

Codebook for
U.S. Media Coverage of International Kidnappings Dataset

Version 1.0

When using the data described in this codebook, please cite Danielle Gilbert (2020):
The Oxygen of Publicity: Explaining U.S. Media Coverage of International
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10.1080/1057610X.2020.1792723. Report any errors in this codebook or the dataset
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1. Introduction

This is the codebook for the dataset used in Danielle Gilbert (2020): *The Oxygen of Publicity: Explaining U.S. Media Coverage of International Kidnapping*, *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism*, DOI: [10.1080/1057610X.2020.1792723](https://doi.org/10.1080/1057610X.2020.1792723), henceforth Gilbert (2020). I constructed this dataset by gathering all publicly reported instances of American civilians captured around the world since 9/11, a process described at length in the [online appendix](#) to Gilbert (2020). The following document defines all of the variables therein.

1.1 Motivation

This dataset was created in order to analyze the variation in U.S. media coverage of Americans kidnapped abroad. In the fall of 2014, the kidnapping and brutal beheadings of several Americans by the Islamic State (ISIS) gained significant and sustained national media attention; at the same time, similarly brutal kidnappings and decapitations of American citizens in Mexico received paltry coverage. This disparity led me to examine what features of a kidnapping – whether variation in victims, perpetrators, violence, or media effects – influenced the amount of media attention a kidnapping received.

I found that existing datasets of kidnapping incidents (Loertscher and Milton 2015; Mellon et al. 2017) focused only on certain categories of perpetrators, had errors, or were incomplete; no existing dataset includes measures of concomitant newspaper coverage of victims or incidents. Thus, to conduct my analysis, I created the dataset using the process described below and in the appendix to Gilbert (2020).

1.2 Unit of Analysis and Temporal Domain

The unit of analysis in the dataset is the kidnapping victim-incident. I do not say “victim,” because individuals may be kidnapped on multiple occasions, which would feature separate incident and media coverage details. For example, photojournalist Lynsey Addario was kidnapped in Iraq in 2004, a weeklong incident that did not receive any news coverage; she was later kidnapped in Libya in 2011, and was then the subject of 31 news stories. She therefore appears in the dataset twice, as two separate “victim-incidents.” I do not simply say “incident,” because some kidnappings involve one victim, while some involve multiple victims. For example, Gracia Burnham, Martin Burnham, and Guillermo Sobero were kidnapped together in the Philippines in 2001. They share an incident ID number (2), but each receives their own hostage ID number (2, 3, 4) and line in the dataset.

The dataset covers the timeframe of 2001 to 2015. Any kidnappings that have not been resolved as of December 31, 2015 (i.e. if a hostage was still in captivity or has not been found or released by that date) are artificially truncated by that date. For example, Naeem Khan was kidnapped in Pakistan on November 3, 2012 and was missing as of December 31, 2015; his kidnapping is coded as lasting 1,153 days, or just over three years, though in reality it may be shorter (if he was killed) or longer (if he remained in captivity after 2015).

2. Variables

The following subsections define all variables in the dataset, dividing them among incident variables, victim variables, perpetrator variables, and media variables.

