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Home-schooling Freedoms Help Parents Who Abduct Children

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A means of hiding

Emily Fritts was 6 years old when her mother abducted her in Staunton, Va.

For the next eight years, Mary Outlaw Fritts and Emily lived on the run in at least five other states: Tennessee, Oregon, Kansas, Alaska and Montana. They assumed new identities, becoming Mary and Emily Stutz.

Mary Fritts took an additional step to keep her secret, something she could not have done as easily 10 or 20 years earlier in most states: She home-schooled Emily.

Each year, thousands of parents in custody cases abduct their children. These parents must elude spouses, the police, state agencies, the FBI and a legion of organizations dedicated to finding missing children.

Parents who abduct children live quiet lives on the run. They canmove into a community, claim they are home schooling and avoid answering questions or providing proof of their past.

How many abductors home-school?

No one knows.

No one is trying to find out.

Even if someone were to attempt to determine the extent of the problem, most state laws are written so loosely that it is impossible to track children through a system they have in common: education.

When children move from one public school to the next, their records follow them. Most private schools request prior academic files, although some private schools -- mainly religious ones -- do not.

In Ohio, parents notify their school district that they are going to home-school. They do not need to ask for permission.

The local superintendent cannot ask any questions about the family or children, including where the family lived prior to moving into the district. Requesting prior academic records is forbidden.

Ohio is considered a moderate state for oversight and accountability.

In Colorado, home-schooling parents must notify a school district, but not necessarily the one in which they live. A parent who wants to home-school can register with a district separated by more than 100 miles of mountainous terrain, making it difficult for that district to check on the family.

In other states, such as Texas and Michigan, where home-schooling laws are even looser, families are not required to notify their district. In these states, compulsory education has, in effect, been abandoned.

For Emily's father, Rodney Fritts, the eight years trying to find his daughter were frustrating and expensive.

Four FBI agents and the National Center for Missing and Exploited Children offered no answers, so Fritts paid $50,000 to hire a private investigator. Overall, the ordeal cost him $450,000 in attorney's fees and losses he incurred trying to keep up the search.

``It was like looking for a needle in a haystack,'' he said. ``When (Emily) first disappeared, I thought she would be home-schooled because there was no way she was going to be put in public schools.... ,'' Fritts said.

The push to find children

After a series of high-profile kidnapping, rape and murder cases in the late 1990s, the federal government and most state legislatures passed laws to alert communities to potential threats from sex offenders and other criminals.

States also createdimmediate-response systems, called Amber Alerts, that are triggered as soon as a child is reported missing.

The National Center for Missing and Exploited Children, formed by Congress in 1984 as a private, nonprofit organization, is a clearinghouse for information about abducted, endangered and sexually exploited children. The agency works closely with the FBI and U.S. Department of Justice.

The department's most recent survey on missing children is a snapshot of 1999, when 1.3 million new cases were reported. The number of long-term abductions -- the type that might require home schooling to maintain obscurity -- is much smaller.

A Beacon Journal analysis of national center data from 1990 through the summer of 2004 found that 1,000 to 1,200 long-term cases of missing children involving a family member are reported to the center annually.

No data kept on any link

When the national center, the FBI and the Justice Department were asked whether home schooling hindered attempts to locate missing children, the question appeared to catch spokesmen off guard.

Paul Bresson, an FBI spokesman, said his agency does not have data linking abductions and home schooling.

``We've seen a few cases where that has happened,'' Bresson said. ``It's probably more than likely something has probably happened in the past, maybe even on more than one occasion, but how pervasive it is or how frequently those kinds of scenarios come up, I don't know.''

He said the FBI has similar difficulty tracking children through the public school system because privacy laws prevent state education departments from compiling specific information on individual students.

Justice Department officials reiterated the FBI's assertions.

The national center said it received 14,980 reports of a noncustodial parent abducting a child between 1990 and July 2004. The center helped to locate 12,746 of the children, a recovery rate of about 85 percent.

Executive Director Ben Ermini said the center is not an investigative or research agency. It routinely collects information on abducted children, including personal characteristics, family members, and where the child was taken from and eventually found.

