

THE AMBER ALERT: A COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS OF THE SUGGESTED
FEDERAL AMBER ALERT ACTIVATION GUIDELINES AND
INDIVIDUAL STATE ACTIVATION CRITERIA

by

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ABSTRACT

THE AMBER ALERT: A COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS OF THE SUGGESTED FEDERAL AMBER ALERT ACTIVATION GUIDELINES AND INDIVIDUAL STATE ACTIVATION CRITERIA

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This study focuses on the AMBER Alert system, in particular the criteria that should be present prior to the issuance of an alert. The purpose of this study is to review individual state's AMBER Alert activation criteria as they relate to the suggested federal AMBER Alert activation guidelines. Police department's interpretations of their state's AMBER Alert criteria were also analyzed on a case-by-case basis. The findings of this study suggest that the federal government should ensure that all states use standardized activation criteria that includes confirmation of an abduction prior to an AMBER Alert activation.

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

On a warm Saturday afternoon in January 1996 nine-year-old Amber Hagerman was tragically abducted while riding her bicycle through an east Arlington, Texas neighborhood. Neighbors heard her scream and witnessed a man grab her and throw her into a pickup truck (Krainik, 2002). The police were provided with specific information about the suspect and suspect vehicle, but they had no means with which to quickly disseminate information about the abduction to the public. When Amber's body was found four days later an outraged community began to demand that a community alert be developed and thus the AMBER Alert was born.

Although the AMBER Alert has received much media attention and has been praised for its ability to save lives, there is a surprising lack of research on the topic. Only a handful of studies have focused specifically on the AMBER Alert. The majority of the research completed on this topic focuses on the perceived effectiveness of the policy, but a gap in the literature exists regarding the implementation of the alert. The suggested federal guidelines for the issuance of an AMBER Alert are examined in some studies, but an analysis of the guidelines used at the state level are overlooked. Although the federal government has issued a list of suggested requirements that a case should meet prior to the issuance of an AMBER Alert, ultimately it is left up to the states to implement their own criteria. The purpose of this study is to review individual state's AMBER Alert activation criteria as they relate to the suggested federal AMBER Alert activation guidelines. Police department's interpretations of their state's AMBER Alert criteria were also analyzed on a case-by-case basis. It is important that the implementation process of the AMBER Alert is thoroughly examined so that necessary changes can be made to improve the effectiveness of the alert system.

Department of Justice Recommended AMBER Alert Activation Criteria

In 2004, the Department of Justice issued a set of suggested criteria that should be used to determine whether an AMBER Alert should be issued, but ultimately the criteria for activation is set by each state (AMBER Alert: Report to the White House, 2004). The suggested criteria are:

1. There is reasonable belief by law enforcement that an abduction has occurred.
 - a. The Department of Justice states that even though an abduction should be confirmed before an alert is issued, each case should be appraised on its own merits and law enforcement should realize that they need to use a “best judgment” approach when determining if they have enough information to activate the alert (AMBER Alert: Guidance on Criteria, 2004).
 - b. Each state interprets what constitutes as an abduction differently, especially when family members are involved. The next section of the introduction defines several different types of abductions.
2. The law enforcement agency believes that the child is in imminent danger of serious bodily injury or death.
 - a. This criterion is solely based on the investigating officer’s instincts about the seriousness of the abduction and leaves much room for interpretation.
3. There is enough descriptive information about the victim and the abduction for law enforcement to issue an AMBER Alert to assist in the recovery of the child.
 - a. Sufficient information about the victim, suspect, and suspect vehicle must exist so that the public is aware of what to look for (AMBER Alert: Report to the White House, 2004).
 - b. This criterion is also left up for interpretation as to what constitutes as “sufficient information.”

4. The abduction is of a child aged 17 years or younger.
 - a. Every state has their own age requirements, and the upper limits can range from 10-17 years old, thus creating problems when activations need to go across state lines (AMBER Alert: Guidance on Criteria, 2004).
5. The child's name and other critical data elements, including the child abduction flag, have been entered into the National Crime Information Center (NCIC) system.
 - a. The child's entry as "abducted" or "endangered missing" into the NCIC system will greatly enhance the chances of finding the child because the system allows the search to expand from the local, state, or regional level to the national level (AMBER Alert: Guidance on Criteria, 2004).
 - b. Many state plans do not mandate immediate entry into NCIC, and some believe that this "omission undermines the entire mission of the AMBER Alert initiative" (AMBER Alert: Guidance on Criteria, 2004, p. 1).

Abduction Definitions

The Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention were given the task of categorizing the different types of missing children in their NISMART (National Incidence Studies of Missing, Abducted, Runaway, and Thrownaway Children) report. Child abductions were broken down into three different categories: non-family abduction, stereotypical kidnappings, and parental kidnappings (Finkelhor, Hammer, & Sedlak, 2002). The suggested federal guidelines for an AMBER Alert only state that an abduction should be confirmed, thus giving the states the opportunity to choose which types of abductions they want to include in their Amber Alert plan. A non-family abduction is defined by Finkelhor et al. (2002, p. 2) as

- 1) an episode in which a non-family perpetrator takes a child by the use of physical force or threat of bodily harm or detains the child for a substantial period of time (at least 1 hour) in an isolated place by the use of physical force or threat of bodily harm without lawful authority or parental permission or
- 2) an episode in which a child younger than 15 or mentally incompetent, and without lawful authority or parental permission, is taken or detained or voluntarily accompanies a non-family perpetrator who conceals the child's whereabouts, demands ransom, or expresses the intention to keep the child permanently

Stereotypical abductions are defined as (Finkelhor et al., 2002, p. 2)

abductions perpetrated by a stranger or slight acquaintance and involving a child who was transported 50 or more miles, detained overnight, held for ransom or with the intent to keep the child permanently, or killed

The third type of abduction defined by Hammer, Finkelhor & Sedlak (2002, p. 2) in the NISMART is family abduction, which is

the taking or keeping of a child by a family member in violation of a custody order, a decree, or other legitimate custodial rights, where the taking or keeping involved some element of concealment, flight, or intent to deprive a lawful custodian indefinitely of custodial privileges

Plan of Presentation

Chapter 2 consists of a literature review that is divided into 10 subsections. The first two subsections give an overview of the history of missing children and sex offender laws. The next 4 subsections focus on child abduction myths and motivations for non-family abductions. The agencies that are involved in locating missing children are also briefly mentioned. The last 4 sections of the literature review are dedicated to the AMBER Alert. The history of the alert is examined, along with the methods in which the alert is disseminated to the public. Last, the perceived effectiveness of the AMBER Alert is discussed. Chapter 3 describes the methodology while Chapter 4 outlines the findings of the study. Chapter 5 discusses the findings and potential policy implications.

CHAPTER 2

LITERATURE REVIEW

History of Abducted Children

Child abduction is not a recent phenomenon. Although kidnapping has taken place throughout time, the disappearance of children was not defined as a social problem until 1874 (Fass, 1997). Since that time, the public has become increasingly concerned with the problem of abducted children and has attempted to combat the problem with a multitude of laws and policies that are aimed at protecting children. The issue of kidnapping first emerged into the public consciousness as the story of one particular child who was abducted from his home and was never seen again. Four year old Charley Ross and his brother were taken from their front yard by two unknown men on July 1, 1874. His brother was released by the men shortly after the kidnapping and was able to provide the police with specific details about the abduction (Fass, 1997).

Charley's father subsequently placed a want ad in the newspaper asking for information about Charley's whereabouts, thus resulting in the public feeling personally responsible for finding Charley. The abductors sent multiple ransom letters to Charley's father but he refused to pay a ransom because he did not want the abduction to be successful and in return fuel further child kidnappings (Fass, 1997). Although Charley was never located, he became America's "lost child" and his disappearance began to symbolize the connection between children and the community. Charley's abduction also resulted in the crime of kidnapping changing from a misdemeanor to a felony charge, thereby greatly enhancing the punishment for the crime (Fass, 1997).

According to Fass (1997), the next influential kidnapping happened on May 21, 1924 when two men named Leopold and Leob abducted fourteen-year old Bobby Franks.

A ransom note was sent to the boy's parents, but the boy's body was found before the ransom drop could be completed. This kidnapping not only created a new association between kidnapping and murder but also created a new fear between kidnapping and the sexual assault of innocent children (Fass,1997). This preoccupation has continued into present day.

The kidnapping of Charles Lindberg Jr. was another influential abduction. On March 1,1932 twenty month old Charles Lindberg Jr. was taken from his crib and his body was found three months later in a field near his house, even though his parent's had paid a ransom for the boy a month before (Fass, 1997). Due to Charles Lindberg's popularity, the news of the abduction became instantaneous and information about the kidnapping was broadcast over the radio, ticker tape, and a picture of the child was shown on television. These new methods used in the search for the Lindberg baby were major innovations that are still used today. Fass (1997) also mentions that the Lindberg case "set a milestone in the commercial exploitation of childhood" (p. 99). This exploitation has resulted from a cultural indulgence that exploits the very children that society is trying to protect.

During the 1950's another form of child abduction was portrayed as significant by the media, when two-day-old baby Robert Marcus was taken from the maternity ward on September 19, 1955 (Fass, 1997). A large police search ensued and once again the public was asked to help in the search of a missing child. The baby's doctor used the media to give the suspect information on what to feed the baby and how to take care of the newborn. The baby was later returned to his parents by the kidnapper who claimed that she took the child because she desperately wanted to be a mother. The public saw this suspect as a deranged mother who was aching to have a child in her arms (Fass, 1997), thus creating a new type of villain for parents to obsess over.

Last, the abduction of fourteen-year-old Stephanie Bryan on April 28, 1955, resurrected the community's preoccupation with sex offenders (Fass, 1997). The community became involved in the search for the young girl when the media began to broadcast home movies of the child. When the girl's body was found, the police were unable to determine if a

sexual assault had actually occurred but the community still became obsessed with increasing the penalties for sex offenders. The 1950's thus provided a period of transition from the ransoming of children to a different and more potent fear (Fass, 1997).

History of Sex Offender Laws

In most instances, the sexual murder of a child by someone with a previous record has been responsible for spurring legislative action against sexual offenders (Lieb, Quinsey, & Berliner, 1998). In the 1990's a multitude of these "sexual predator laws" were passed. The term "sexual predator" is usually applied to offenders who target strangers, multiple victims, or those who commit extremely violent offenses. Most of these new laws focused on social control mechanisms following prison terms and not on alternatives to conventional confinement (Lieb et al., 1998).

