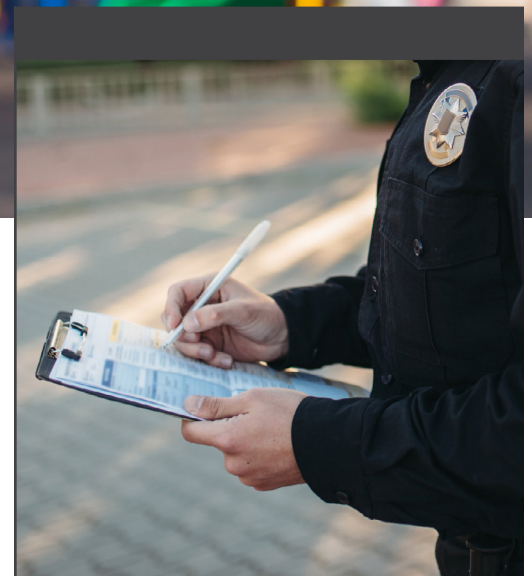


# Law Enforcement Policy and Procedures for Reports of Missing and Abducted Children



**A Model Developed  
by the National  
Center for Missing &  
Exploited Children®**

**Revised May 2021**



# Model Contents

<b>Overview</b>	<b>i</b>
Using the Model Policy	ii
Pre-incident Planning and Resource Development	ii
<b>Model Missing Children’s Policy</b>	<b>1</b>
I. Policy Purpose	1
II. Policy Statement	1
III. Definitions	2
IV. Procedures	4
A. Communications personnel receiving the report of a missing child	4
B. The initial officer or first responder assigned to the report of a missing child	6
C. The supervisor assigned to the report of a missing child	9
D. The investigator assigned to the report of a missing child	11
E. An officer assigned to the report of an unidentified person, whether living or deceased, who appears to be a child	13
F. An officer assigned to the recovery or return of a missing child	14

## Overview

Reports of missing children can be among the most challenging and emotionally charged cases to which a law enforcement agency responds. The attitude and approach an agency and its officers take in handling reports of missing children, from the initial investigation through successful recovery, forms a critical component of a thorough law enforcement response.

A law enforcement agency should equip its officers with the tools to act decisively when confronted with reports of missing children. This includes having clear policies and procedures for officers to follow through each stage of the investigation, as well as direct instruction regarding the intent of these policies and procedures. Providing training and awareness about the overall issue of missing children and the nuances that may be associated with a specific child's case will help ensure officers understand the critical role they play in protecting children. For example, officers should be aware they might encounter differing types of missing child cases, each with their own unique response requirements.

The National Center for Missing & Exploited Children® (NCMEC) categorizes missing child cases per these **five circumstances** under which children go missing:

### ■ Family Abduction (FA)

The taking, retention, or concealment of a child by a family member in violation of a custody order, a decree, or other legitimate custodial rights.

### ■ Endangered Runaway (ERU)

Any missing child who is missing on their own accord and whose whereabouts are unknown to their parent or legal guardian.

### ■ Nonfamily Abduction (NFA)

The unauthorized taking, retention, luring, confinement, or concealment of a child by someone other than a family member.

### ■ Lost/Injured or Otherwise Missing (LIM)

Any missing child where there are insufficient facts to determine the cause of the child's disappearance, or circumstances puts the child at increased risk.

### ■ Missing Young Adult (MYA)

Missing persons reported to NCMEC by a law enforcement agency when the individual is at least 18 years old but younger than the age of 21. [34 U.S.C. § 41307]

In addition to these missing child case categories, NCMEC has tailored programming to facilitate reporting and case management services for children missing from care, which involves a child younger than 18 who is a ward of the state, such as in custody of child protective services/social services, juvenile justice, and goes missing from a foster home or group home, or other facility. These children can be at even higher risk for exploitation, sex trafficking, abduction, or even homicide. This also includes children with special needs whose case response may require unique response protocols. For example, a child on the autism spectrum may be drawn to water, or other hazardous attractions like trains or traffic lights, which place the child in immediate danger. Some children may require medication that, if not taken, can become life-threatening. NCMEC has resources and search protocols that can assist law enforcement and be implemented by your agency.

