

THE PUBLIC AWARENESS ON INTERNATIONAL CHILD ABDUCTIONS

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Abstract

Objectives: The goal of the research was to find out what is the level of public awareness on the issue of international child abductions in České Budějovice.

Methods: Qualitative research, the questioning method, the structured interview technique with open questions was used for fulfilment of this goal.

Results: It was found that there is not only low the public awareness on the issue of illegal removal or retention of children in České Budějovice but also knowledge of the Convention on the Rights of the Child.

Conclusion: The number of cases of international child abductions by one parent, not only abroad but also in the Czech Republic has increased in recent years. It is necessary to introduce certain preventive measures to reduce the number of these cases. Parent awareness on the issue of international child abductions plays an important role in the sphere of prevention of illegal removal or retention of children. According to the research results, it is necessary to focus on raising the public awareness on children's rights and on raising the mixed parent awareness on the issue of international child abductions.

Key words: *child – international child abduction – prevention – awareness – public*

INTRODUCTION

There is an increase in the number of partner relations with foreigners and thus children born to these mixed couples with developing possibilities of the Czech citizens to travel into various countries of the world. If there are serious disagreements between partners, mostly one of them solves it by leaving with a child to his/her parents. It is slightly more complicated in cases of mixed couples. In such cases if there are major disagreements between partners it can result in international child abduction. A parent who decides to such action is mostly unaware of what consequences it could have and get themselves and their child

in a difficult situation. Unfortunately the child is the most afflicted by such action. Therefore parent awareness is important in this sphere and such awareness could serve as a preventive measure to reducing the occurrence of cases of international child abductions. The goal of the research was to find out what the public awareness is on the issue of international child abductions in České Budějovice.

MATERIAL AND METHODS

Qualitative research, the questioning method, the structured interview technique with open questions was used to assess public awareness on the issue

of international child abductions in České Budějovice. The structured interview with open questions is one of the qualitative research techniques, which leaves the respondent free to express themselves through carefully formulated questions, but the obtained data isn't structurally very different and therefore it is easier to analyse (Hendl 2005).

The structured interview with open questions contains ten questions, of which seven are general and three are identifiers (see annexe). The question "Have you ever heard about the issue of international child abductions?" is a filter question. Respondents who answered that question "no" were then only asked the question "Have you heard about the Convention on the Rights of the Child?" and identification questions. The

respondents' gender was determined by an observation.

Interviews were recorded on audio track and then transcribed into the record sheets. The research investigation was made within three months of 2009 (April–June) in České Budějovice. Data obtained through interviews were placed in frequency tables.

Characteristics of the research file

304 respondents took part in the research investigation, which corresponds to 1% of 30,388 people living in České Budějovice at ages of 20–40 years to 31/12/2008 according to the Czech Statistical Office. The age category 20–40 years was based on the finding that parents concerned in the issue of international child abductions had been in this age category in the most cases.

Table 1 Respondents' gender

| Gender | Absolute frequency | Relative frequency |
|--------------|--------------------|--------------------|
| Female | 152 | 50% |
| Male | 152 | 50% |
| Total | 304 | 100% |

There were 152 women and 152 men from 304 respondents, which corresponds to 1% of women (15,229) and 1% of men (15,159) living

in České Budějovice at ages from 20–40 years to 31/12/2008 (Table 1).

Table 2 Respondents' age

| Age | Absolute frequency | Relative frequency |
|--------------|--------------------|--------------------|
| 20–25 | 58 | 19% |
| 26–30 | 93 | 31% |
| 31–35 | 63 | 21% |
| 36–40 | 90 | 30% |
| Total | 304 | 100% |

Table 2 shows the age distribution of respondents. Most respondents were represented in the age group 26–30 years, namely 93, i.e. 31%. 90 respondents, i.e. 30%, were in the age group 36–40 years.

63 respondents were in the age group 31–35 years, i.e. 21%. The least represented age group was the group 20–25 years; there were 58 respondents, i.e. 19%.

Table 3 Respondents' education

| Education | Absolute frequency | Relative frequency |
|---------------------|--------------------|--------------------|
| Primary | 10 | 3% |
| Secondary | 201 | 66% |
| Advanced vocational | 12 | 4% |
| University | 81 | 27% |
| Total | 304 | 100% |

Table 3 provides information on the highest educational attainment of respondents. 201 respondents, i.e. 66%, had a secondary education, 81 respondents, i.e. 27%, had a

university education, 12 respondents, i.e. 4%, had an advanced vocational training and the remaining 10 respondents, i.e. 3%, had a primary education.