The initial "sexual predator law" passed by congress was the Jacob Wetterling Crimes Against Children and Sexually Violent Offender Registration Act. Jacob Wetterling was an eleven-year-old boy who was abducted in 1989 and is still missing to this day (Lieb et al., 1998). This act was passed in 1994 and required states to create registries of offenders convicted of sexually violent offenses or crimes against children, and also required offenders to verify their addresses annually for 10 years. The purpose of these new registration requirements was to deter offenders from committing future crimes, provide law enforcement with an additional investigative tool and to increase public protection (Sex Offender Registration, 1999).

The Wetterling Act has been amended three times since it was initially passed in 1994. The first amendment, which was titled Megan's Law, came into effect in 1996 after the 1994 sexual assault and murder of a seven-year-old girl named Megan Kanka by a convicted child molester who lived on her block (Brooks, 1996). Megan's law requires all states to release relevant information about sex offenders to the community when it is necessary to protect the public. Each state is given discretion about when and how to notify the community (Sex Offender Registration, 1999).

The second amendment to the Wetterling Act also took place in 1996. The Pam Lychner Sexual Offender Tracking and Identification Act heightened registration requirements for repeat and aggravated offenders (Sex Offender Registration, 1999), and also directed the FBI to establish a national database of sex offenders in order to assist local agencies in tracking offenders that have moved out of the state (Lieb et al., 1998). The third amendment to the Wetterling Act was the Departments of Commerce, Justice, and State, the Judiciary, and Related Agencies Appropriations Act, which was passed in 1998 (Sex Offender Registration, 1999). This act required sex offenders who work or attend school in a state other than where they live to register with that state as well as their state of residence, and also required the registration of federal and military sex offenders. A national sex offender registry was also completed and all states are required to participate in the registry (Sex Offender Registration, 1999). These laws were passed due to the public's increasing fear of sex offenders, which has resulted in a moral panic.

Children and Moral Panics

The words "missing child" or "child molestation" are frightening terms that have created panic within the community and have caused all parents to question the safety of their own children (Zgoba, 2004b). The heightened media reporting of crimes against children has resulted in the belief that the country is experiencing an epidemic. This increased media coverage has resulted in a "fear factor" among parents and in turn has caused increased awareness and amplified vigilance, thus creating a moral panic within society (Zgoba, 2004b). A moral panic is defined by Cohen (1972, p. 9) as "a condition, episode, person or group of persons, which emerge to become defined as a threat to societal values and interests." The behavior of a certain group within society is seen as evil and is felt to be harmful to the community. This paranoia results in the belief that serious steps must be taken to repair the behavior, punish the perpetrator, and repair the damage (Goode & Ben-Yehuda, 1994).

Goode & Ben-Yehuda (1994) mention three distinct moral crusades that were the precursors to moral panics. Moral crusaders are defined as "activists who are acting to bring

about change and are motivated by moral and not rational and protectionist interests” (Goode & Ben-Yehuda, 1994, p. 20). The prohibition movement from 1900-1920 was seen as the first moral crusade. A common act that was initially seen as beneficial to your health eventually became an evil practice that created a crisis within American society. The anti-marijuana legislation of the 1930's was the second moral crusade mentioned by Goode & Ben-Yehuda (1994). Before the 1930's use of marijuana was common practice, but towards the end of the decade numerous reports were released about it being a dangerous drug, and as a result its use become illegal. The last moral crusade took place in the 1930's- 1950's and was spurred by the death of a young girl. After the dead girl's body was found, sex crimes against children began to be seen as an overwhelming problem. As a result multiple sexual psychopath laws were passed, even though there was not an increase in the prevalence of sex crimes during that period (Goode & Ben-Yehuda, 1994). This sexual psychopath moral crusade has never completely died and has been reawaked multiple times throughout history.

Goode & Ben-Yehuda (1994) also mention five necessary elements that are needed in order for a moral panic to be successful. These five elements are concern, consensus, hostility, disproportionality, and volatility. In order for a moral panic to be present, there must be a heightened concern about the topic among the public (Zgoba, 2004b). Sex offenders who abuse children are often called “predators” or “fiends,” thus making the offender sound like an aggressive animal feeding on innocent prey (Jenkins, 1998; Palermo & Farkas, 2001). The use of these terms has resulted in the public feeling that children's lives are in danger and therefore has created a consensus among the public that the danger is real and imminent. As a result of this panic, various pieces of legislation have been passed, such as the Jacob Wetterling Act, Megan's Law, the National Sexual Offender Registry and the Amber Alert (Zgoba, 2004b).

The second criterion for a moral panic is a consensus among the population that the threat is real, serious, and is caused by a wrong doing group (Goode & Ben-Yehuda, 1994). This consensus is usually achieved when a tragic child abduction or molestation occurs (Zgoba, 2004b), and the media uses this specific story to pull on the heartstrings of the nation. The

public begins to see the problem as an epidemic and responds by working towards a solution. “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’ ” (Zgoba, 2004b, p. 401). Hostility towards the group that is engaging in the behavior eventually develops into an “us” vs. “them” mentality, which is the third indicator of a moral panic (Goode & Ben-Yehuda, 1994). Unlike other offenders, sex offenders are subject to a multitude of laws that restrict their lives after prison, because of the belief that they are more dangerous than other offenders (Zgoba, 2004b). Due to the fact that this legislation is highly publicized, the public will always be hostile towards sex offenders.

The fourth criterion used by Goode and Ben-Yehuda (1994) was disproportionality, which was defined as the idea that more people are engaging in the negative behavior than actually are. Studies that have measured the incident of child kidnapping have suggested that kidnapping is extremely rare and usually occurs between family members (Zgoba, 2004b). Fox (2002) reports that a child’s chances of being kidnapped by a stranger are approximately one in one million. The volatility of the situation is seen as the last indicator of a moral panic (Goode & Ben-Yehuda, 1994). Volatility is described as consistent fluctuations or sudden eruptions in the level of panic (Welch, Price, & Yankey, 2002). Concern over child abduction has risen and fallen over the past centuries, and issues of child safety “evolve and mutate, depending on such intertwined factors as demographic changes, shifting gender expectations, economic strains, and racial conflicts as well as the social, political, and religious ideologies built upon these underlying realities” (Jenkins, 1998, p. 216).

There are many different actors who are involved in creating a moral panic. Goode & Ben-Yehuda (1994) state that these five actors are: the press, the public, law enforcement, politicians and legislators, and action groups. The media is the most influential actor in creating a widespread moral panic. Due to the fact that few other crimes create the same fear and outrage that a crime against a child does, the media continuously reports these stories and this constant coverage only sets the stage for a widespread panic (Palermo & Farkas, 2001). The

media is therefore able to catch more people in their net and give the panic an all-pervasive quality. Even though all moral panics eventually fade away when the media stops focusing on certain crimes, there has been an increasing rapidity in the succession of moral panics and it seems that one has barely finished before another one takes place (Thompson, 1998). Each moral panic fluctuation has little or nothing to do with an increased prevalence in the crime, but can mostly be attributed to increased media coverage (Jenkins, 1998; Welch et al., 2002). Stranger kidnappings, or non-family abductions have recently created a moral panic within society, even though they are extremely rare.

Motivations for Non-family Abductions

There are several common motivations that are pervasive among offenders who abduct children. Boudreaux et al. (2000) identifies 4 specific motivations: desire to possess a child, sexual gratification, financial gain, and desire to kill. Most offenders who desire to possess a child are women who abduct infants because they have a maternal desire to have a baby. These abductions are usually well planned and often the abductor had faked being pregnant so that her sudden appearance with a child would not be seen as suspicious. More than 90% of these victims were recovered and most were found within 25 miles of the abduction site (Boudreaux et al., 2000).

Sexual gratification as a motive for child abduction has received the most attention from the media, and therefore causes the most concern among the public (Boudreaux et al., 2000). The victims of this offense usually were older school-age females, due to the fact that older children are easily accessible because they are more mobile and independent than young children (Bourdeaux, Lord, & Dutra, 1999). Finkelhor et al. (2002) conducted a study of non-family abducted children by using household surveys and studying kidnapping cases from a representative sample of law enforcement agencies. This study found that nearly half of all child victims of stereotypical kidnappings and non-family abductions were sexually assaulted by their offender (Finkelhor et al., 2002). Sexual gratification, therefore, is one of the primary motivators for child abductions.

The third motivation, kidnapping for profit, could entail several different offenses including extortion, robbery, or for drug-related purposes (Boudreaux et al., 1999). Most victims that are abducted for this motivation are older (high-school age) and most are male. Older children are more susceptible to kidnapping for profit because they are more likely to have valuable possessions or money on their person. Seven percent of non-family abduction victims and 20 percent of stereotypical kidnapping victims were robbed. Although kidnapping for ransom used to be a popular offense, only 4 percent of non-family abducted children and 5 percent of stereotypically kidnapped children were held for ransom, which suggests that ransom as a motivation is not common. Kidnapping for murder is the last motivation that was listed by Boudreaux et al. (2000) and is the most heinous of all motivations. According to Finkelhor et al. (2002), 40 percent of children who were stereotypically kidnapped were killed and another 4 percent of children were never found. These rare cases have resulted in several child abduction myths.

Child Abduction Myths

Due to several sensationalized child murders, the child abductor has been “morphed to a furtive stranger and sexual predator who snatches and murders innocent children” (Shutt, Miller, Schreck, & Brown, 2004, p. 128). This myth about child abductions, along with other myths was the focus a paper written by Shutt et al. (2004) that examined these false beliefs and the policy implications that have resulted from them. The myth that strangers generally commit child abductions is a commonly held belief that is far from the truth. Finkelhor et al. (2002) stated in their NISMART report that in 1999 approximately 58,200 children were abducted by non-family members but only 115 of those children were victims of a stereotypical kidnapping. Even though most kidnapping prevention strategies and programs focus on the danger of strangers, the majority of non-family abduction victims (63 percent) knew their abductors. Of that percentage, 38 percent of the abductors were a friend or long-term acquaintance of the family, 5 percent were a neighbor, 6 percent were persons of authority, and 4 percent were the child's caretaker or babysitter (Finkelhor et al., 2002). Abduction by a parent or family member

is much more common than by a non-family member. In 1999 an estimated 203,900 children were abducted by a family member (Hammer et al., 2002), which almost quadruples the number of children abducted by non-family members. If parents and law enforcement continue to assume that children are more likely to be abducted by strangers instead of acquaintances, they may fail to provide children with the appropriate prevention strategies (Finkelhor et al., 2002).

