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## FREEDOM OF INFORMATION ACT 2000 REQUEST

Thank you for your e-mail of 16 November to the Information Rights Team in which you requested information about child abduction cases that occur overseas, in particular those involving a stranger, under the Freedom of Information Act (FOIA or Act). Your request stated:

*"I am a PhD student at Loughborough University and I am researching fears of contemporary parenthood. As part of this research I have conducted several focus groups with parents and one fear was repeatedly discussed: the fear of child abduction by a stranger while on holiday abroad.*

*I would be interested to find out, or at least to get some vague idea, of how frequent this crime actually is. While I appreciate it is impossible to identify whether the abductor was a stranger until the case is closed, from what I understand it is possible to identify if the abduction is suspected to be a parent (e.g. during a custody dispute).*

*I have been advised that you assisted with 470 missing person cases in 2008/2009 and I would appreciate it you would be able to provide me with further statistics on these cases. Specifically how many involved children while on holiday.*

*I would appreciate any information you could provide me with."*

I can confirm that the Foreign and Commonwealth Office (FCO) holds information relevant to your request. Please find attached two sets of data relating to international child abduction cases recorded by the Directorate's Child Abduction Section (CAS). The first shows new cases recorded each year from 2005-2009, and the other the total number of active (unresolved) cases from 2004-2009.

These statistics are a record of international child abduction cases of which CAS is aware and have been extracted from COMPASS, the FCO's global assistance database, which consular officials use to record consular assistance cases. You should note that they serve as a guide to the work of CAS rather than an authoritative analysis of international parental child abduction.

The FCO leads on abductions to countries that have not ratified the 1980 Hague Convention on the Civil Aspects of Child Abduction so most cases recorded will be in non-Hague countries. You may also find it useful to contact the International Child Abduction and Contact Unit at the Ministry of Justice (see <http://www.justice.gov.uk/about/international-family-law.htm>) which may be able to provide you with statistics for abductions to countries that have signed the Hague Convention. They can be contacted on 0207 911 7045.

You have specifically asked about the number of child abduction cases that involving strangers. We do not record such data centrally; these cases, like those involving abduction by a parent or relative, are recorded on COMPASS. It is possible to search and extract data from COMPASS by selecting a pre-existing attribute, such as country or type of assistance case but not specifically those involving a

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stranger. Given this, we could only locate such cases by searching the database entry for each child abduction case. Each case has attached notes, ranging from one to many hundreds. We, therefore, believe that the time taken to do this for all international child abduction cases for a given year would exceed the cost limit under Section 12 of the Act.

As you may be aware, the FCO is not obliged to comply with requests for information where the cost of dealing with them would be likely to exceed 'an appropriate limit'. Section 12 of the FOIA allows public authorities to refuse requests for information where the cost of dealing with them would exceed the appropriate limit. The limit has been specified in the Freedom of Information and Data Protection (Appropriate Limit and Fees) Regulations 2004. For central government, the appropriate limit is set at £600. This figure represents the estimated cost of one or more persons spending 3½ working days in determining whether the government department concerned holds the information, and to find, retrieve and extract the relevant material.

A search of cases for a shorter time frame, e.g. a month, is unlikely to yield any results, since abduction cases involving a stranger are rare. However, our Country Casework Teams in the Directorate, who are the first point of contact in providing consular assistance, were asked to provide details of any cases that they could recall. They were able to recall the case of Ben Needham, who is believed to have been abducted while staying with family on the Greek island of Kos in summer 1991. Our Embassy in Athens has worked with the local authorities and media in an effort to locate Ben, but were not successful. The FCO filed the case in May 2008. You will also be aware of the Madeleine McCann case. Both this and the Needham case are categorised as a missing persons, rather than child abduction cases, as there is no evidence in either case to support whether the children were or were not abducted.

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Strategy, Communications and Training Group