Table 4 Respondents' work area

| Work area | Absolute frequency | Relative frequency |
|-----------------------------|--------------------|--------------------|
| Health | 33 | 11% |
| Social area | 15 | 5% |
| Education | 28 | 9% |
| State administration | 6 | 2% |
| Economic and financial area | 31 | 10% |
| Trade and services | 61 | 20% |
| Manufacturing and industry | 24 | 8% |
| Transport | 19 | 6% |
| Gastronomy and food | 20 | 7% |
| Agriculture | 16 | 5% |
| Students | 32 | 11% |
| Other | 19 | 6% |
| Total | 304 | 100% |

Table 4 summarises information on the work area of respondents. Most respondents, namely 61, i.e. 20%, work in the area of trade and services. Among responses included in this category were e.g. a shop assistant, a service technician, a charwoman, a seamstress, a hairdresser, a plumber, and a painter. The other most represented area was the health area; there were 33 respondents, i.e. 11%. Pharmacy workers were also included in the health area. Students were the other important group of respondents; there were 32 students, i.e. 11%. 31 respondents, i.e. 10%, were in the economic and financial area. For example accountants, personnel clerks, workers

of logistics, marketing, banks, insurance companies were represented in this area. The education area was the other significant group of respondents; there were 28 respondents, i.e. 9%. Another 24 respondents, i.e. 8%, were from the manufacturing and industry area. All production, the automotive industry, the engineering industry and building industry were included in that category. 20 respondents, i.e. 7%, were from the gastronomy and food area. The same representation of respondents, namely 19, i.e. 6%, were in the transport area and in the category other. The area of culture, tourism, information technology and media was included in the category other.

16 respondents, i.e. 5%, were represented in the agriculture area, to which was included e.g. forestry and fishery. 15 respondents, i.e.

5%, were from the social area. The area of state administration was the least represented work area; there were 6 respondents, i.e. 2%.

RESULTS

Table 5 Whether respondents had heard about the issue of international child abductions

| Heard about the issue | Absolute frequency | Relative frequency |
|-----------------------|--------------------|--------------------|
| Yes | 240 | 79% |
| No | 64 | 21% |
| Total | 304 | 100% |

Responses to the question: “Have you ever heard about the issue of international child abductions?” are in Table 5. 240 respondents, i.e. 79%, answered that they had already heard about this issue and the remaining 64 respondents, i.e. 21%, answered that

they hadn’t ever heard about the issue of international child abductions.

In tables 6, 7, and 8 are responses of respondents who answered this question “yes”.

Table 6 Source of information on the issue of international child abductions

| Source | Absolute frequency | Relative frequency |
|-----------------------|--------------------|--------------------|
| Newspapers, magazines | 21 | 9% |
| Television | 93 | 39% |
| Internet | 2 | 1% |
| Media | 114 | 48% |
| Friend | 4 | 2% |
| Other | 6 | 3% |
| Total | 240 | 100% |

Legend: Newspapers, magazines – included respondents who answered only that source.

Television – included respondents who answered only that source.

Internet – included respondents who answered only that source.

Media – included respondents who answered a combination of different media types.

Responses to the question: “Where did you learn about this issue?” are in Table 6. 114 respondents, i.e. 48%, answered that their information were from different kinds of media from the total number of 240 respondents who have already heard about the issue of international child abductions. 93 respondents, i.e. 39%, received information from the television only. Newspapers and

magazines were the source of information for 21 respondents, i.e. 9%. 6 respondents, i.e. 3%, drew information from other sources. The combination of school and television and combination of media and friends was included in the category other. 4 respondents, i.e. 2%, got to know about this issue from friends and the remaining 2 respondents, i.e. 1%, drew information from the internet only.

Table 7 Idea about the concept “international child abduction”

| Idea | Absolute frequency | Relative frequency |
|-------------------|--------------------|--------------------|
| Correct | 109 | 45% |
| Partially correct | 64 | 27% |
| Wrong | 52 | 22% |
| Don't know | 15 | 6% |
| Total | 240 | 100% |

Table 7 summarises responses to the question: “What is your idea about the concept international child abduction?” 109 respondents, i.e. 45%, had the correct idea about the concept “international child abduction”. The following formulations were among the correct answers: “when there is a mixed marriage and a father from another country abducts a child”, “when one of the parents abduct a child to another country”, “when parents are from different countries and one of them takes a child to another country whereas the other parent doesn't know about it”. 64 respondents, i.e. 27%, answered

partially correct. The following formulations were among the partially correct answers: “a child's abduction to another country”, “a child's abduction across the border of the Czech Republic”. 52 respondents, i.e. 22%, had a wrong answer and the remaining 15 respondents, i.e. 6%, didn't know what the concept “international child abduction” presents. The wrong answers included the following: “a child's abduction for work”, “someone kidnaps a child so it can get some money for it”, “someone kidnaps a child for the purpose of prostitution, trafficking”.