Another myth that has continuously been perpetrated by the media is the belief that child abductions have become an epidemic (Shutt, 2004). Information on child abductions was originally collected in the NISMART-1 study in 1988 and later again in the NISMART-2 study in 1999. Even though these two studies had different methodologies, both stated that estimates of child abductions were only in the hundreds, thus suggesting that child abductions have not become more frequent (Finkelhor et al., 2002). The total number of “missing children” can also be confusing because the public does not realize that most of the children listed as missing were not abducted but were either runaways or were abandoned by their parents or caretakers. An estimated 1,682,900 children ran away from home in 1999 or were abandoned by their parents (Runaway/Thrownaway Children, 2002).

Agencies Involved in Locating Missing Children

When a child is reported missing it is up to the local police department to investigate the case and locate the child, but there are various agencies and programs that become active during a missing episode that assist the local police in returning the child home. The National Center for Missing and Exploited Children (NCMEC) was established in 1984 and is responsible for providing immediate and coordinated action when a child goes missing (NCMEC Annual Report, 2006). The NCMEC is a national clearinghouse that connects each child's case to a vast set of resources to assist in the child's recovery.

Team Adam is a program that is specifically used to find missing children and is only activated when a child is abducted (NCMEC Annual Report, 2006). Team Adam sends trained retired law-enforcement professionals to the site of serious child abductions. The team is made up of 64 ex-law enforcement professionals who are experienced in missing children cases and

provide a rapid, on-site response and support system for local law-enforcement agencies. Since the program started, it has been deployed 275 times and has searched for a total of 313 children (NCMEC Annual Report, 2006).

The FBI also uses a taskforce to assist in locating missing children. The Federal Agency Task Force for Missing and Exploited Children is responsible for coordinating federal resources and services in order to meet the needs of missing, abducted, and exploited children and their families (Federal Resources, 2007). The task force serves as:

1. an advocate for missing and exploited children and their families
2. initiates positive change to enhance services and resources for missing and exploited children, their families, and the agencies and organizations that serve them
3. promotes communication and cooperation among agencies and organizations at the federal level and
4. serves as the focal point for coordination of services and resources

Due to the fact that timing is crucial in missing children cases, the task force tries to initiate a rapid response in order to increase the chance of a successful recovery (Federal Resources, 2007). The AMBER Alert is another program that focuses on a rapid response in order to locate a missing child.

History of the AMBER Alert

Like many other pieces of legislation that deal with protecting children, the AMBER Alert is named after a young child who was abducted and murdered in 1996. Amber Hagerman was abducted by an unknown assailant while riding her bicycle through an east Arlington, Texas neighborhood (New View for AMBER, 2006). Four days later her body was discovered (Zgoba, 2004). Neighbors heard her scream when the man grabbed her and were thus able to provide the police with details about the abductor's vehicle. That information was not immediately given to the public because prior to Amber's abduction, the police did not have the means to quickly disseminate missing children information (Krainik, 2002). This outraged Amber's family and the Arlington community as a whole, and residents began to demand that a community alert be developed.

In response to the public's persistence on this issue, in 1997 a partnership between local area law enforcement and the Association of Radio Managers began (Krainik, 2002). Both parties agreed that an alert system that focused on locating abducted children was necessary. Dallas area broadcasters came up with the idea of using the Emergency Alert System (EAS) equipment to quickly send out child abduction information, and the AMBER Alert was born (Amber Alert: Best Practices, 2006). AMBER is an acronym for America's Missing: Broadcast Emergency Response and was first activated in the Dallas/Ft Worth area in 1997. The main goal of the AMBER Alert was to provide "a swift transition of vital information to local residents, ultimately for the safe return of abducted children" (Zgoba, 2004b, p. 397). Although the AMBER Alert did spread quickly to other communities and states (AMBER Alert: Best Practices, 2006), from 1996 to 2001 the progress on developing and implementing the plan throughout the United States was not significant. In fact, prior to 2002 there were only four statewide AMBER plans that had been implemented (AMBER Alert: Report to the White House, 2004).

Unfortunately, it took another abduction of a young girl in order to get the federal government interested in the AMBER Alert program. The recent abduction of Elizabeth Smart and her recovery along with the capture of her abductors once again brought the issue of child abduction to the "forefront of America's mind" (The United States Conference of Mayors, 2003, p. 1). Smart was abducted from her suburban Salt Lake City home in the middle of the night and was gone for nine months (Wood, 2005). After she returned home, both she and her family have publicly advocated that the AMBER Alert be put into federal legislation (Zgoba, 2004b).

As a result of the increased awareness of child kidnappings and child safety, President Bush hosted the first-ever White House Conference on Missing, Exploited and Runaway Children on October 2, 2002 (AMBER Alert: Report to the White House, 2004). During this conference the AMBER Alert became nationally focused and Attorney General John Ashcroft was asked to appoint a National AMBER Alert Coordinator. This Coordinator is responsible for: facilitating AMBER Alert development, supporting state development plans and efforts, helping to eliminate geographic gaps in AMBER networks, providing regional AMBER network

coordination, and establishing guidance on criteria for issuing an AMBER Alert (Amber Alert National Strategy, 2003). Ashcroft stated "Few things grip law enforcement with more urgency than finding a missing child. Rapid response is vital in abduction cases, and taking the acclaimed AMBER Alert System nationwide will save lives and thwart would-be predators" (AMBER Alert: Report to the White House, 2004, p. 2). President Bush asked that every state set up an AMBER Alert program.

In April 2003, President Bush signed the Prosecutorial Remedies and Other Tools to End the Exploitation of Children Today (PROTECT) Act (Federal Resources, 2007). The Senate approved the bill (S 151) with an astounding vote of 98-0 and Congress with a vote of 400-0 (Anonymous, April 2003). This act formally established the role of the federal government in the AMBER Alert system, and required the Justice Department to award grants to states that successfully established an AMBER Alert program (Federal Resources, 2007). These grants were used to help the state require the necessary equipment needed to implement the Alert and also to help with training those involved. James Sensenbrenner, the House Judiciary Chairman, stated that the bill was "the most important and far-reaching child protection legislation in the past 20 years" (Anonymous, April 2003, p. 3).

Although the AMBER Alert was the main focus of the PROTECT act, other legislation concerning the exploitation of children was also passed with the bill. The Feeney Amendment is a controversial addition to the bill. This amendment calls for stiffer penalties for sex crimes against children (Anonymous, May 2003) by restricting judges discretion and leaving sentencing decisions to congressional scrutiny (Tebo & Graham, 2003). The bill also makes transmitting pornographic images of children over the Internet illegal and enhances sentences for recidivists and those offenders that cross a state line in order to engage in a sexual act with a minor (Anonymous, April 2003).

The AMBER Alert program is now in place in all 50 states, with Hawaii being the last state to implement the program in 2005 (Anonymous, March 2005). The AMBER Alert is also in place in the District of Columbia, Puerto Rico, and the U.S. Virgin Islands (NCMEC, 2006). As a

memorial to Amber Hagerman on the 10th anniversary of her abduction and murder, January 13, 2006 was designated as AMBER Alert Awareness Day (AMBER Alert Awareness Day, 2006). On this day state and regional AMBER Alert coordinators held press conferences and other events to increase public awareness of the program and to encourage public participation when an alert is issued. Also in 2006, the Postal Service helped emphasize the alert by issuing AMBER Alert stamps (NCMEC, 2006). These stamps show a mother embracing a young child and have the words "AMBER Alert saves missing children" printed upon them, thus increasing public awareness and support of the program.

How the AMBER Alert Works

The AMBER Alert is based on the assumption that "time is an abducted child's greatest enemy" (New View for AMBER, 2006, p.1). In an hour's time, a child could be taken up to 70 miles away from the point of abduction and possibly across state lines. Therefore, the main goal of the AMBER Alert is to give the responding agency a mechanism within which they can quickly extend all pertinent information about the abduction to the community. The community then becomes extra "eyes and ears of the department," thereby greatly enhancing the chances that the child will be found quickly (Krainik, 2002, p. 85). "The AMBER Alert program works because citizens know what to look for, who to contact, and what is at stake" (AMBER Alert: Best Practices, 2006, p. 1). Research has shown that when members of the community feel that their roles in the alert are both worthy and effective, they will actively assist law enforcement (Burns and Crawford, 1999; Zgoba, 2004b; Rothe and Muzzatti, 2004). In 2004, the Department of Justice issued a set of suggested criteria that should be used to determine whether an AMBER Alert should be issued (AMBER Alert: Report to the White House, 2004). This criteria is not mandated to every state by the Department of Justice but serves as a set of rules that is assumed appropriate for each state. The specific details of implementation are left up to the individual states (Anonymous, March/April 2004). The AMBER Alert criteria guidelines are outlined in the introduction.

Once it has been determined by the local law enforcement that an alert should be issued, information about the alert is sent to the Department of Transportation via fax or other methods (Final Report, 2004). It is suggested that the Department of Transportation broadcast the alert within 200 miles of the abduction site and that the information be broadcast within the first three hours of the kidnapping. These guidelines adequately reflect how far an abductor could travel in three hours and keep the alerts local, thereby reducing the number of alerts that are issued (Final Report, 2004). Information about the alert is also given to local radio stations and news stations so that information can be broadcast immediately.

Public Service Announcements are another tool that the media uses to notify the public of endangered missing children (AMBER Alert: Report to the White House, 2004). Two famous fathers of abducted children have appeared on public service announcements: John Walsh and Ed Smart. Not only do these alerts give information about recent abductions but they are also used as a prevention tool. Public Service Announcements spread the word that both citizens and the local law enforcement are on alert and that the media is ready to act immediately when an alert is issued (AMBER Alert: Report to the White House, 2004).

Information about the AMBER Alert is relayed from the individual law enforcement agencies to the media via the Public Information Officer (PIO) (AMBER Alert: Best Practices, 2006). The PIO plays a vital role in the issuance of an Amber Alert and they are responsible for:

1. Alerting the public via the media to be on the lookout for a missing child.
2. Enhancing media coverage of the missing child incident by providing photographs, videos, and other visual aids to help identify the victim(s) and/or suspect(s).
3. Ensuring that the story stays alive by providing regular updates with accurate and timely information.
4. Directing the media and public inquiries to their proper destinations.
5. Gauging public opinions and media perceptions for the agency.
6. Anticipating possible worst-case scenarios and preparing the agency's response to the types of questions likely to accompany such scenarios.
7. Participating in post-Alert evaluations to improve systems and procedures

Means of Disseminating the AMBER Alert

There are multiple types of mediums within which the AMBER Alert is disseminated across the country. Changeable message signs (CMS) have become one such tool in the hunt for missing children (Final Report, 2004). A CMS is a sign that is capable of displaying an electronic message, using multiple lines or pages of messaging. The essential role of CMS has been to convey timely and important information to motorists and travelers. These signs have recently been used to relay information about missing children to motorists when an AMBER Alert has been issued. CMS have been credited with many successful captures of abductors and successful recoveries of missing children. The message that is displayed on the signs during an AMBER Alert varies from state to state (Final Report, 2004). Usually vehicle descriptions are written on the CMS, but there has been debate over posting the entire license plate number. Some jurisdictions feel that posting the entire plate number gives the reader too much information to absorb while passing by at a high rate of speed and they usually will advise their motorists to tune to a local news or radio station for more information on the current alert (Final Report, 2004). Other states argue that posting vehicle information without a license plate number will cause vigilante behavior on the freeway when every vehicle that matches the suspect vehicle's description is mistaken for an abductor's vehicle.