Many missing child incidents are resolved by parents, relatives, friends, or neighbors. When law enforcement is called upon to handle a missing child case, it can be a highly demanding situation that requires decisive action and a carefully planned response. Regardless of what the first indicators may be, when developing policy and procedures regarding missing children cases, each response should be governed by an assumption the child is in jeopardy until significant facts to the contrary are confirmed. When officers respond with the missing child's vulnerabilities and safety as their foremost concern, they

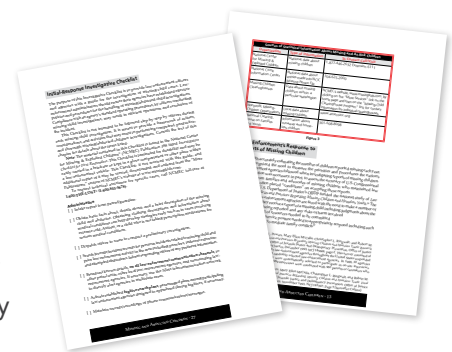
will be more likely to collect evidence or information that might otherwise be lost during the critical, preliminary stages of an investigation. It is also critical that agencies implement these policies with consistency and integrity to help ensure equality and inclusivity in practice, regardless of the child or family's race, gender, sexual orientation, or community.

## Using the Model Policy

This model policy is designed to serve as a general reference and may be modified to fit the specific needs of any agency, regardless of size and community demographics. The goal of this model policy is to present the missing child response process in a logical progression from case intake through on-scene response, case investigation, recovery, and case closure.

From the basic outline presented in this model, administrators are encouraged to add those topics unique to their agency, community, state, and region to incorporate actions mandated by statutes at all levels from federal to local. The text in *italics* is offered as explanation, and its inclusion in an agency's final policy or procedures is optional.

Finally, much of the content of this model policy is based on material found in the NCMEC publication titled *Missing and Abducted Children: A Law-Enforcement Guide to Case Investigation and Program Management*, which contains chapters covering each of these types of missing child cases with individualized checklists offering step-by-step recommendations for successful case investigation. A free copy of this publication may be viewed, downloaded, and/or ordered from the "Our Work/Publications" section of [MissingKids.org](http://MissingKids.org). It may also be ordered by calling toll-free at 1-800-THE-LOST® (1-800-843-5678).



## Pre-incident Planning and Resource Development

Along with the creation of written policies and procedures, pre-incident planning and resource development are equally important to the formation of an effective law enforcement response to reports of missing children. When these three factors are given equal emphasis, a truly comprehensive response plan will result.

To more efficiently investigate, manage, and resolve cases of missing children and minimize the emotional stresses associated with these incidents, many communities, led by their law enforcement agencies, are holding preplanning sessions to assess roles, identify resources, and agree on responsibilities. When implemented, this interagency protocol outlines specific responsibilities and serves as the basis for ongoing communication and coordination.

When law enforcement responds to the report of a missing child with a plan, time is saved and opportunities are leveraged. By adopting planned strategies, officers can exercise more control over events, react more effectively to unexpected occurrences, and enhance the likelihood of swift and successful recovery of a missing child.



**Comments or questions regarding this Model Policy and Procedure are welcomed.**

**Please contact NCMEC's Training Team at [training@ncmec.org](mailto:training@ncmec.org) or 1-800-THE-LOST® (1-800-843-5678).**

# Model Missing Children's Policy

Directive Type	Effective Date	Directive Number
Subject  <b>Missing Children</b>		Issuing Authority
Reference	Amends/Rescinds	
Distribution	Reevaluation Date	No. Pages

## I. Policy Purpose

*Describe the objectives of this policy.*

The purpose of this policy is to establish guidelines and responsibilities regarding this agency's response to reports of missing children.

