



After deliberating for less than nine hours, jurors convicted Alejandro Avila, 30, in the Samantha Runnion case. Jurors will sentence him next week.

## Jury convicts man in rape, murder of California girl

Associated Press

SANTA ANA, Calif. — A jury convicted a factory worker yesterday of kidnapping and murdering 5-year-old Samantha Runnion, an Orange County girl whose 2002 death prompted widespread outrage and stronger efforts to rescue abducted children.

After deliberating for less than nine hours over two days, jurors convicted Alejandro Avila, 30, of kidnapping, murder and sexual assault. In the penalty phase, set to begin Wednesday, the jury will decide whether to recommend a death sentence.

Samantha's mother, Erin Runnion, cried silently in the front row of the courtroom as verdicts were read.

Samantha was abducted, kicking and screaming, from outside her home in Stanton on July 15, 2002. Her body was found the following day in mountains some 50 miles away.

After her death, then-Gov. Gray Davis ordered a statewide expansion of child abduction alerts posted on electronic billboards along freeways.

Prosecutors said cell phone and bank records indicate Avila had been in the area where Samantha was abducted, DNA matching his genetic profile was found under her fingernails, and sneaker and tire prints found near the girl's body also matched with the defendant.

Avila had been acquitted of molesting two girls in 2001, and authorities said they believe he lled Samantha to avoid another such trial.