The information that is posted on the CMS also varies from state to state. Usually three lines are used to convey an AMBER Alert and the order tends to be: general category of information on the top line, vehicle information on the second line and the number to call if the motorist has information on the third line (Final Report, 2004). Some states have decided to not use the phrase "AMBER Alert" on their signs; for fear that motorists will confuse the message with a change in the national security threat level. These states will instead post the words "Child Abduction" on their CMS during an AMBER Alert. The amount of time an alert remains active also differs from state to state. Most state's Departments of Transportation will keep the message on the signs for approximately three to eight hours. The Caltrans District 7 in Los Angeles, on the other hand, feel that Amber Alerts during peak traffic hours cause unnecessary

congestion, so they amended their policy to not display any AMBER Alerts during peak traffic hours (Final Report, 2004).

Various other ways of disseminating AMBER Alert information also exist. The Internet has become a key component in the Amber Alert. Law enforcement can actually use a web portal that serves as a single point of entry for information regarding a kidnapping (Anonymous, April 2005). Once an officer enters information about the child and abduction, the information is immediately broadcast to many government agencies and to businesses such as the Department of Transportation and Department of Corrections. Another program that has proven to be beneficial to law enforcement is the Lost Child Alert Technology Resource (LOCATER) (NCMEC, 2006). This web-based, poster-creating program provides law enforcement agencies with the ability to create and distribute their own posters of missing children, missing adults, AMBER Alerts, etc., and the technology can be accessed free of charge.

Information about the alert is also broadcast to citizens who sign up to receive information about AMBER Alerts over the Internet, or those who periodically visit the multiple websites that continuously broadcast current AMBER Alerts. A business named SurferQuest has agreed to contribute to the AMBER Alert by using kiosks to release AMBER Alert information when the kiosks are not in use (Web Kiosks, 2005). Another new technology that has recently been developed is a system called AmberView (New View for AMBER, 2006). This system has the ability to mass broadcast within minutes of the issuance of an alert, a digital image of an abducted child to law enforcement, media, and private-sector recipients via the Internet. The same image can also be broadcast to 911 centers, media outlets, shopping malls, airport monitors, cell phones, and other outlets so that the chance of finding the missing child will be greatly increased (New View for AMBER, 2006).

Cell phones are another type of technology that is used to disseminate AMBER Alert information. On May 17, 2005, in recognition of National Missing Children's Day, the wireless industry created the use of Wireless AMBER Alerts (NCMEC, 2005). These subscribers will

receive text messages on their phone with important information about abducted children in their local area. More than 30,000 Americans signed up to participate in these alert on the first day the program was announced. The alerts that are issued through various mediums other than the media and CMS are called secondary AMBER Alerts (NCMEC, 2006). Many states have also issued secondary alerts by giving information over lottery tickets and video lottery terminals (Krainik, 2002). Private businesses have also helped the effort by displaying alert information on their marquees. Truck drivers can also be alerted using a global-positioning technology called the AMBER Alert Highway Network that redistributes alerts to truck drivers who are in the area near where the child was abducted, thus broadening the audience of people who are looking for the abducted child (NCMEC, 2006).

Does the AMBER Alert Work?

It is claimed by the NCMEC that the AMBER Alert has been responsible for 333 successful recoveries (AMBER Alert: AMBER Alert Program, 2007). The program has also been credited with saving an average of four children per year (Anonymous, October 2002). Once such success story happened in 2003, when a 10-year old girl in Klamath Falls, OR was found alive a few hours after an AMBER Alert was issued (Anonymous, March 2003). This successful AMBER Alert was the state's first attempt of the program. Another success story was reported in Minnesota when two teenagers stole a minivan with a baby inside (Anonymous, January 2003). Within less than a half-hour of the AMBER Alert's activation, the baby was recovered and the first AMBER Alert in Minnesota was deemed a success, even though it was old-fashioned police work that brought the baby home safely.

Griffin and Miller (2008) question the effectiveness of the AMBER Alert in their study and state that the AMBER Alert program could be a type of "crime control theater," which they define as a set of responses to a crime which only appear to be a form of crime control. They state that the program is a socially constructed solution to a socially constructed problem. Although the inventors of the AMBER Alert had good intentions, they also unintentionally

created problems, such as public backlash when the program does not work, and a distorted view of the criminal justice system (Griffen and Miller, 2008).

Smoll (2003) attempted to determine if the AMBER Alert was effective in finding missing children in his thesis. He analyzed AMBER Alerts in four different regions of the United States (Northeast, Midwest, South, and West regions). The three most populous cities within each region were then used to represent the entire region. He then looked at all AMBER Alerts that were issued in those cities between January 1, 2005 and December 31, 2005, resulting in an analysis of 91 AMBER Alerts. He was most concerned in determining whether the child was recovered alive or dead and determining whether an abduction had actually occurred. Over 80% of the child abductees in his study were recovered alive, suggesting that the AMBER Alert is successful. Also, nearly 86 percent of all the cases in the study were found to be abduction cases and 54 percent of these abduction cases involved a family-member kidnapping the child, 29 percent of the cases involved known individuals that took the child, and only 4 percent of the abductors in the study were considered to be complete strangers to the victim (Smoll, 2003). These findings contradict the notion that most children are abducted by strangers and suggest that the majority of abductions are actually committed by family members.

Smoll (2003) also found three significant relationships that should be mentioned. First, he concluded that abduction status and outcome were strongly related, stating that almost 95 percent of abductions resulted in the recovery of the child alive, whereas in all cases of non-abduction the victim was found to either be missing, runaway, or the episode was later found to be a hoax. Second, he noted that the abduction outcome and characteristics of the abductor were significantly related, and 94 percent of abductions by family members resulted in a live recovery of the victim as compared with only 67 percent among non-family cases. The last relationship that he determined was that a significant relationship between the age of the child and abduction outcome existed. Only 64 percent of children under 11 years of age were recovered alive as compared with the 87 percent of victims 11 years or older that were found

alive. Due to these findings, Smoll (2003, p. 44) concluded, “the AMBER Alert system can be an effective tool in recovering missing and abducted children alive.”

Smoll (2003) did suggest several policy implications that can be drawn from his study. He first suggested that all states should follow the exact same AMBER Alert plan, and deviations should only be made under special circumstances. Second, he suggested that the emphasis from missing children organizations on abduction education and prevention should be focused on fixing the breakdown of the traditional family unit instead of stranger abductions. Due to the fact that stranger abductions are exceedingly rare (Smoll, 2003), more resources should be allocated towards the family than programs of “stranger danger.”

Unfortunately, false AMBER Alerts are not uncommon and many advocates are worried that the public will start tuning out AMBER Alerts even when a child is in real danger (Hargrove, 2005). Griffin et al. (2007) coined the phrase “AMBER fatigue” to describe such a phenomenon. One such false alert happened in Arkansas and involved a twelve-year old boy who left his backpack on a school playground, causing police to issue a statewide alert even though he was later found to be safe at home (Hargrove, 2005). Police in Arkansas also issued an AMBER Alert for a six-year-old boy, even though they knew that he was lost in the woods. The state of Arkansas clearly disregarded the federal guidelines for issuing an Amber Alert, thus causing undue panic among the public. Hargrove (2005) reports that out of the 233 Amber Alerts that were issued in 2004, at least 46 of those children were either lost, had run away, or were the subjects of hoaxes or misunderstandings and were never in any real danger. Traditional cases of abduction, which involved a stranger abduction, accounted for only one-third of the 233 AMBER Alerts that were issued. Several states also violated federal guidelines by issuing dozens of vague alerts that contained very little information for the public to act upon. In fact, in 23 of the alerts issued in 2004, the police did not even know the name of the child that had supposedly been abducted (Hargrove, 2005). Although federal guidelines do not state specifically whether or not family abductions are eligible for an AMBER Alert, many police departments argue that they struggle with family-abduction cases because it is hard to prove

that the child is in imminent danger (Hargrove, 2005). Zgoba (2004a) states that if the authorities only recognize non-family abductions then they are making an unofficial statement that cases of family-abduction are less serious. This could promote a false sense of security within communities and may create a “hierarchical system of ranking child abductions.” Zgoba (2004a) also mentions that the guideline that children must be under 18 is also a problem because the majority of non-family abduction victims are teenagers and the authorities are narrowing the pool of cases by placing an age restriction on the AMBER Alert.

In conclusion, the effectiveness of the AMBER Alert is extremely hard to determine. The criteria that police departments use vary from state to state, which can result in confusion. The disparity in activation criteria also results in some states issuing an AMBER Alert when it is unnecessary, thereby possibly creating a desensitizing effect on the public. This would ultimately be detrimental to the AMBER Alert system.

CHAPTER 3

METHODOLOGY

The purpose of this study is to review individual state's AMBER Alert activation criteria as they relate to the suggested federal AMBER Alert activation guidelines. Police department's interpretations of their state's AMBER Alert criteria were also analyzed on a case-by-case basis. The author of the study also examined, from a case study perspective, if compliance with the guidelines results in a higher number of favorable case outcomes. The subject of this study was the AMBER Alert system and the units of analysis were police reports from multiple police agencies. The instrument and approach have been approved by IRB.

Sample

A total of 130 AMBER Alert cases from 2006 were analyzed. This list was compiled from information received from three AMBER Alert websites: Code AMBER website, National Center for Missing and Exploited Children website, and America's Most Wanted Website. This list is not exhaustive and does not include all of the Alerts issued in 2006. Only AMBER Alerts listed on the three specific websites were used because these sites contained the most information about each individual AMBER Alert. The author was unable to locate a complete list of AMBER Alerts issued in 2006. Each individual Alert was then sorted into five different groups based on the results of the case: children found deceased, children never found, children found and suspect apprehended, children found and suspect not apprehended, and cases in which the child was found but was never in danger because the abduction was later determined to be a hoax or misunderstanding. See appendix A for a diagram of the instrument used to group the cases.