## II. Policy Statement

*Describe the agency's intent or philosophy regarding this policy.*

- A. It shall be the policy of this agency to thoroughly investigate all reports of missing children. Additionally, every child reported missing to this agency will be considered **at risk** until sufficient information to the contrary is confirmed.
- B. Jurisdictional conflicts are to be avoided when a child is reported missing. If a missing child either resides in, or was last seen in this jurisdiction, this agency will immediately initiate the required reporting process. If a child resides in this jurisdiction and was last seen in another jurisdiction, but the law enforcement agency serving that jurisdiction chooses not to take a missing child report, this agency will assume reporting and investigative responsibility.
- C. Questions concerning legal custody often arise in relation to missing child reports. It shall be the policy of this agency to accept the report of a missing child even if custody has not been formally established. Reporting parties shall be encouraged to obtain legal custody as soon as possible; however, since the safety of a missing child is paramount, members of this agency will open a case when it can be shown the child has been inappropriately removed, without explanation, from their legal place of residence. If custody has not been established by the Court, then the law enforcement responsibility is to help ensure the child's safety and well-being.

### III. Definitions

*Describe what circumstances control report acceptance.*

- A. The term **missing child** refers to a person who is younger than 18 years of age, or as otherwise defined by state law, whose current location is unknown to their parents, guardian, or caregiver.
- B. A missing child will be considered **at elevated risk** when one or more of the **case factors** noted in Paragraph C are present.
- C. **Elevated risk factors may include** a missing child who is:
  1. 12 years of age or younger. *Although missing children of any age group may experience other factors listed below, young age itself and the accompanying lack of physical and mental development is a risk factor. Or*
  2. Believed or determined to be experiencing one or more of the circumstances noted below.
    - a. Is out of the zone of safety for their age and developmental stage. *The zone of safety is the area a child may routinely travel independently and will vary depending on the age of the child and their developmental stage. In the case of an infant, for example, the zone of safety will include a nearby adult caregiver. For a school-aged child, the zone of safety might be the immediate neighborhood or route taken between home and school.*
    - b. Has neurological, cognitive, or behavioral disabilities. *Determine if the child has a learning, intellectual, developmental, psychiatric, or physical disability. For example, if the child is diagnosed with autism spectrum disorder, they may have difficulty communicating with others about needs, identity, or address. This places the child in danger of exploitation or other harm.*
    - c. Has a drug dependency, including prescribed medication and/or illegal substances, and the dependency is potentially life-threatening. *Children with medical diagnoses who require regular medication, like diabetes or epilepsy for example, may become critical if they do not have access to medications. Children who use illegal drugs may be more vulnerable to risks, such as gang involvement or becoming the victim of exploitation.*
    - d. Has been absent from home for more than 24 hours before being reported to law enforcement as missing. *While some parents may incorrectly assume 24 hours must pass before law enforcement may accept a missing person case, a delay in reporting might also indicate the existence of neglect, abuse, or exploitation within the family. Delayed reporting, in some circumstances, could also be related to a child being forced from their home for a variety of reasons to include nonacceptance of their sexual orientation or gender identity, which again increases the vulnerability to risks of becoming a victim of exploitation.*
    - e. Has been reported missing previously. *A child who has run away multiple times in the past may be at increased risk for exploitation or other harm. Missing children may run away for many reasons and trends show when children run away frequently or for long periods of time, they tend to be running from an unsafe situation or to an unsafe situation. These reasons could include abuse, neglect, domestic violence, non-acceptance of gender or sexual*

identity, or drug dependency in the home. External forces, such as online enticement, grooming, and child sex trafficking, may cause children to run from their home environment based on threats and manipulation by non-familial offenders.