Table 8 Legal regulations governing the issue of international child abductions in the Czech Republic

| Legal regulation | Absolute frequency | Relative frequency |
|--|--------------------|--------------------|
| Convention on the rights of the child | 18 | 8% |
| Act on social-legal protection of children | 5 | 2% |
| Other | 14 | 6% |
| Don't know | 203 | 85% |
| Total | 240 | 100% |

Responses to the question “Which legal instrument regulates the issue of international child abductions in the Czech Republic?” are in Table 8. Respondents who didn't know which legal instrument regulates this issue were the largest group (203, i.e. 85%). Another 18 respondents, i.e. 8%, answered that international child abductions are regulated by the Convention on the Rights of the Child. 14 respondents, i.e. 6%, answered that this issue is regulated by other legal regulations. The following answers

were included in this category: “the bill on child protection”, “the act on abduction”, “the Constitution”, “some international treaty”, “the Declaration of Rights of the Child”. The remaining 5 respondents, i.e. 2%, answered that the issue of international child abductions is regulated by the Act on Social-Legal Protection of Children. The results on this question indicate that no respondent knew the legal instrument which regulates the issue of international child abductions, namely the Hague Convention on Child Abduction.

Table 9 Whether respondents had heard about the Convention on the Rights of the Child

| Heard | Absolute frequency | Relative frequency |
|--------------|--------------------|--------------------|
| Yes | 127 | 42% |
| No | 177 | 58% |
| Total | 304 | 100% |

In Table 9 there are responses to the question: “Have you heard about the Convention on the Rights of the Child?” This question was put to all 304 respondents. 177 respondents, i.e. 58%, answered that they hadn’t heard about the Convention on

the Rights of the Child and the remaining 127 respondents, i.e. 42%, answered that they had already heard about this legal regulation.

The remaining two questions were only put to respondents who have already heard about the issue of international child abductions.

Table 10 Institution which respondents will turn to

| Institution | Absolute frequency | Relative frequency |
|--------------|--------------------|--------------------|
| Police | 151 | 63% |
| Court | 43 | 18% |
| Authority | 20 | 8% |
| Office | 10 | 4% |
| Other | 13 | 5% |
| Don't know | 3 | 1% |
| Total | 240 | 100% |

Legend: Authority = The Authority of Social-Legal Protection of Children.

Office = The Office for International Legal Protection of Children.

Table 10 summarises responses to the question: “Which institution would you turn to if you found yourselves in a case of international child abduction?” Most respondents (151, i.e. 63%) answered that they would turn to the police. 43 respondents, i.e. 18%, answered that they would turn to a court in case of international child abduction. 20 respondents, i.e. 8%, would turn to the authority of the social-legal protection of

children. Another 13 respondents, i.e. 5%, would turn to another institution. The following responses were included in this category: “to some children’s delegate in every country”, “to an embassy”, “to some international court”. Only 10 respondents, i.e. 4%, would ask for help from the Office for International Legal Protection of Children. The remaining 3 respondents didn’t know whom they should turn to.

Table 11 The Czech central authority for matters of international child abductions

| Body | Absolute frequency | Relative frequency |
|--------------|--------------------|--------------------|
| Office | 22 | 9% |
| MLSA | 7 | 3% |
| MJ | 10 | 4% |
| MI | 3 | 1% |
| MFA | 3 | 1% |
| Police | 7 | 3% |
| Other | 10 | 4% |
| Don't know | 178 | 74% |
| Total | 240 | 100% |

Legend: Office = The Office for International Legal Protection of Children.

MLSA = Ministry of Labour and Social Affairs.

MJ = Ministry of Justice.

MI = Ministry of the Interior.

MFA = Ministry of Foreign Affairs.

In Table 11 there are responses to the question: “Which institution is the central authority of the Czech Republic for issues of international child abductions?” Most respondents (178, i.e. 74%) didn't know the Czech central authority for this issue. 22 respondents, i.e. 9%, had a correct answer, namely that the central authority is the Office for International Legal Protection of Children. 10 respondents, i.e. 4%, answered that the Czech central authority is the Ministry of Justice. 10 respondents answered that the central authority is another institution. The following responses were included in the category other institutions: “some international organisation”, “some ministry”. 7 respondents, i.e. 3%, answered that the central authority is the Ministry of Labour and Social Affairs and the same number of respondents answered that it is the police. The least respondents (3, i.e. 1%) answered that the central authority of the Czech Republic is the Ministry of the Interior and another 3 respondents answered that it is the Ministry of Foreign Affairs.

DISCUSSION

In most cases parents afflicted with the international child abduction of their child

aren't well informed about the issue of international child abductions. Therefore the research made focused on public awareness of this issue in České Budějovice. This research can't be compared with any similar research because currently there is no such research available.

Using a structured interview with open questions was the basis for the research of public awareness on the issue of international child abductions to carried out.