Details in the center's recovery reports might mention that a child was home-schooled if that was volunteered by another agency that conducted the investigation, Ermini said.

``We just don't track that type of information. We don't ask the question of families or the law enforcement agencies that locate these children,'' he said.

Cases counted

Responding to a Beacon Journal request, the national center identified 13 cases involving 18 recovered children since 1990 in which the family was home schooling.

``That doesn't mean that there weren't hundreds of other kids that were recovered that were home-schooled, but they never mentioned it in the report,'' Ermini said.

In its research of a shorter period of time, the Beacon Journal found 18 more cases that the national center did not identify -- involving 28 abducted children -- in which home schooling reportedly was occurring. The newspaper reviewed thousands of articles published since 1997.

It's probable that the Beacon Journal's research is incomplete. Abductions and reunions aren't always the subject of news coverage. Also, newspapers and other publications don't always note whether a child was home-schooled while in hiding.

Call for regulation

The executive director of Vanished Children's Alliance, a California-based agency that is the nation's oldest and second-largest organization dedicated to finding missing children, said an abducting parent would be motivated to keep the child out of schools and away from other children and adults.

Georgia K. Hilgeman-Hammond said law enforcement agencies should be collecting data on abducting parents, including whether they use home schooling to elude authorities.

``This is a way to keep the child out of the mainstream,'' she said.

Hilgeman-Hammond thinks state and federal lawmakers should hold parents more accountable by requiring them to notify their local districts that they are home schooling and to provide prior academic records.

The Beacon Journal also found cases in which the national center was involved in helping to find the abducted child but had not determined the child was home-schooled.

In one such case, Melissa Ann Gooding was caught in Corinth, Texas, in 2002 after the national center's routine request for an update on the case prompted the Adams County, Ill., sheriff to renew the search for the mother and her daughter, Lisa.

They had disappeared in 1990, about the time Lisa Gooding's father in Illinois was awarded custody. Melissa Ann Gooding lived in several states; among them were Illinois and Texas, where no registration for home schooling is required.

In Texas, home schooling is so common that most people don't think twice about a home-schooling family living nearby.

Adams County Deputy Clay Doan tracked Melissa Ann Gooding's parents and sister to the outskirts of Corinth, where a game warden, who regularly set traps for snakes and bobcats near the home, helped identify the family -- including the missing mother and daughter.

Doan said that Lisa Gooding was home-schooled and her mother had never told her that she was abducted.

Doan, who followed the girl's progress through the court proceedings and afterward, said she was several grades behind for her age when she was placed in a public school.

The mother was convicted of a felony and granted supervised visitation, Doan said.

Girl found in Streetsboro

Unlike the national center, the FBI or the Department of Justice, Deborah Aylward considers home schooling in her searches. As a private investigator, she knows it offers a way to hide children.

Aylward heads Home Fires, a group from Virginia that offers legal and investigative services to parents looking for lost children.

On a cold afternoon in February 2002, Aylward sat outside a home in Streetsboro, waiting for local police to arrive. Minutes earlier, she had witnessed a young girl in a dress walk quickly from a car to the home, a coat pulled over her head.

For three weeks, Aylward had been tracking Gail Perkins, a 6-year-old abducted by her father five years earlier from her home in Greensboro, N.C.

Gail's mother, Nikki Jones, had turned to Aylward and Home Fires after the FBI, the national center and four private investigators were unable to locate the girl.

When the police arrived at the Streetsboro home, they found Gail and her grandmother hiding in a bedroom closet.

Streetsboro police said that Gail wasn't enrolled in school and that the family said she was home-schooled.

Aylward said she found Gail by focusing on the extended family of her father, Adam Perkins.

For five years, as they moved from state to state, Gail had been told that her grandmother was her mother. Law enforcement officials believe the family was in southern Virginia before moving to Streetsboro.

Evasion and tracking

``It's very hard to disappear in the United States today,'' Aylward said.

She said someone in hiding must stop using a Social Security number and credit for purchases. The person needs to find work that pays under the table, use a post office box instead of a mailing address and register vehicles in someone else's name.