- f. Is in a life-threatening situation or environment. *The environment in which the child is missing may be particularly hazardous. Examples of a dangerous environment could be a busy highway or body of water for a toddler or child on the autism spectrum, a bus or train station for a teenager, or an outdoor environment in inclement weather for a child of any age.*
- g. Is in the company of others who could endanger their welfare. *A missing child in such circumstances is in danger not only of sexual exploitation, but also of possible involvement in criminal activity, such as burglary, shoplifting, robbery, or other crimes. Adolescents are prone to erratic, emotionally influenced behavior, which can lead to disregard for risks and consequences.*
- h. Is absent in a way inconsistent with established patterns of behavior and the deviation cannot be readily explained. *Most children have an established and reasonably predictable routine. Significant, unexplained deviations from that routine increase the probability the child may be at risk.*
- i. Is involved in a situation causing a reasonable person to conclude the child should be considered at risk. *Significant risk to the child can be assumed if the investigation indicates a possible abduction, violence at the scene of an abduction, or signs of sexual exploitation.*
- j. Is part of a population at risk. *Trauma can have a substantial impact on adolescent development. Some groups of children are disproportionately represented among those at increased risk for victimization.*
  - *Children with intellectual and developmental disabilities are at an increased risk for abuse and emotional neglect.*
  - *Homeless children are victims of violence and trauma from loss of homes, community, friends, stability, and safety. Most homeless children have experienced early and multiple traumas. Homeless children are exposed to a dangerous environment with increased vulnerability to being trafficked and substance abuse.*
  - *Parental substance misuse increases children's risk for victimization. Children and adolescents with substance-using parents/guardians may be exposed to other high-risk situations, such as violence in the home and community.*
  - *Lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and questioning (LGBTQ) children experience bullying, harassment, abuse, societal stigma, bias, and rejection.*
  - *Youth who have had contact with the child welfare system are at a higher risk for commercial sexual exploitation than children who have not had such involvement in the child welfare system. Traffickers are known to target youth shelters, group homes, and foster care facilities as locations*



**To learn more about populations of children at elevated risk, visit:**

[childwelfare.gov/topics/systemwide/youth/understanding/trauma/](https://childwelfare.gov/topics/systemwide/youth/understanding/trauma/)

[theiacp.org/projects/enhancing-law-enforcement-response-to-children-exposed-to-violence-and-childhood-trauma](https://theiacp.org/projects/enhancing-law-enforcement-response-to-children-exposed-to-violence-and-childhood-trauma)

[ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC3968319/](https://ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC3968319/)

[ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC4797323/](https://ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC4797323/)

*for recruitment of vulnerable children. Running away from court-ordered care or placements can put children at increased risk for domestic child sex trafficking.*

D. Actions upon determination of **elevated risk factors**.

1. If it is determined **elevated risk factors** are involved in the report of a missing child, an expanded investigation, including the use of all appropriate resources, will immediately commence. *While all missing child incidents should be thoroughly investigated, those involving elevated risk factors indicate a heightened likelihood of danger to the child and, therefore, require a more intensive response.*
2. If appropriate, existing interagency response protocols — including requesting activation of the **AMBER Alert** system and/or other immediate community notification methods, if available — should be considered. All staff involved in missing child investigations, including first responders, should be familiar with AMBER Alert request procedures for their state or regional plan. The state-specified AMBER Alert coordinator will determine if an AMBER Alert should be activated but may also have access to other alerting tools like Endangered Missing Advisories. General information about AMBER Alerts, including best practices and companion law enforcement and media guides may be found at [amberalert.ojp.gov](http://amberalert.ojp.gov). *Preplanned strategies for responding to missing child reports are essential for the successful recovery of the child. By identifying all the services and resources a region has available to search for missing children, multiagency agreements can be reached beforehand and promptly activated when the need arises. See Paragraph 7 of Section IV(A) regarding the role of the telecommunicator and Paragraph 3 of Section IV(C) regarding the role of the supervisor for additional **AMBER Alert** commentary.*

## IV. Procedures

*Describe the responsibilities of agency members who may be involved in a missing child case.*

