a certainty; such judgments might be wrong. While additional reporting and information sources may change analytical judgments, such changes are most likely to be refinements and not substantial in nature.

(U) **Medium confidence** generally means the information is credibly sourced and plausible but not of sufficient quality or corroborated sufficiently to warrant a higher level of confidence. Additional reporting or information sources have the potential to increase the FBI's confidence levels or substantively change analytical judgments.

(U) **Low confidence** generally means the information's credibility or plausibility is uncertain, the information is too fragmented or poorly corroborated to make solid analytic inferences, or the reliability of the sources is questionable. Absent additional reporting or information sources, analytical judgments should be considered preliminary in nature.