``School is a major issue,'' Aylward said.

In her experience, many abducting parents either home-school or enroll the children in an obscure religious school that doesn't ask for student records, she said.

``In most of the cases I have handled over the past 10 years, home schooling has been a factor,'' Aylward said, adding she has handled about 75 cases.

When someone is caught with a child, they say as a defense that they are home schooling, she said. ``It's a great cover. `I'm home schooling my kids.' ''

But, she said, home schooling is often only a cover.

``They are living a fugitive lifestyle. Schooling is not high on their list,'' Aylward said. ``They're protecting their own butts from prosecution and how they can lay low. I don't think there is home schooling at all. I don't think these children are schooled whatsoever.''

She thinks legitimate home-schooling families should be concerned that these parents are tainting the movement's reputation.

The same laws that empower a parent to home-school can provide cover to abducting parents.

``It's a loophole in the whole mess,'' Aylward said. ``Home schooling should not be looked at as a method of harboring abducted children.''

She estimated that abductor families truly were home schooling in about 10 percent of the cases she has investigated.

``It's a great way to deflect attention about why children are home all day and not going to school. Who is going to call first? It's the nosy old lady on the street who is going to say, `These kids aren't in school,' '' she said.

``If I were a parent and I moved into a neighborhood, it's like being in the witness-protection program. I would make friends with everybody, introduce my kids under an alias and say they were being home-schooled, and that would be it,'' Aylward said.

'Out of the sunlight'

Linda Shay Gardner, a Bethlehem, Pa., lawyer who specializes in abduction cases and sits on the board of The Committee for Missing Children, said no data exist on the link between home schooling and missing children, but she has encountered the problem in her efforts to reunite children with custodial parents.

``They are home schooling to keep them out of the sunlight. I have seen it in cases,'' she said.

Gardner said states with laws like Ohio's make it almost impossible to track a child.

Parents are not going to be able to call the more than 600 school districts in Ohio, Gardner said. ``Even the national center isn't going to spend the time to call (all those) school districts.''

And that is just one state.

Many abductors move their children from state to state.

Nancy Hammer, director of the international division and policy counsel at the National Center for Missing and Exploited Children, said an abducting parent's claiming to be home schooling makes sense, but her experience has been that little or no education is taking place.

``Why would anybody bother to register, even in Ohio, that they are home schooling if they abducted their child?'' she said. ``I would just wait and see if anybody asked me, and then if I got caught, I'd say I didn't know I was supposed to register.''

Hammer said the issue raises a number of questions that lack easy answers, such as: Do relaxed rules for home schooling create an environment that leads to an increase in abductions? Would an abducting parent who already has violated laws by taking the child be concerned about following home-schooling registration laws?

Schooling missed

The search for a missing child is, as Rodney Fritts said, like looking for a needle in a haystack.

For eight years, he and a team of investigators could not break the case and find his daughter and her mother. Finally, in 2002, he went on The Montel Williams Show. Afterward, someone in Montana spotted his ex-wife, he said, and shortly thereafter they showed up at Fritts' back door.

Mary Outlaw Fritts was convicted of a misdemeanor and fined $250. The same judge recently issued a warrant for her arrest for failure to provide child support, Rodney Fritts said.

He learned that for eight years, his daughter had never attended conventional private or public schools. Instead, she was home-schooled or attended small religious schools run by a network of parents.

When Emily came home at age 15,Rodney Fritts offered her a choice of school settings. She opted to enroll in Stuarts Draft High School, a public school, as a freshman.

Emily should have been a sophomore, but she had no high school credits.

She went to summer school, took extra courses and will graduate on time in June 2005, with plans to go to college next fall.

Rodney Fritts said their relationship was strained at first, but a few months ago, Emily's attitude suddenly changed, and now she is happy, positive and excited about school.

Emily, now 18, has also become a standout long-distance runner on the high school cross country and indoor and outdoor track teams.

``She's got three letters in three different sports,'' Rodney Fritts said. ``She couldn'texcel in anything before without the threat of being found.''