A. **Communications personnel** receiving the report of a missing child shall:

1. Determine if circumstances of the report meet the definition of a missing child as set forth in Section III. *By asking questions to obtain all relevant information from the caller about the specific circumstances of the report, the telecommunicator can make a preliminary assessment about the level of risk to the missing child. This assessment shall also prepare the telecommunicator to promptly activate additional response protocols if needed. The APCO ANS 1.101 Standard for Public Safety Telecommunicators when Responding to Calls of Missing, Abducted, and Sexually Exploited Children [apcointl.org/standards/standards-to-download/](http://apcointl.org/standards/standards-to-download/) provides appropriate guidance about formulating such questions. Each telecommunicator should be familiar with this guide.*
2. Dispatch an officer to the scene promptly. *The officer who routinely patrols the vicinity of the report is best suited to handle the first response since they should be familiar with the area and are likely to have knowledge of unusual activities, suspicious people, known offenders, and other neighborhood dynamics. The handling of missing child reports, such as children who are believed to be*



missing on their own accord, over the phone is discouraged since accurate assessments of risk to the child cannot be made.

Federal law (**34 USC § 41308**) requires that law enforcement agencies:

- may **not** require any waiting period before accepting a missing child or unidentified person report;
  - may **not** set a policy to remove missing person entries from its State system or NCIC based solely on the age of the person;
  - **must** ensure that reports include all necessary information, including all physical descriptors; a recent photograph, if available; the date and location of last known contact; and the category under which the child is reported missing; and
  - **must** enter the above information **within two hours of receipt** into the State law enforcement system and NCIC.
3. The law enforcement agency that enters the report into NCIC **shall**:
    - verify and update the record with any additional information within 30 days, including, where available, medical and dental records and a recent photograph;
    - initiate appropriate search and investigative procedures;
    - notify the National Center for Missing & Exploited Children of each report received relating to a child missing from foster care; and
    - maintain close liaison with relevant agencies and the National Center for Missing & Exploited Children for the exchange of information and technical assistance.
  4. Notify a supervisor. Because of the complexity of some missing child cases, especially those requiring the immediate mobilization of investigative resources, telecommunicators should verify a supervisor has been notified whenever officers respond to such an assignment.
  5. Transmit the appropriate radio alerts and other notifications. A critical responsibility of the telecommunicator is to obtain sufficient information from the reporting party to broadcast a radio/mobile data message alerting other officers and agencies, if necessary, about the circumstances of the missing incident. Information should include the child's height, weight, hair and eye color, clothing, and the location where the child was last seen as well as any risk factors or special considerations unique to this missing child. Most importantly the radio alert should contain any information known about a possible abductor, with special emphasis on the description of the suspect and vehicle used, as well as direction of travel. Consideration should also be given to the use of highway surveillance or road-block plans, including those involving surrounding agencies, to apprehend a fleeing abductor.
  6. Search agency records for related information, specifically any records such as those pertaining to the family, the place where the child was last seen, the child's residence, and that of close family or friends. It is essential for responding officers to know if the child or family has been the subject of previous reports that might have a bearing on this incident. Records should also be reviewed to learn if any incidents have been reported in the area that might have investigative value in

**Note:** Federal law (**34 USC §41307**) also requires missing young adults ages 18, 19, and 20 are afforded all the same above-listed NCIC and other requirements.

*this case. Complaints of or reports about incidents, such as attempted abductions, prowlers, public lewdness, loitering, and suspicious persons, will be of specific interest. Access should also be made to Sex Offender Registries to determine if individuals designated as sex offenders reside, work, or might otherwise be associated with the area. All available background information is critical to responding officers and investigative personnel to help evaluate the incident and interview witnesses or possible suspects.*

