Despite high-profile Guthrie case, kidnappings are extraordinarily rare in U.S.

Jeff Robb, a Seattle resident wintering in Tucson, signs a banner supporting Nancy Guthrie in Tucson Ariz., on Friday, Feb. 13, 2026. (AP Photo/Ty Oneil

By Jeff Mordock - *The Washington Times - Thursday, February 26, 2026*

The shocking disappearance of Nancy Guthrie has captured the nation's attention, but high-profile abductions committed by strangers are rare, and most kidnappings involve family or custody disputes.

Investigators are treating the 84-year-old's disappearance as a suspected kidnapping. She has been missing since Feb. 1, and authorities have yet to identify anyone who might be involved in the puzzling case.

If Ms. Guthrie was abducted by a stranger, her case would be extremely rare. FBI data shows 50,654 abductions and kidnappings in the U.S. over the past 12 months.

Of those cases, roughly 67%, or 33,980, involved an offender with a relationship to the victim, such as a parent, spouse, ex-spouse, acquaintance, grandparent or former romantic partner. In only 9% of the cases, or 4,903, was the kidnapper a stranger. In the remaining cases, the crime wasn't solved, so the relationship is unknown. About 23% of all kidnappings involve people younger than 18, according to the FBI data. That is the largest demographic in the FBI database.

Only 182 kidnappings, or 0.3%, involved a person older than 80, such as Ms. Guthrie. The Justice Department's National Crime Information Center tracks kidnappings as part of its missing persons records. It counted 563,389 missing in 2023, according to its most recent available information, yet deemed only 8,401 of them, or 1.5%, as "involuntary" disappearances, such as kidnappings or abductions.

The vast majority of those disappearances were attributed to other factors. They include people who vanished because of a mental health issue or cognitive disease, who haven't been found after a catastrophe such as a flood or earthquake, and juvenile runaways.

Tara Kennedy, the media representative for the Doe Network, a volunteer group that works to identify missing and unidentified people, called involuntary abductions a "rare, rare occurrence."

"If you look at these involuntary abductions, they are in the thousands compared to other categories, which are in the tens of thousands and even hundreds of thousands," she said. "These are not regular occurrences. Involuntary abductions like the one that happened, unfortunately, to Nancy Guthrie, do not happen frequently."

Law enforcement officials say the number of kidnappings has dropped dramatically over the years because the crime is much more difficult to carry out in an era of surveillance cameras, license plate readers and cellphone tracking data.
The FBI's clearance rate on kidnapping/abduction cases is about 60%.

"The risk-reward is not feasible," said Betsy Brantner Smith, a spokeswoman for the National Police Association. "It's extremely risky, especially now when everyone leaves a digital footprint. You can't carry out a kidnapping without a cellphone or being on camera. The reward is fairly unattainable."

Another reason such crimes are rare is that celebrities who have the kind of money that could pay a steep ransom have stringent security and bodyguards, while those who aren't celebrities don't have the wealth to make an abduction worthwhile.
A handful of kidnapping cases have involved people being held at gunpoint and taken to an ATM to withdraw cash, but even those are rare.

Ms. Kennedy said she couldn't remember the last time she heard about a ransom in a disappearance case. Police are investigating purported ransom notes sent to TMZ and other media outlets but have not confirmed whether they were sent by someone in the Guthrie case.

Going back nearly 100 years, only a small number of kidnapping cases have riveted the nation's attention. Those include the abduction of the 20-month-old son of aviator Charles Lindbergh and his wife, Anne Morrow Lindbergh, in 1932; the kidnapping of Adolph Coors III, the heir to the Coors brewing fortune, in 1960; the abduction of Frank Sinatra Jr., son of the legendary entertainer, in 1963; the grandson of oil tycoon Jean Paul Getty in Italy in 1973; and Patty Hearst, heir to the Hearst fortune, who was held for ransom in 1974.

"These are the cases that come to mind because it happens so infrequently," Ms. Kennedy said.

Most kidnappers have some connection to the victim in these cases. For example, Elizabeth Smart was 14 when she was kidnapped from her bedroom at knifepoint in 2002. She was discovered after her sister remembered that the voice she heard during the kidnapping belonged to a handyman who had worked on the Smarts' home.
In 2016, high school freshman Elizabeth Thomas was abducted by teacher Tad Cummins, who spent a year making sexual advances toward the student.

The abduction and murder of Adam Walsh from a Sears department store in Hollywood, Florida, in 1981 sparked fears of child abductions. No one was ever charged with Adam's murder. A convicted murderer confessed in 1983 but recanted in 1996.

His death prompted his father, John, to became an advocate for victims of violent crime and create and host the popular TV show "America's Most Wanted."
Adam's case sparked a nationwide panic in the mid-1980s, fueling untrue claims about child kidnappings, including that more than 50,000 children were being taken by strangers every year.

Those myths dissipated after The Denver Post won a Pulitzer Prize in 1986 for a series of stories examining the belief that most missing children had been abducted by strangers. The series concluded that most missing children were runaways or were involved in custody disputes.

"The stranger situation is extremely rare. After Adam Walsh and the kids on the milk carton, parents were terrified that strangers were going to grab kids off the streets," Ms. Brantner Smith said. "But someone picking that house or that child for no reason whatsoever is very unlikely."

Experts expressed a need for more data and an increase in forensic scientists to process DNA and other evidence to help catch kidnappers quickly.

No standardized data is available for missing people, and various agencies use different definitions to track information. Local law enforcement is required to report missing persons cases to the federal government only if they involve minors.

In addition to the National Crime Information Center and the FBI, the National Missing and Unidentified Persons System (NamUs) collects data on missing people, but only 16 states require mandatory reporting to the NamUs database.

As the emphasis on forensic evidence across the country grows, a shortage of personnel to test blood, DNA and other evidence is stalling police investigations and creating difficult choices about what gets tested and what doesn't when seconds matter in kidnapping cases.

"We need more resources to process that kind of data because DNA is really a solid scientific tool that can really definitively point out the identity of someone," Ms. Kennedy said. "We need a plethora of resources put into that."

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