The grouping “children found deceased” consisted of six AMBER Alerts in which the child was found to be deceased after the Alert had been issued. The grouping “children never found” consisted of fifteen AMBER Alerts in which the children were never found after the Alert was issued, and still to this day have not been located. The grouping “children found and suspect apprehended,” consisted of 69 AMBER Alerts in which a suspect was apprehended at the time that the child was located or shortly thereafter. The grouping “children found and suspect not apprehended” consisted of 19 AMBER Alerts in which the children were located after the Alert was issued but the suspect was not immediately apprehended. The last grouping “child never in danger” consisted of 21 cases in which an AMBER Alert was issued for children who were never actually abducted or in any real danger. Supplemental information from news reports was used to determine if a case met this group’s criteria. It should be noted that the grouping of these cases is largely based on the author’s opinion as to whether the child was actually abducted and/or was in a dangerous situation. The majority of these cases involve custody disputes and teenage girls running away with their adult boyfriends.

A total of 51 cases were then selected from the 5 groups. The selection process for each group varied. Specifically, all 6 cases from “children found deceased” were used, along with all 15 cases from “children never found.” Ten cases from the other groupings were then randomly selected. The police departments who issued the 51 AMBER Alerts were then contacted regarding each case. See Appendix B for the complete list of police departments who were contacted.

Data Collection Method

An open records request was mailed to each police department. See Appendix C for a copy of the open records request. The request specifically asked for reports that contained information regarding when the alert was issued and cancelled, the criteria that the police used to justify issuing the Alert, and whether the child was located and/or the suspect apprehended. A total of 46 departments responded to the open records request letter by mail or telephone.

Only 19 agencies were able to provide the initial police reports and supplements. None of the 6 agencies from the grouping “children found deceased” were able to provide police reports or information, because the cases were still being investigated. An additional 16 cases from the other groupings were also still under investigation and those reports were not available. Five of the police departments were unable to locate the requested AMBER Alert cases, which suggests that the agency information on the websites was incorrect. A few of the police departments charged for copies of the police reports. See Appendix D for a complete list of agency responses.

Research Design

A qualitative content analysis was conducted of the 19 police reports received. The cases were grouped according to what state the police agency examined was located within. The following states are studied: Arizona, Florida, Georgia, Illinois, Iowa, Michigan, Minnesota, Missouri, Ohio, Pennsylvania, Tennessee, Texas, and Washington. Several agencies sent information regarding their state’s AMBER Alert criteria with their response, while others advised that the information could be located on their state’s website. The Alert criteria for each state was obtained from each individual state’s AMBER website, or from the Klaaskids website. The AMBER Alert criteria used by each state was compared to the suggested federal guidelines. All 19 AMBER Alert cases were analyzed in order to determine how each police department justified the issuance of an AMBER Alert. It should be noted that the missing children’s names were not disclosed in order to protect the child’s privacy, and only the police department who issued the Alert will be mentioned.

CHAPTER 4

FINDINGS

The purpose of this study is to review individual state's AMBER Alert activation criteria as they relate to the suggested federal AMBER Alert activation guidelines. Police department's interpretations of their state's AMBER Alert criteria were also analyzed on a case-by-case basis.

In this chapter the author will present all of the AMBER Alert case information obtained in response to the open records request letters. The cases are grouped according to what state issued the Alert. The AMBER Alert criteria for each state are then listed. Next, a brief synopsis of each case is given, followed by an explanation as to how each criterion was met in order to justify an AMBER Alert activation. Last, the differences between the state guidelines and the suggested federal guidelines, mentioned in Chapter 1, will be presented. It should be noted that a majority of the state's AMBER Alert activation criteria do not specifically state that the child has to be immediately entered into NCIC, as does the suggested federal criteria, but all of the state's AMBER Alert plans automatically include entry into NCIC.

ARIZONA

Arizona AMBER Alert activation criteria

- A. The child is 17 years of age or younger.
- B. The child has been abducted, is missing or has been medically diagnosed as suffering from a mental or physical disability.
- C. There is reason to believe that the child is in imminent danger of serious bodily injury or death
- D. There is sufficient information available to disseminate to the general public, which could assist in the safe recovery of the child and/or apprehension of a suspect.

Case synopsis (Tempe Police Department)

On 2/24/06 at approximately 0650 hours, the Tempe police department was notified by the 11 year old victim's friend that the victim did not get on the bus to go to school and was planning on running away to Mexico with her 19 year old boyfriend. At approximately 2100

hours on the same day, police located the victim at an apartment complex. The suspect was subsequently arrested.

AMBER Alert criteria application

- A. The child was 11 years old.
- B. The child willingly went with the suspect, but there was a significant age difference between the suspect and the victim.
- C. There was a strong possibility that the suspect could have sexually assaulted the child.
- D. There was sufficient information about the child, the suspect, and the suspect vehicle.

Arizona state guidelines vs. federal guidelines

Arizona guidelines allow an AMBER Alert to be issued if a missing child is medically diagnosed as suffering from a mental or physical disability and there is reason to believe that the child is in imminent danger of serious bodily injury or death. The federal guidelines suggest that an AMBER Alert only be issued if there is a confirmed abduction.

FLORIDA

Florida AMBER Alert activation criteria

- A. The child must be under 18 years of age.
- B. There must be a clear indication of an abduction.
- C. The law enforcement agency's investigation must conclude that the child's life is in danger.
- D. There must be a detailed description of child and/or abductor/vehicle to broadcast to the public (photo when available).
- E. The activation must be recommended by the local law enforcement agency of jurisdiction.

Case synopsis (Alachua County Sheriff's Office)

On 5/7/06 at approximately 1300 hours the Alachua County Sheriff's Office was notified that a 13 year old girl willingly ran away with a 25 year old male. The victim and suspect were located three days later by a citizen who saw the AMBER Alert and recognized them. The suspect was subsequently arrested.

AMBER Alert criteria application

- A. The child was 13 years old.
- B. Child willingly went with the suspect, but there is a significant age difference between the child and the suspect.
- C. There was a strong possibility that the suspect could have sexually assaulted the child.
- D. Information about the child, suspect, and the suspect's vehicle was available.
- E. The activation was recommended by the Alachua County Sheriff's Office.

Case synopsis (Fort Meyers Police Department)

On 12/1/06 at approximately 1650 hours the Fort Meyers Police Department was notified that a one month old child had been abducted. The child's mother had accepted a ride from an unknown woman who later told her that she was having an affair with the child's father. The suspect demanded \$500 from the child's mother and then released the mother but kept the child. The child has never been located.

AMBER Alert criteria application

- A. The child was 1 month old.
- B. An unknown woman took the child by force from the child's mother.
- C. The suspect used force against the mother and asked for money, which suggests that the child's life could be in danger.
- D. Information about the child, suspect, and the suspect's vehicle was available.

Case synopsis (Leesburg Police Department)

On 8/27/06 at approximately 2117 hours the Leesburg Police Department was notified that a 2 year old child had disappeared from his room, which contained an open window. The child has never been located.

AMBER Alert criteria application

- A. The child was 2 years old.
- B. The child could not have climbed out of the window by himself, so an abduction is assumed.
- C. An unknown suspect with unknown intentions had abducted the child, and therefore it can be assumed that the child's life was in danger.
- D. A description of the child was available.

Florida state guidelines vs. state guidelines

Florida's criteria require that the activation be recommended by a law enforcement agency of jurisdiction. Federal guidelines do not specifically mention activation by law enforcement as a part of their criteria.

GEORGIA

Georgia AMBER Alert activation criteria

- A. There must be a confirmed child abduction.
- B. The circumstances surrounding the abduction must indicate that the child is in imminent danger of harm or death.
- C. The child must be 18 years of age or younger.
- D. There must be enough descriptive information to believe that an immediate broadcast alert will help recover the child.
- E. Request for activation of alert must be made as soon as possible after the abduction is reported (within 4 hours of abduction is ideal).
- F. The case must be entered into the National Crime Information Center (NCIC) database.

Case Synopsis (Cairo Police Department)

On 9/16/06 at approximately 2300 hours, the Cairo Police Department was notified that a 4 month old child was taken by the child's father and the child's mother had jumped in the car in order to take back her child. The child has never been located.

AMBER Alert criteria application

- A. There appears to be no indication of an abduction because the child was taken by her father, without force.
- B. There is no indication that the child was in danger.
- C. The child was 4 months old.
- D. A description of the child, the suspect, and the suspect's vehicle was available.
- E. It is unknown how many hours it took for the AMBER Alert to be activated.
- F. The child was immediately entered into NCIC.

Georgia guidelines vs. federal guidelines

Georgia's AMBER Alert criteria differ from the federal guidelines in two ways. First, an AMBER Alert can be issued for an 18 year old child, whereas the federal guidelines suggest that activation only be used for a child under 18 years of age. Also, Georgia's guidelines specify that activation of the alert should happen within four hours of the abduction, and the federal guidelines do not specify a time limit.

ILLINOIS

Illinois AMBER Alert activation criteria

- A. Law enforcement must confirm that a child has been abducted.
- B. The child must be under the age of 16 or have a proven mental or physical disability.
- C. Police must believe that the child is in danger of serious bodily injury or death.
- D. There is enough descriptive information about the child, abductor, and/or suspect's vehicle to believe an immediate broadcast alert will help.

Case synopsis (Peoria Police Department)

On 7/19/08 at approximately 1024 hours, Peoria Police were notified that the mother of two 7 year old children had taken the children during a supervised visit. They were later located and the suspect was arrested.

AMBER Alert criteria application

- A. The children were taken by their mother during a supervised visit.
- B. The children were both 7 years old.
- C. The mother had psychological problems and custody had been taken away from her by the court, therefore it can be assumed that the children were in danger of death or serious bodily injury.
- D. A description of the children and the suspect were available.

Illinois guidelines vs. federal guidelines

Illinois guidelines only allow activation for children under 16, whereas the federal guidelines suggest activation for children under 18 years of age. Illinois guidelines also allow activation for children of any age who have a proven mental or physical disability.

IOWA

Iowa AMBER Alert activation criteria

- A. Law enforcement confirms a child has been abducted and entry has been made into the IOWA/NCIC Systems identifying the child as missing.
- B. The child is under the age of 18.
- C. Law enforcement believes the circumstances surrounding the abduction indicate that the child is in danger of serious bodily harm or death.
- D. There is enough descriptive information about the child, abductor, and/or suspect's vehicle to believe an immediate broadcast alert will help.

Case Synopsis (Le Mars Police Department)

On 6/17/08 at approximately 2300 hours, Le Mars Police Department was notified that a 16 year old girl and 17 year old girl had run away. The girls were possibly with a subject who was currently out on bond for sexual assault of a child and drugs. Both of the children were located by the police the next day and both advised that they were not taken against their will and they were not assaulted.