7. Safeguard all pertinent records. *The telecommunicator should also help ensure records of all communication related to this incident, such as phone conversations with the reporting party and witnesses, including written notes regarding the discussion, radio broadcasts, and all subsequent notifications, are safeguarded for future investigative reference.*
8. Activate established protocols for working with the media — including requesting activation of the **AMBER Alert** system and/or other immediate community notification methods when appropriate, including but not limited to social media, broadcast alerts, and text message networks. *In agencies without a public information officer, the telecommunicator, under direction of a law enforcement supervisor, may be best situated to provide information to the media designed to elicit public assistance in the search for a missing child. In preparation for such situations, telecommunicators should have available the phone numbers of media contacts. Additionally, the telecommunicator should be prepared to immediately activate the appropriate community notification method, if so directed by law enforcement personnel.*

**B.** The **initial officer or first responder** assigned to the report of a missing child shall:

1. Respond promptly to the scene of the report activating patrol-vehicle mounted video camera. *Even if the assigned officer has been provided with initial information such as the missing child's description and other facts about the incident, it is best not to delay response to conduct a random search by doing things such as circling through parks, checking playgrounds, or stopping to speak with suspicious individuals. The initial officer assigned should respond directly to the scene and these activities should be handled by other patrol units.*
2. Interview the parents or person making the initial report. *The purpose of this interview is to gain an insight into the circumstances surrounding the missing incident and other information needed to conduct an initial assessment of the case.*
3. Obtain a detailed description of the missing child including photos and videos. *The collection of information about the missing child, including race, height, weight, hair and eye color, shoes, clothing, and other noteworthy features, as well as any medical conditions or special needs the child may have should be done promptly and relayed to other officers assisting with the investigation. Several recent photos and/or a video, if available, should be secured. Again, the use of a missing person report form will expedite the collection of descriptive information. Photos should be the most accurate representation available of the missing child. If no photos*

**Note:** *Using a specifically designed missing person report form to gather information will enable the first responder to more promptly reach an accurate risk assessment. All details should be thoroughly documented for more in-depth review later by investigative personnel who can compare statements made with investigative facts.*

are immediately available, check social media platforms and mobile devices for any photos the parent or reporting person can confirm accurately depict the child.

4. Confirm the child is in fact missing. *First responders should never assume searches conducted by distraught parents or others have been performed in a thorough manner. Another check of the scene should be made and include places where children could be trapped, asleep, or hiding. Special attention should be paid to enclosures, such as refrigerators, freezers, laundry machines, and the interior of parked vehicles, where limited breathing air may place the child at even greater risk. In the case of older children, first responders should ask if parents have checked with the child's friends or perhaps overlooked or forgotten something the child may have said that would explain the absence.*
5. Verify the child's custody status. *First responders should ascertain whether a dispute over the child's custody might have played a role in the missing incident or might constitute a risk factor. Questions regarding whether the reporting party has legal custody, if the noncustodial parent has been contesting custody, or if the missing child expressed a desire to live with the other parent may help an officer gain important insight into the case.*
6. Identify the circumstances of the missing incident. *First responders need to ascertain whether the circumstances are such that a heightened level of response is warranted. If risk factors exist, as defined in Paragraph C of Section III, then the decision to employ additional response methods is clear. In other situations, where the circumstances are not clear, officers should prioritize confirmation of the missing child's safety and well-being and act accordingly.*
7. Determine when, where, and by whom the missing child was last seen. *This information is needed to determine factors such as abduction time frame, windows of opportunity, and verification of previously received information. Interview family members, friends/associates of the child, and friends of the family to determine when each last saw the child, what they think happened to the child, and if the child had talked about concerns in the home or being approached by anyone. Comparison of information gathered from the reporting party, witnesses, and other sources may prove vital to case direction.*
8. Interview the individuals who last had contact with the missing child. *Effective questioning of those individuals who last saw or spoke with a missing child is crucial in the case assessment process. While seeking information about the child's appearance, demeanor, and actions, officers should also be alert to any contradictions made or evasiveness demonstrated by witnesses, especially if these statements cannot be readily corroborated. Thorough documentation will allow investigative personnel to later compare those statements with the facts of the case as they are uncovered.*
9. Identify the missing child's zone of safety for their age and developmental stage. *Responding officers should do a hasty search of this zone while attempting to determine how far a missing child could travel on foot from the point last seen before they would most likely be at risk of injury or harm, likely travel routes, and probable*