The first question was intended to divide respondents into two groups, those who have already heard about the issue of illegal removal or retention of children and those respondents who haven't ever heard about this issue. The results showed that 21% of respondents have never heard about the issue of international child abductions. It is interesting that less than 1/4 of respondents had such a response when this issue has been greatly publicised in the past three years.

The second question examined where respondents learned about the issue of illegal removal or retention. The greatest source of information was the combination of different types of media (48%). The television itself was also an important source of information, namely for 39% of respondents.

The third question was focused on what the respondents' idea about the concept

“international child abduction” was? The removal of a child from the habitual residence abroad by one parent when the other parent doesn’t agree with such act can be considered as international child abduction (Kodriková 2007). Only 45% of respondents were able to correctly define this concept. On the other hand 22% of respondents had a completely wrong idea about the concept “international child abduction”.

The fourth question examined whether the public knew which legal instrument regulates the issue of illegal removal or retention of children in the Czech Republic. The basic legal regulation for the issue of international abductions of children under the age of sixteen years is the Hague Convention on Child Abductions (Wills 2006). Most respondents (85%) didn’t know how to answer this question and the remaining respondents answered, but no response was correct.

The fifth question of the interview was focused on the knowledge of the Convention on the Rights of the Child. The Convention on the Rights of the Child is a fundamental document in the international legal protection of children, which declares the rights of children under the age of 18 years (David 1999). The research results showed that 58% of respondents hadn’t ever heard about the Convention on the Rights of the Child. The public awareness on the Convention on the Rights of the Child is low at the level of 42%. Considering that children are very important elements of our society, people should know that children have their rights and that these rights are determined by a special legal regulation.

The sixth question examined which institution would respondents turn to if they were in a case of international child abduction. Most respondents (63%) would turn to the police. The main body of the Czech Republic, which helps resolve cases of illegal removal or retention of children is the Office for International Legal Protection of Children. Only 4% of respondents would turn to this Office. The sixth question was followed-up by question seven, which was designed to determine whether respondents knew the Czech central authority for the issue of international child abductions. Most respondents (74%) didn’t know the answer

to this question and only 9% of respondents knew that the central authority is the Office for International Legal Protection of Children.

The remaining three questions of the interview were identification questions, which examined the age, education and work area of respondents. Most respondents were at the age of 26–30 years (31%) with a secondary education (66%) and from the work area of trade and services (20%).

The results of the research on the public awareness on the issue of international child abductions in České Budějovice imply the following hypothesis:

- **H₁: The public awareness on the issue of international child abductions in České Budějovice is low.**
- **H₂: Much of the public in České Budějovice don’t know the Convention on the Rights of the Child.**

CONCLUSION

International child abductions by one parent have become an increasingly serious problem in recent years because, in these cases, there is a violation of children’s rights. The parents of a child play an important role in the child’s life and so they should try to protect the interests of their children. However they need sufficient knowledge. The knowledge of children’s rights and the issue of international child abductions play an important role in the prevention of these cases.

The research results revealed the fact that the public awareness on the issue of international child abductions in České Budějovice is low. It was also found that more than half of respondents don’t know the Convention on the Rights of the Child. It can be expected that parents don’t fully know the children’s rights in cases where they don’t know the Convention on the Rights of the Child.

The research results show that it is necessary to focus on raising the public awareness on children’s rights and on raising the awareness of parents, who may be at risk of abduction of their child by the other parent, on the issue of international child abductions.

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ANNEXE – INTERVIEW

Source: PEŠLOVÁ E.: *Výsledky rozhovorů z výzkumu zaměřeného na zjišťování informovanosti veřejnosti v Českých Budějovicích o problematice mezinárodních únosů dětí*. Archiv autorky, 2009.

INTERVIEW

My name is Eliška Pešlová and I'm a 3rd year student of the doctoral study programme of the Faculty of Health and Social Studies at the University of South Bohemia in České Budějovice.

I would like to ask you to permit the interview's use in this way. I will incorporate the interview results in my doctoral thesis on Social-legal aspects of international child abductions. For this thesis I am focusing the research to discover the public awareness on the issue of international child abductions in České Budějovice.

The interview has 10 questions. It is anonymous and will only serve to the needs of my research. The interview will be recorded and then transcribed into the record sheets.

1. Have you ever heard about the issue of international child abductions?
2. Where did you learn about this issue?
3. What is your idea about the concept "international child abduction"?
4. Which legal instrument regulates the issue of international child abductions in the Czech Republic?
5. Have you heard about the Convention on the Rights of the Child?
6. Which institution would you turn to if you found yourselves in a case of international child abduction?
7. Which institution is the central authority of the Czech Republic for issues of international child abductions?
8. In what area do you work?
9. What is your highest education?
10. What is your age?

Respondent's gender:

Thank you for providing the interview.