AMBER Alert criteria application

- A. There was not a confirmed abduction because it appeared as if the children had runaway together.
- B. The children were 16 and 17 years old.
- C. There was a possibility that they could be sexually assaulted.
- D. Descriptive information about the suspect, victim, and suspect vehicle was available.

Iowa guidelines vs. federal guidelines

The Iowa AMBER Alert criteria are the same as the suggested federal guidelines.

MICHIGAN

Michigan AMBER Alert activation criteria

- A. An endangered missing person under 17 years of age is reported to law enforcement and one or more of the following circumstances exist:
 - a. The child suffers from a severe mental or physical disability that greatly impairs the child's ability to care for him/herself.
 - b. The child is a victim of stranger or acquaintance kidnapping.
 - c. The child is in the company of a person who has a confirmed criminal history of child abuse/neglect, sexual assault, domestic assault, a crime involving the victimization of children, or has made statements of intent to harm the missing child, or is suicidal.

- d. The child has been abducted by a non-custodial parent who parental rights have been terminated.

Case synopsis (Hamtramck Police Department)

On 1/9/06 at approximately 0304 hours the Hamtramck Police Department was notified that a 6 month old child was taken by two men from a babysitter. One of the men was wearing a mask and had a gun, but claimed to be the baby's father. The child was later located and the suspect was determined to be the baby's father.

AMBER Alert criteria application

1. The child was 6 months old:
 - a. N/A
 - b. The child was forcibly taken from the babysitter from men in masks who could have been strangers.
 - c. It is unknown as to the identity of the men and therefore the possibility exists that they could have a criminal history of child abuse/neglect, sexual assault, domestic assault or a crime involving the victimization of children.
 - d. N/A

Michigan guidelines vs. federal guidelines

Many differences exist between the AMBER Alert criteria for Michigan and the suggested federal guidelines. The Michigan criteria do not allow activation for a 17 year old child, but they do allow activation for a child with a severe mental or physical disabilities. The federal guidelines do not mention disabled children, and suggest that the Alert should be used for children under 18 years old. Also, the Michigan criteria specify a suspect's criminal history as a reason to issue an alert, and the federal guidelines do not mention criminal histories. Also, Michigan allows Alerts to be issued for abductions involving parents whose rights have been terminated. The risk of death or serious bodily injury is also not a criterion for Michigan. Last, Michigan does not require descriptive information about the suspect, victim, or suspect's vehicle to be present in order for an AMBER Alert to be activated.

MINNESOTA

Minnesota AMBER Alert activation criteria

- A. The child is 17 years of age or younger.
- B. The child has been abducted.
- C. There is reason to believe that the victim is in imminent danger of serious bodily injury or death.
- D. Information is available to disseminate to the general public which could assist with the safe recovery of the victim and/or apprehension of the suspect.

Case Synopsis (Brooklyn Center Police Department)

On 8/5/06 at approximately 1030 hours the Brooklyn Center Police Department was notified that a 4 year old child was taken by his father who threatened to kill himself and the child. Both subjects were located and the suspect was apprehended.

AMBER Alert criteria application

- A. The child was 4 years old.
- B. The suspect took the child after threatening his life.
- C. The suspect threatened the child's life.
- D. Information about the child and the suspect was available.

Minnesota guidelines vs. federal guidelines

The Minnesota AMBER Alert activation criteria are the same as the suggested federal guidelines.

MISSOURI

Missouri AMBER Alert activation criteria

- A. Law enforcement officials have reasonable belief that an abduction has occurred, which meets the definition in RSMo. 565.110 or 565.115.
 - a. RSMo. 565.110: A person commits the crime of kidnapping if he or she unlawfully removes another without his or her consent from the place where he or she is found or unlawfully confines another without his or her consent for a substantial period, for the purpose of
 - (1) Holding that person for ransom or reward, or for any other act to be performed or not performed for the return or release of that person; or
 - (2) Using the person as a shield or as a hostage; or
 - (3) Interfering with the performance of any governmental or political function; or
 - (4) Facilitating the commission of any felony or flight thereafter; or
 - (5) Inflicting physical injury on or terrorizing the victim or another.
 - b. RSMo. 565.115 A person commits the crime of child kidnapping if such person is not a relative of the child within the third degree and such person:
 - (1) Unlawfully removes a child under the age of fourteen without the consent of such child's parent or guardian from the place where such child is found; or
 - (2) Unlawfully confines a child under the age of fourteen without the consent of such child's parent or guardian.
- B. Law enforcement officials believe that the child is in imminent danger of serious bodily injury or death.
- C. Enough descriptive information exists about the victim and the abductor for law enforcement to issue an AMBER Alert.
- D. The victim of the abduction is a child age 17 years or younger.
- E. The child's name and other critical data elements- including the child abduction (CA) flag- have been entered into the National Crime Information Center (NCIC).

Case synopsis (Osage County Sheriff's Office)

On 6/28/06 at approximately 1822 hours the Osage County Sheriff's Office were notified that a 3 year old child and a 9 month old child had been taken by their non-custodial father. The suspect physically assaulted the children's grandmother's friend during the abduction. The children were located and the suspect apprehended.

AMBER Alert criteria application

- A. The children were forcibly taken. The mother of the children had temporary custody of the children.
- B. The father did not have custodial rights to the children and the force was used during the abduction, therefore it is probable that the children were in danger of death or serious bodily injury.
- C. Information about the suspect, victims, and the suspect's vehicle was available.
- D. The children were 3 years and 9 years old.
- E. The children were immediately entered into NCIC.

Missouri guidelines vs. federal guidelines

The only difference that exists between Missouri's criteria and the federal government's suggested criteria, is that Missouri specifically mentions that the elements of the offense for kidnapping and/or child kidnapping must be present in order for an Alert to be activated.

OHIO

Ohio AMBER Alert activation criteria

- A. An abducted child is under 18 years old.
- B. The abduction poses a credible threat of immediate danger of serious bodily harm or death to a child.
- C. A law enforcement agency determines that the child is not a runaway and has not been abducted as a result of a child custody dispute, unless the dispute poses a threat of immediate danger of serious bodily injury or death.
- D. There is sufficient descriptive information about the child, the abductor, and the circumstances surrounding the abduction to indicate that activation of the alert will help locate the child.

Case synopsis (Licking County Sheriff's Office)

On 5/7/06 at approximately 1007 hours, Licking County Sheriff's Office was notified that a 16 year old girl and her 16 month old daughter voluntarily left with the baby's father, who had been living with them. The child has not been located.

AMBER Alert criteria application

- A. The child was 16 years older and her baby was 16 months old.
- B. An abduction was not committed because the girl voluntarily left with her child's father.
- C. The child was a runaway and there was no indication of death or serious bodily injury.
- D. Information about the suspect, victims, and suspect's vehicle was available.

Case Synopsis (Pickerington Police Department)

On 5/7/06 at approximately 1007 hours, the Pickerington Police Department was notified that a 16 year old girl, who does not have custody of her two children, took her 2 year

old child and 13 month old child from foster care. The two children were recovered on the same day at approximately 1500 hours but the suspect was not apprehended.

AMBER Alert criteria application

- A. The children were 2 years old and 13 months old.
- B. The suspect does not have custody of her children and it is likely that she is unable to care for them.
- C. The children were not runaways.
- D. Information on the suspect, victims, and suspect vehicle was available.

Ohio guidelines vs. federal guidelines

The Ohio AMBER Alert activation criteria are the same as the suggested federal guidelines, except for the fact that they specifically state that the missing child cannot be a runaway.

PENNSYLVANIA

Pennsylvania AMBER Alert activation criteria

- A. Victim is under 16 years of age or under 18 years of age if the child has a mental or physical disability.
- B. Victim is in danger of death or serious bodily injury.
- C. The abduction was committed by a non-family member.

Case synopsis (Ridley Township Police Department)

On 8/17/06 at approximately 0559 hours, the Ridley Township Police Department was notified that an unknown teenager was seen being pushed into a van. The van and teenager were never located.

AMBER Alert criteria application

- A. The age of the victim is unknown.
- B. The witness saw the victim forcibly being pulled into a van, which could indicate that the victim's life was in danger.
- C. It is unknown as to whether the suspect was a non-family member.

Pennsylvania guidelines vs. federal guidelines

Pennsylvania's AMBER Alert activation criteria differ from the suggested federal guidelines in several ways. First, Pennsylvania requires that the victim be under 16 years old or under 18 years old with a mental or physical disability. The federal guidelines only state that the child has to be under 18 years of age. Also, Pennsylvania specifically states that the abduction has to be committed by a non-family member, whereas the federal guidelines do not make that distinction. Last, the Pennsylvania guidelines do not require any descriptive information about the victim, suspect, or suspect vehicle.

TENNESSEE

Tennessee AMBER Alert activation criteria

- A. Abducted child must be 17 years of age or younger.
- B. Believe the abducted child to be in imminent danger of bodily injury or death.
- C. To activate the AMBER Alert you must have one of the following:
 - a. Description of child
 - b. Description of suspect
 - c. Description of vehicle

Case synopsis (Gatlinburg Police Department)

On 12/7/06 at approximately 1447 hours, the Gatlinburg Police Department was notified that a 3 year old child was missing. The child's mother had lost sight of the child for approximately 1 to 3 minutes until she realized that she was missing. On the same day at approximately 1740 hours the child was located with the child's father.

AMBER Alert criteria application

- A. The child was 3 years old.
- B. The child was missing but it was unknown if the child was abducted, and it was possible that the child was with her father.
- C. Information about the child was available.

Tennessee guidelines vs. federal guidelines

The Tennessee AMBER Alert activation criteria are the same as the suggested federal guidelines.

TEXAS

Texas AMBER Alert activation criteria

- A. The abducted child is 17 or younger
- B. The child has been abducted or unwillingly taken without permission from the child's parent or legal guardian.
- C. Law enforcement believes that the child is in danger of serious bodily injury or death.
- D. There is enough descriptive information about the child, the abductor, or the suspect's vehicle to make a broadcast alert to the public helpful.

Case synopsis (Liberty County Sheriff's Office)

On 5/22/06 at approximately 2052 hours, the Liberty County Sheriff's Office was notified that a 16 year old child had left town with her adult boyfriend. Police located both subjects and the suspect was apprehended.

AMBER Alert criteria application

- A. The child was 16 years old.
- B. The child was a runaway and had not been abducted.
- C. The child was not in danger of death or serious bodily injury.
- D. Information about the suspect and child was available.

Case synopsis (Irving Police Department)

On 6/21/06 in the late afternoon, the Irving Police Department was notified that a 2 year old child had disappeared while in a park. The child has not been located.