2.1 Incident Variables

Variable Name	Content	Type
hostageid	Unique identifier for each individual hostage.	Integer
incidentid	Unique identifier for each hostage-taking incident. If two people are kidnapped together, they share an incident ID.	Integer
totalhostages	Total number of hostages (of any nationality) kidnapped per incident.	Integer
UShostages	Total number of Americans kidnapped per incident	Integer
captivetime	Total number of days of captivity. Captive time ends when the hostage is either: released, killed, or escaped, or December 31, 2015 if hostage is missing.	Integer
year	Year of abduction.	Integer
monthkidnapped	Month of abduction.	String
datekidnapped	Date of abduction. If only month is available, date is set to the first of the month.	Date (MM/DD/YYYY)
missing	=1 if hostage outcome is unknown or confirmed missing as of December 31, 2015.	Byte
released	=1 if hostage was released.	Byte
escaped	=1 if hostage escaped.	Byte
killed	=1 if hostage was killed in captivity.	Byte
datereleased	Date hostage was released.	Date (MM/DD/YYYY)
datekilled	Date hostages was killed.	Date (MM/DD/YYYY)
enddate	Date captivity ended by any outcome, or December 31, 2015 is hostage is missing.	Date (MM/DD/YYYY)
ransom	=1 if there was a ransom demand reported.	Byte
raid	=1 if there was a planned or executed rescue mission reported.	Byte
video	=1 if there was a hostage video/ proof of life reported.	Byte
country	Country where kidnapping took place.	String
stateabb	Country abbreviation.	String
COW	Correlates of War Country Code.	Integer
statewarn	State Department Warning, 0 to 4.	Integer
FTOcount	Number of U.S.-designated Foreign Terrorist Organizations operating in the country where the kidnapping took place.	Integer
MENA	=1 if kidnapping took place in the Middle East or North Africa.	Byte
latinamerica	=1 if kidnapping took place in Central or South America.	Byte

2.1.1. State Department Warning (“Statewarn”)

One incident variable in particular warrants its own coding explanation. The U.S. Department of State maintains an up-to-date travel warning system on its website, with detailed explanation of regions to avoid and the risks American travelers might face when traveling abroad (<https://travel.state.gov/content/travel/en/traveladvisories/traveladvisories.html/>).¹ In early 2015, I used these warnings to classify each country with at least one kidnapping case in my dataset on a 5 point scale for conveyed kidnapping risk, as described in the chart below. Where there was no warning at all listed for the country, I code it as $x = 0$ (zero travel risk).

Threat	Definition	Countries	Examples from State Department Travel Advisories
High ($x = 4$)	State Department warning includes a specific and high-risk kidnapping alert for Americans; the country has a recent history of Americans kidnapped and killed	Cameroon [^] , Iraq [^] , Kenya [^] , Lebanon [^] , Mexico [^] , Nigeria [^] , Pakistan [^] , Philippines [^] , Somalia [^] , Syria [^] , Venezuela [^]	"The number of kidnappings throughout Mexico is of particular concern and appears to be on the rise. According to statistics published by the Mexican Secretaria de Gobernacion (SEGOB), in 2013 kidnappings nationwide increased 20 percent over the previous year... Mexico suffered an estimated 105,682 kidnappings in 2012; only 1,317 were reported to the police. Police have been implicated in some of these incidents. Both local and expatriate communities have been victimized. Nearly 70 kidnappings of U.S. citizens were reported to the U.S. Embassy and consulates in Mexico between January and June of 2014."
Substantial ($x = 3$)	State Department warning includes substantial risk of kidnapping, but the risk has either been reduced in recent years, or is primarily targeted at non-Americans.	Afghanistan [^] , Algeria [^] , Colombia [^] , Djibouti [^] , Democratic Republic of the Congo [^] , Haiti [^] , Honduras [^] , Libya [^] , Mauritania [^] , Niger [^] , Sudan [^] , Yemen [^]	"The incidence of kidnapping in Colombia has diminished significantly from its peak in 2000. However, kidnapping remains a threat. Terrorist groups and other criminal organizations continue to kidnap and hold civilians, including foreigners, for ransom. No one is immune from kidnapping on the basis of occupation, nationality, or other factors. The U.S. government places the highest priority on the safe recovery of kidnapped U.S. citizens, but it is U.S. policy not to make concessions to kidnapers."
Non-kidnap targeting ($x = 2$)	State Department warning emphasizes crimes and violence targeted at Americans, though no specific threat of kidnapping. This includes terror attacks, murders, robbery, and unjust imprisonment.	El Salvador, Iran [^] , North Korea	"Since January 2010, 33 U.S. citizens have been murdered in El Salvador including a nine-year-old child in December 2013. During the same time period, 366 U.S. citizens reported having their passports stolen, while others were victims of violent crimes. Typical crimes in El Salvador include extortion, mugging, highway assault, home invasion, and car theft. There have also been cases reported in which criminals observe and follow customers making withdrawals at ATMs and banks, then rob them on the road or at a residence."
No specific targeting ($x = 1$)	State Department warning emphasizes systematic danger in the country, but no specific targeting of Americans.	Burkina Faso [^] , Burundi, Central African Republic [^] , Chad, Eritrea, Guinea, Israel/West Bank/ Gaza, Lesotho, Liberia, Mali [^] , Mozambique, Russian Federation [^] , Saudi Arabia, Sierra Leone, South Sudan [^] , Ukraine [^]	"Armed groups operate in Burundi. Weapons are easy to obtain and some ex-combatants have turned to crime or political violence. Crime, often committed by groups of armed bandits or street children, poses the highest risk for foreign visitors to both Bujumbura and Burundi in general. Exchanges of gunfire and grenade attacks are not uncommon but are usually not directed at foreigners."
No warning ($x = 0$)	There was no State Department warning at the time of coding	Benin, Egypt, Guyana, Panama, Peru, Tajikistan, Ukraine	N/A

