



The Body Snatchers

The starting price for kidnapping a child is P20,000.



Michael Raqim Mira

Updated February 15th 2019, 8:59:27 pm

Last month, just a week after the New Year, a three-year old boy was almost abducted near his home in Santa Ana, Manila. The child's father caught the suspect, Charito Fernandez, in the act and was able to stop the kidnapping attempt. The police apprehended Fernandez after a chase through the neighborhood. Police investigators later found out that the woman was a member of a kidnapper gang which involved two other people.

However, the most troubling information Fernandez told the police was that she was paid P20,000 for every child she kidnaps. The identity of her financier is unknown as there are no additional details given by the police to the public, or Fernandez did not divulge the

information. Despite the blurry details surrounding the case, one fact remains clear: even a child's body has a price tag.

The question of what kidnappers do with the children they abduct can lead to different answers and, oftentimes, more questions. Human trafficking in Southeast Asia has been a major transnational criminal issue for the past few decades. According to independent reports by organizations such as Amnesty International and Interpol, there are 4.5 million victims of human trafficking annually. An estimated 33% of the victims are minors.

Analysts believe that the figure could be higher because human trafficking is what's called a *hidden crime*. This means that kidnapped individuals, runaways, homeless citizens, and sex workers could fall victim to human trafficking rings under the radar. If they are transported to another province or country, the victims become a lost statistic in human trafficking reports, especially when the police lose the perpetrators' trail.



Another common criminal scheme in the Philippines is kidnap-for-ransom. Kidnapper gangs would target affluent families, usually stalking them for weeks to develop a strategy of execution. Once the perpetrators successfully abduct a young member of the family, they force the relatives of the victim to pay them ransom. Everyone from kidnapper gangs to terrorist groups—even disgruntled former-employees of wealthy families—have used this tactic throughout the years.

Terrorist groups often use kidnapping as a political strategy to gain a leverage on the government over a list of demands, such as the release of their members from prison. However, there has been a growing trend among Philippine insurgent groups to use kidnap-for-ransom as a means to finance their operations. Last June, a kidnap-for-ransom group in Zamboanga demanded P400,000 in exchange for the release of six victims. That same month, Abu Sayyaf Group (ASG)—an Al-Qaeda-linked extremist organization based in southern Philippines—kidnapped the relatives of a mayor in Sulu.

Kidnapper gangs not affiliated with a terrorist group usually work as a standalone crew and occasionally work as contractors for mafia organizations. The latter are associated with rumors of black market organ harvesting. These stories are sometimes brushed off as urban legends. However, last March, an anonymous source who allegedly has affiliations with the Philippine National Police's intelligence unit [*told The Philippine Star*](#) that some of the kidnappings could be linked to syndicate groups active in black market organ harvesting.

While verified cases of organ harvesting which involve kidnapping are rare, or remain undocumented due to the nature of the crime, there have been incidents in countries like Bangladesh where people voluntarily sell their kidneys to the black market, only to receive less money than they were promised. A similar case happened in Israel in 2009, which involved black market organ trafficker Levy Izhak Rosenbaum. The Brooklyn-based man paid “donors” in Israel \$10,000 for a kidney, and he even financed their surgeries. Rosenbaum and his organ trafficking ring then sold the kidneys in the United States for as much as \$160,000.

However, the question of what Charito Fernandez and her cohorts planned to do with the three-year old boy remains a mystery. To be paid P20,000 for kidnapping children means the return-on-investment for the financier is high. This is the most disturbing aspect of the case for the police. The child that Fernandez attempted to abduct was fortunate to have his father nearby, but according to police intelligence sources homeless children are even more vulnerable because they tend to sleep in public spaces where they could be easily snatched. Additionally, their parents or older siblings don't have financial resources for rescue efforts.

In a past article, I wrote how [*a smartphone costs more than a contract killer's fee*](#) for murdering someone. Apparently, the body of a child is just as “cheap” as the cost of life.