AMBER Alert criteria application

- A. The child was 2 years old.
- B. After an extensive search without locating any indication of the child, law enforcement concluded that he had been abducted.
- C. It is possible that the child is in danger of death or serious bodily injury because an unknown suspect with unknown intentions took him.
- D. Information on the victim was available.

Texas guidelines vs. federal guidelines

The Texas AMBER Alert activation criteria are the same as the suggested federal guidelines.

WASHINGTON

Washington AMBER Alert activation criteria

- A. The child is under 18 years of age and is known to be abducted and is not a runaway or throwaway from home.
- B. The abducted child is believed to be in danger of death or serious bodily injury.
- C. The AMBER Alert activation should occur within 4 hours of the event qualifying under the criteria as an AMBER Alert unless circumstances or the timeliness of the information warrant otherwise.
- D. There must be enough descriptive information available to believe that an AMBER Alert activation will assist in the recover of the child. (Must include as much of the following info as possible)
 - a. Where the abduction took place.
 - b. A specific physical description of the child.
 - c. A physical description of the abductor.
 - d. Place last seen.
 - e. Description of the vehicle.
- E. The incident must be reported to and investigated by a law enforcement agency.

Case synopsis (Lakewood Police Department)

On 5/20/06 hours at approximately 1903 hours, the Lakewood Police Department were notified that a disabled father took his child in a vehicle while they were waiting in a parking lot. Both subjects were later located.

AMBER Alert criteria application

- A. The child was one year old
- B. The child was not abducted because her father took her, but the father was disabled and was possibly unable to care for the child.
- C. It is unknown how long after the event took place that the Alert was issued.
- D. Information about the suspect, victim, and suspect's vehicle was available.

Case synopsis (Renton Police Department)

On 3/24/06 at approximately 0707 hours, the Renton Police Department was notified that a 3 year old child was missing from her home. Witnesses saw a female take the child and the parent's of the child later received a phone call from the suspect stating that she had the child. At approximately 1250 hours, the suspect called police and advised that she had found the child in a parking lot and had been looking for the child's parents.

AMBER Alert criteria application

- A. The child was 3 years old.
- B. Witnesses observed a female take the child and the female later called and advised that she had the child.
- C. The AMBER Alert was issued at 1127 hours, which is within the 4 hour timeframe.
- D. Information about the child, suspect, and suspect's vehicle was available.
- E. The incident was reported to law enforcement.

Case synopsis (Sunnyside Police Department)

On 4/13/06 at approximately 1545 hours, the Sunnyside Police Department was notified that a 2 year old baby had been taken from the baby's mother by an ex-boyfriend. Once the alert was issued the suspect turned himself in and it was later determined that the suspect was married to the baby's mother.

AMBER Alert criteria application

- A. The child was 2 years old and police believed that an angry ex-boyfriend, who was of no relation to the child, took the boy.
- B. Police believed that the child was in danger of death or serious bodily injury because they believed that the child was taken for retaliation.
- C. It is unknown as to what time the alert was issued and if it was issued within the 4 hour timeframe.
- D. Information on the suspect, victim, and suspect's vehicle was available.

Washington guidelines vs. federal guidelines

Washington's AMBER Alert activation criteria differ from the suggested federal guidelines in several ways. First, Washington's criteria specifically state that the child cannot be a runaway or throwaway. Also, Washington's guidelines state that the Alert should be issued within 4 hours of the event, and the federal guidelines do not give a timeline for issuance of the Alert.

In Chapter 5 the author will expand on the results of these findings.

CHAPTER 5

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

Current Research Limitations

Current research on the AMBER Alert is quite rare. This is surprising due to the publicity that the AMBER Alert routinely receives. The majority of AMBER Alert research focuses on studying the effectiveness on the Alert system by measuring the number of children located as a direct result of an Alert. Other research has examined the willingness of the public to respond to an AMBER Alert and studied the best means by which to disseminate an Alert.

Few researchers have concentrated on examining the specific requirements included in the AMBER Alert activation criteria, as suggested by the federal government, and no current research has examined individual state's criteria as they relate to the federal guidelines. It is important that the activation criteria for individual states are researched so that improvements can be made that will result in quicker activation and/or quicker recovery of the child. Researchers have also failed to study police department's implementation of the AMBER Alert criteria on a case-by-case basis. This type of research is also needed in order to justify the necessity of each criterion.

The focus of this study, as mentioned in previous chapters, focused on reviewing individual state's AMBER Alert activation criteria as they relate to the suggested federal AMBER Alert activation guidelines. Individual police department's interpretations of their state's AMBER Alert guidelines were studied as well. The author also examined whether compliance with the federal guidelines resulted in a higher number of favorable case outcomes. In the next section, the author will discuss the results of the findings outlined in Chapter 4.

Discussion

The majority of states in the sample have AMBER Alert activation criteria that are similar to the suggested federal guidelines, with only a few minor differences. The most common difference involves activation of the AMBER Alert if a missing child suffers from a mental or physical disability, regardless as to whether an abduction has occurred. The age criterion required for activation is another common difference that exists between state guidelines. The federal criteria require that the abducted child be under 18 years old, but several state criteria allow activation for children 18 years old and others only allow activation for children under 17. Two states, Pennsylvania and Michigan, have unique criteria that differ greatly from the suggested federal guidelines. Pennsylvania does not require descriptive information about the suspect, victim, or suspect's vehicle to be present prior to the issuance of an alert, and therefore an unnecessary alert was issued for an unknown teenager. Michigan also does not require descriptive information be present, and has a criterion that involves inspection of a suspect's criminal history to determine if the suspect has been convicted for any crimes against children. Michigan also does not require that the risk of death or serious bodily injury be present in order to activate an alert. The absence of this criterion is a severe oversight by Michigan that could result in many unnecessary AMBER Alert activations. Four of the states (Iowa, Minnesota, Tennessee, and Texas) have the exact same criteria as the federal guidelines.

The author examined the cases within each grouping in order to determine if police departments were interpreting the AMBER Alert criteria correctly before activating an AMBER Alert. The grouping "children never in danger" contained a total of seven AMBER Alert cases and it is the author's opinion that three of those cases should not have resulted in the issuance of an AMBER Alert. See Table 1. The grouping of "children never found" also contained three cases, out of the total six cases, in which an AMBER Alert should not have been issued. See Table 4. The other grouping of "children found and suspect not apprehended" did not contain

any cases in which an AMBER Alert activation was not justified by the criteria. See Table 3. The grouping “Children found and suspect apprehended” contained 1 case, out of the 4 cases, in which an AMBER Alert should not have been issued. These results suggest that police departments who comply with their state’s criteria are more likely to locate an endangered missing child, based on the fact that all of the children involved in the cases from Tables 2 and 3 were located, and only one of those cases involved an AMBER Alert that was unjustified. Table 4, on the other hand, contains 3 cases in which an Alert should not have been issued and those children were never located.

The author also determined that twelve of the cases occurred in states that did not require proof of a confirmed abduction, reasonable belief that an abduction had occurred, or a clear indication of an abduction, before issuance of an Alert. Five out of the seven cases in the grouping “children never in danger” did not require confirmation of an abduction before the issuance of an AMBER Alert, which suggests that those AMBER Alerts could have been avoided if confirmation of an abduction was part of the activation criteria. Both of the cases in the grouping “children found and suspect not apprehended” did not require confirmation of an abduction, and 2 out of the 4 cases in the grouping “children found and suspect apprehended” also did not require abduction confirmation prior to the issuance of an AMBER Alert. See Tables 2 and 3. The grouping “children never found” contained 3 cases in which an abduction did not have be confirmed prior to the issuance of an AMBER Alert. See Table 4. A total of 4 out of the 6 cases in which an AMBER Alert was not justified, also did not require confirmation of an abduction prior to the issuance of an Alert. Based on these results, one can assume that confirmation of an abduction should be a required criteria for all AMBER Alert activations in order to eliminate nonessential AMBER Alerts.

Table 1: Children Never in Danger

	Should Alert have been issued?	Does criteria require a confirmed abduction?
Arizona- Tempe Police Department	Yes	No
Florida- Gainesville Police Department	Yes	Yes
Missouri- Osage County Sheriff's Office	Yes	Yes
Tennessee- Gatlinburg Police Department	No	No
Texas- Liberty County Sheriff's Office	No	No
Washington- Lakewood Police Department	No	No
Washington- Renton Police Department	Yes	No

Table 2: Children Found and Suspect Not Apprehended

	Should Alert have been issued?	Does criteria require a confirmed abduction?
Michigan- Hamtramck Police Department	Yes	No
Ohio- Pickerington Police Department	Yes	No

Table 3: Children Found and Suspect Apprehended

	Should Alert have been issued?	Does criteria require a confirmed abduction?
Illinois- Peoria Police Department	Yes	Yes
Iowa- LeMars Police Department	No	Yes
Minnesota- Brooklyn Center Police Department	Yes	No
Washington- Sunnyside	Yes	No

Table 4: Children Never Found

	Should Alert have been issued?	Does criteria require a confirmed abduction?
Florida- Ft. Myers Police Department	Yes	Yes
Florida- Leesburg Police Department	Yes	Yes
Georgia- Cairo Police Department	No	Yes
Ohio- Licking County Sheriff's Office	No	No
Pennsylvania- Ridley Township Police Department	No	No
Texas- Irving Police Department	Yes	No

Limitations of the Study

There are several limitations that exist throughout the study. First, the groupings used to differentiate the individual cases were only based on the limited information available from the three AMBER Alert websites studied and supplemental news reports. The limited information could have resulted in several cases being grouped incorrectly. Also, not all of the AMBER Alert cases in 2006 were used in the study, which could have affected the results.

The limited information received from some of the open records requests is another limitation of the study. None of the cases in the grouping "children found deceased" could be examined because police departments were not able to release the police reports due to ongoing investigations. The six departments that did not respond, and the other 21 cases in which information was not available or could not be released, also could have affected the results of the study.

Policy Implications

The results of the study suggest that several changes should be made to the AMBER Alert activation system. The majority of states in the sample have criteria that are similar to the federal guidelines. The differences that exist between most state guidelines and the federal guidelines are mostly arbitrary and do not result in ineffective AMBER Alerts. Pennsylvania, on the other hand, has criteria that differ greatly from the suggested guidelines,

which resulted in the issuance of an unnecessary AMBER Alert. It is important that only AMBER Alerts that meet the federal criteria be issued, in order to protect the public from “AMBER fatigue.” Once the public becomes accustomed to AMBER Alerts, the effectiveness of the Alert becomes compromised. The author, therefore, suggests that all states should implement the same AMBER Alert criteria as suggested by the Department of Justice. If every state is operating on the same standardized criteria, the AMBER Alert will be more effective and dissemination of the Alert across state lines will be easier.