¹ The State Department Travel Advisory system keeps warnings in place until they are superseded by a new or updated warning. Thus, the warning for a country listed in early 2015 might be a brand new set of concerns, or might have been a warning recorded months or years prior. My coding reflects travel warnings in 2015, and may not resemble current travel advisories.

Notes: Countries marked with * indicate that they are in the top 20 countries for kidnapping risk globally; Countries marked with ^ indicate that they are on the State Department's 2019 list of countries with elevated kidnapping risk for Americans—a list with no discernible basis.²

2.2 Victim Variables

Variable Name	Content	Type
victimID	=1 if victim is named in news coverage.	Byte
name	Victim's name.	String
age	Victim's age at kidnapping.	Integer
female	=1 if victim is female.	Byte
nonwhite	=1 if victim is a dual national citizen from Asia, Latin America, or the Middle East; American citizens who are reported as Black, Arab, or Latinx.	Byte
profession	Victim's profession as reported.	String
employername	Victim's employer.	String
journalist	=1 if victim is identified as a journalist.	Byte
usmilitary	=1 if victim is identified as a member of the U.S. military.	Byte
aidmission	=1 if victim is identified as an aid worker or missionary.	Byte
contractor	=1 if victim is identified as a contractor.	Byte
tourist	=1 if victim is identified as a tourist.	Byte
business	=1 if victim is identified as an employee of a multinational corporation.	Byte
at_work	=1 if victim was working at the time of the kidnapping.	Byte

2.2.1. Race/dual-nationality variable (“Nonwhite”)

A wealth of research has examined the disparate media attention given to white and non-white victims of crime, including a sustained focus on media coverage of abductions (see, for example: Gilchrist 2010; Min and Feaster 2010; Grunewald et al. 2013; Simmons and Woods 2015, Sommers 2016; Slakoff and Fradella 2019). In order to test the “Missing White Woman Syndrome” hypothesis in my dataset of Americans kidnapped abroad—that is, whether white, female victims of international kidnappings receive more media coverage than their male, non-white counterparts—it is necessary to code both gender and race as independent variables.

For the particular purposes of this hypothesis, “white” serves as the reference category, in order to examine whether those victims seen as “other” are treated differently by the media. The resulting