It can also be interpreted from the findings, that the requirement of a confirmed abduction should be a component of the AMBER Alert activation criteria. Abduction confirmation is an essential criterion because it requires police departments to review the information that they have at the time and make a decision as to whether they believe that a true abduction has occurred. The federal guidelines should be updated in order to include the words “confirmed abduction.” Confirmation of an abduction by law enforcement will greatly reduce the amount of unnecessary Alerts.

The results of this study also suggest that police department’s interpretations of the AMBER Alert criteria differ greatly and training on when to issue an AMBER Alert is needed. The Department of Justice should require officers from police departments to attend national training classes that focus on the AMBER Alert system, and specifically the Alert criteria. These officers can then use their training to educate other personnel within their department about the AMBER Alert system.

It can also be interpreted from the results of this study that the Department of Justice should assign additional duties to the National AMBER Alert Coordinator or create an additional position that acts as a liaison between the federal government and the states. The AMBER Alert Coordinator should be notified when a state issues an AMBER Alert in order to facilitate adequate dissemination of the Alert across state lines if necessary. The AMBER Alert Coordinator should also be responsible for reviewing AMBER Alerts after the case is resolved in

order to determine if proper procedures were followed and what changes should be made in order to improve the system.

Further research on the AMBER Alert needs to be conducted. Researchers should focus on the additional 37 states that were not sampled in this study. The AMBER Alert activation criteria for these additional states need to be analyzed to determine if the same results exist. New research on this topic could result in the discovery of additional criteria that would be beneficial to AMBER Alert activation.

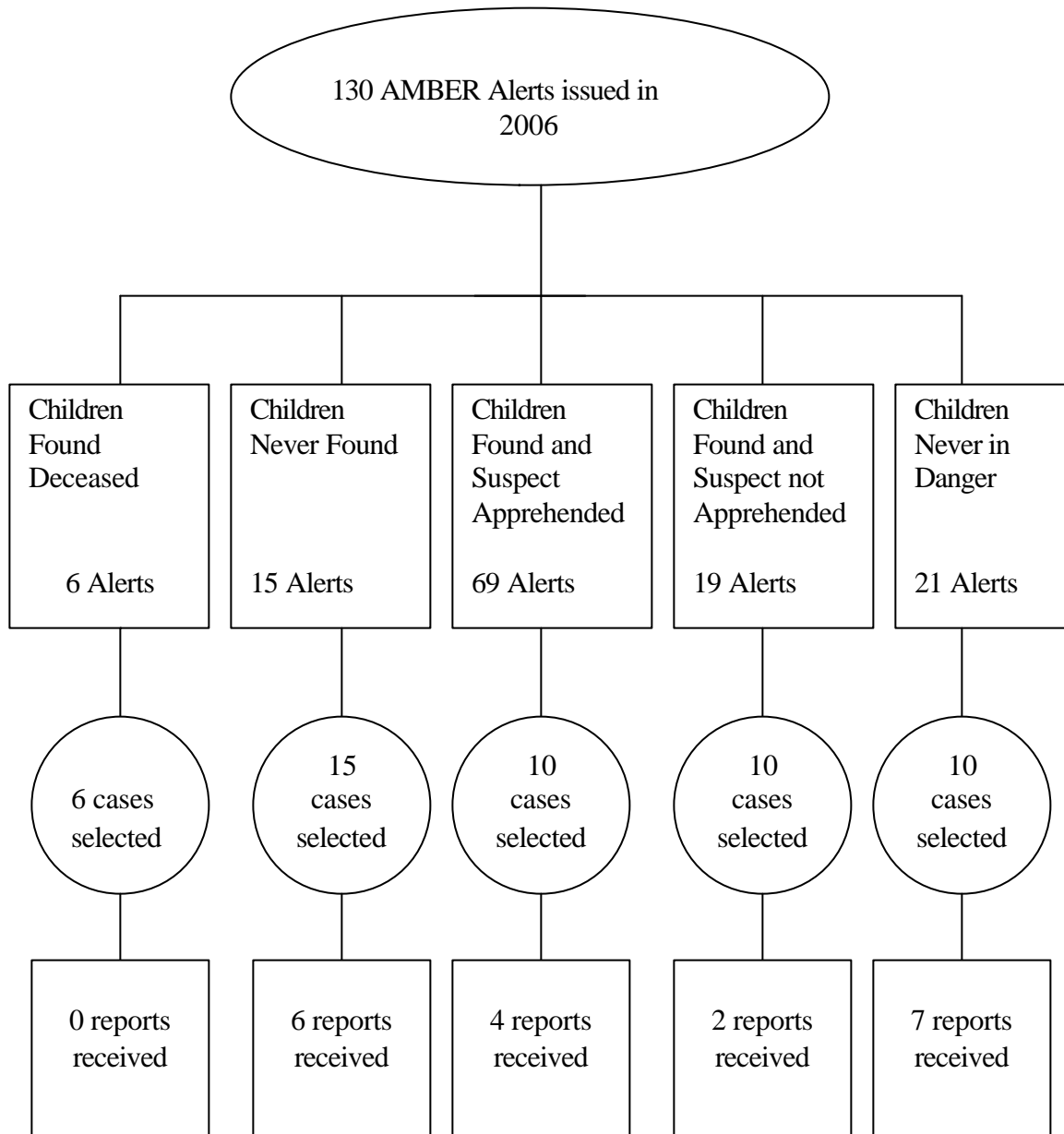
Conclusion

The AMBER Alert system is a unique program that has been credited with saving the lives of many children. The criteria for activation suggested by the federal government have been implemented throughout the states, but not uniformly. Standardization of the AMBER Alert activation criteria will result in a more uniform response to an abducted child and will reduce the issuance of excessive Alerts. Adaptations to the AMBER Alert program are important for the progression of the system, especially since other programs, such as the Silver Alert, have been modeled after the Alert system. Not only do our children deserve the most efficient and productive system possible, but their lives also depend on it!

APPENDIX A

AMBER ALERTS (2006) GROUPING INSTRUMENT

AMBER Alerts (2006) Grouping Instrument



APPENDIX B

CONTACTED POLICE DEPARTMENTS

Contacted Police Departments

Alabama

Albertville Police Department

Arkansas

Desha County Sheriff's Office

Arizona

Tempe Police Department

California

Los Angeles County Sheriff's Department
Los Angeles Police Department (2 separate cases)
San Diego Police Department

Florida

Fort Myers Police Department
Gainesville Police Department
Greenacres Police Department
Leesburg Police Department
Nassau County Sheriff's Office
St. Petersburg Police Department

Georgia

Cairo Police Department

Illinois

Peoria Police Department

Indiana

Cass County Sheriff's Office
Terre Haute Police Department

Iowa

LeMars Police Department

Kansas

Independence Police Department

Kentucky

Danville Police Department

Michigan

Detroit Police Department

Minnesota

Brooklyn Center Police Department

Missouri

Bel-Ridge Police Department
Hamtramck Police Department
Osage County Sheriff's Department

Nevada

Las Vegas Metro Police Department

New York

New York City Police Department

North Carolina

Siler City Police Department

North Dakota

Minot Police Department

Ohio

City of Pickerington Division of Police
Dearborn County Sheriff's Office
Licking County Sheriff's Office

Oklahoma

Purcell Police Department

Pennsylvania

Lancaster Bureau of Police
Pittsburgh Bureau of Police
Ridley Township Police Department

South Dakota

Watertown Police Department

Tennessee

Gatlinburg Police Department
Memphis Police Department
Nashville Police Department
Smyrna Police Department

Texas

Harris County Sheriff's Office
Houston Police Department (2 separate cases)
Irving Police Department
Liberty County Sheriff's Office

Washington

Bellview Police Department
Lakewood Police Department
Renton Police Department
Sunnyside Police Department

Wisconsin

Barron County Sheriff's Department

APPENDIX C

OPEN RECORDS REQUEST

Open Records Request

April 1, 2008

RECORDS REQUEST

Dear Records Request Officer:

Pursuant to the state open records act, I request access to and copies of all police reports and supplemental reports regarding the abduction of [name of child and date of abduction], which resulted in the issuance of an Amber Alert. I am especially interested in reports that contain information regarding when the alert was issued and cancelled, the criteria that the police used to justify issuing the Alert, and whether the child was located and/or the suspect apprehended.

I am currently working on my thesis at the University of Texas at Arlington and these records will assist me with my research.

I agree to pay reasonable duplication fees for the processing of this request.

If my request is denied in whole or part, I ask that you justify all deletions by reference to specific exemptions of this act.

Thank you for your assistance.

Sincerely,

Jacklyn Donalson

APPENDIX D

AGENCY RESPONSES

Agency Responses

Agencies That Provided Police Reports

Arizona- Tempe Police Department
Florida- Alachua County Sheriff's Office
Fort Meyers Police Department
Leesburg Police Department
Georgia- Cairo Police Department
Illinois- Peoria Police Department
Iowa- Le Mars Police Department
Michigan- Hamtramck Police Department
Minnesota- Brooklyn Center Police Department
Missouri- Osage County Sheriff's Office
Ohio- Licking County Sheriff's Office
Pickerington Police Department
Pennsylvania- Ridley Township Police Department
Tennessee- Gatlinburg Police Department
Texas- Irving Police Department
Liberty County Sheriff's Office
Washington- Lakewood Police Department
Renton Police Department
Sunnyside Police Department

Agencies That Were Unable to Provide Police Reports

Alabama- Albertville Police Department
Arkansas- Pickens Police Department
Florida- Greenacres Police Department

St. Petersburg Police Department

Indiana- Cass County Sheriff's Office

Terre Haute Police Department

Kansas- Independence Police Department

Kentucky- Danville Police Department

Missouri- Bel-Ridge Police Department

Nevada- Las Vegas Police Department

New York- New York City Police Department

North Carolina- Siler City Police Department

North Dakota- Minot Police Department

Oklahoma- Purcell Police Department

Pennsylvania- Pittsburgh Police Department

South Dakota- Watertown Police Department

Tennessee- Memphis Police Department

Smyrna Police Department

Texas- Channelview Police Department

Houston Police Department (2 cases)

Washington- Renton Police Department

Wisconsin- Barron County Sheriff's Office

Agencies That Could Not Locate the Police Report

California- Linda Vista Police Department

Los Angeles Police Department (2 cases)

Florida- St. Petersburg Police Department

Washington- Bellview Police Department

Agencies That Did Not Respond

Florida- Nassau County Sheriff's Office

Michigan- Detroit Police Department

Ohio- Dearborn County Police Department

Pennsylvania- Lancaster Police Department

Tennessee- Nashville Police Department

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