² In 2019, the State Department added a new feature to its travel advisory system—marking travel warnings with an indicator (“K”) for kidnapping risk. There appears to be no discernible basis for the 35 countries given this designation, based on the State Department's own prior warnings, the record of kidnapping in the last 20 years, or relevance to global kidnapping hotspots. It includes countries that had not previously been marked for any kidnapping risk in State Department warnings (Burkina Faso, Central African Republic, Mali, and Ukraine) and countries from which there were no public records of American kidnappings over the prior decades (Angola, Bangladesh, Burkina Faso, Cameroon, Central African Republic, Ethiopia, Lebanon, Malaysia, Mali, Papua New Guinea, South Sudan, Trinidad & Tobago, and Turkey). Further, the list does not include countries that feature at the top of global warning lists (Brazil, Egypt, India, Nepal, and South Africa), nor countries where the U.S. has previously designated significant risk (Djibouti, Honduras, and Mauritania) or where Americans have been kidnapped over the past two decades (Benin, Chad, El Salvador, Honduras, Nepal, Panama, Peru, Saudi Arabia, Tajikistan, or the West Bank and Gaza). I do not include a variable for these 35 countries in the dataset, as the designations were made in 2019 (after the dataset closed), but I have marked the 35 “K” countries with ^ in the chart above.

“nonwhite” variable does *not* account for how a victim presents or self-identifies, but instead, how the media frames their normative (white) and non-normative (other) victim. It is crucial to note here that this variable follows the media’s description of victims and is intended to capture the implicit or explicit treatment by the media of some victims as different. NB, I did not find a single instance in which the media describes a victim as “white” or “natural-born American citizen”; however, stories often identified victims’ nonwhite race or dual national status. Thus, in coding victims as “nonwhite,” I attempt to capture the media’s framing certain victims as a minority or “other” in the way they have deemed worthy of reporting.

This is, of course, an imperfect measure for multiple reasons. First, as emphasized above, this is not victims’ own identification, nor mine, but a reflection of how media describes individual hostages. Thus, my coding may be at odds with how victims self-identify. Second, there may be “false negatives” in the coding—people of color who were not explicitly named as such in newspaper stories, and thus are not coded as “nonwhite.” If the media are less likely to report stories about nonwhite victims, but do not mention the victims’ race in the story, I would have underestimated the effect of race on coverage.

Moreover, the coding collapses multiple distinct identity groups. Because the dataset is small, and thus due to power reasons, I do not separate out different racial, ethnic, and national identities to test whether victims identified as “black,” “Latino,” or “Asian-American,” for example, receive more or less coverage. Thus, the “nonwhite” variable is a flawed measure that includes victims identified as being dual national citizens from Asia, Latin America, or the Middle East; and American citizens reported as Black, Arab, or Latinx. Though I do not separate these groups in the statistical analysis, the “Results” section of Gilbert (2020) shows that within incidents with multiple victims, the various “nonwhite” hostages receive substantially less newspaper coverage than their white co-captives. Future analysis should continue to test how various identities and identity frameworks affect media attention to victims of kidnapping violence.

2.3 Perpetrator Variables

Variable Name	Content	Type
perpetrator	Perpetrator’s name.	String
perp_name	=1 if perpetrator name is known.	Byte
FTO	=1 if perpetrator was a U.S. State Department-designated Foreign Terrorist Organization at the time of the kidnapping.	Byte
muslim	=1 if perpetrator is identified as Muslim.	Byte
pirates	=1 if perpetrator is identified as pirate.	Byte

2.4 Media Variables

Variable Name	Content	Type
NYT	=1 if story reported in the <i>New York Times</i> .	Byte
totalstories_h	Total number of US Newsstream Database stories about the hostage, between date of capture and December 31 of the year the captivity ends.	Integer

totalstories_i	Total number of US Newsstream Database stories about the hostage-taking incident (on one or more of the hostages), between the date of capture and December 31 of the year the captivity ends.	Integer
terroris_frame	=1 if any US Newsstream stories refer to the kidnapping as “terrorism” or the perpetrator as “terrorist.”	Byte
terroris_stories	Total number of US Newsstream Database stories that refer to the kidnapping as “terrorism” or the perpetrator as “terrorist.”	Integer
terroris_ratio	Proportion [0-1] of US Newsstream Database stories that refer to the kidnapping as “terrorism” or the perpetrator as “terrorist” (otherwise measured as terroris_stories / total_stories).	Double

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