**Note:** A search of the home should be conducted even if the missing child was last seen elsewhere.

areas the child may be found. This perimeter should, under many circumstances, define the initial search zone. In the case of a child on the autism spectrum, it is imperative that all nearby bodies of water are searched immediately as many of these children are drawn to water or other hazardous areas such as traffic lights or trains. The National Autism Association reports between 2009 and 2011, accidental drowning accounted for 91% total U.S. deaths reported in children with ASD ages 14 and younger after wandering/elopement.

**Note:** Officers must be cautious in labeling or classifying a missing child case, since the classification process will impact the way in which initial information or evidence is gathered. Even if first indications suggest a less urgent incident, officers should consider all possibilities until the case category is clearly determined.



**To learn more about how to enter missing person records, visit:**

[justice.gov/otj/  
page/file/1349421/  
download](https://justice.gov/otj/page/file/1349421/download)

10. Make an initial assessment of the type of incident. By employing all available assessment tools, such as completion of standardized forms; interviews with parents, other family members, and friends; statements of witnesses; and search of scene, an officer should be able to reach a preliminary determination regarding the type of case and the type of additional resources needed for the specific case.
11. Obtain a description of the suspected abductors or companions, and other pertinent information. Officers need to immediately record witness information, not only for general investigative use but also before witnesses forget details or speak to others who may confuse or make suggestions about what was observed. If it is possible the child was abducted, and the abduction scene involves a business or other public place, officers may be able to supplement witness information with video from security cameras that might provide crucial information about the suspect/abductor, vehicles, and circumstances. In the case of a suspected family abduction, the reporting party may have photos of the abductor or other valuable information. If the incident occurred in a neighborhood setting, a neighborhood canvass should be conducted to locate any home security or doorbell video that might have captured the incident.
12. Determine the correct NCIC Missing Person File category and help ensure notification is promptly transmitted. There are five categories within the Missing Person File applying to children. They are disability, endangered, involuntary, juvenile, and catastrophe. Simply because the child is younger than 18 does not require the juvenile category be used. The circumstances should govern category selection.
13. Provide detailed descriptive information to the communications unit for broadcast updates. As information becomes available regarding the missing child's physical appearance, circumstances of the case, or description of the potential abductor, the initial officer should help ensure other officers and agencies are provided with up-to-date facts.
14. Identify and separately interview everyone at the scene. Record the name, address, home and work phone numbers of everyone present at the scene, along with their relationship to the missing child. If possible, include them in photos and/or videos of the incident scene. By interviewing each person privately, officers may be able to uncover information instrumental to the recovery of the child.
15. Conduct an immediate, thorough search of the scene. With the assistance of additional personnel, a systematic, thorough search of the incident scene should be conducted. If appropriate, officers should obtain written permission to search houses, apartments, outbuildings, vehicles, and other property that might hold information about the child's location. A thorough, immediate search of the child's home and property should be conducted — even if the

child was last seen at another location. Evaluate the contents and appearance of the child's room/residence. When possible, officers should also search a missing child's school locker.



**Before making an initial assessment that the child is missing on their own accord**, an officer should determine if the child may have left to meet someone they encountered while online.

16. Seal/protect scene, area of child's home, and areas of interest as potential crime scenes. *First responders must take control of the immediate area where the incident occurred and establish an appropriate perimeter to avoid destruction of vital evidence. Extend search to surrounding areas and vehicles, including those that are abandoned and other places of concealment, such as abandoned appliances, pools, wells, sheds, or other areas, considered attractive nuisances that are likely to draw a child's attention. In addition to external crime scenes, the missing child's home and its residents, and particularly the child's bedroom, should be secured and protected until electronic and physical evidence and identification material such as potential items containing DNA, hair, and fingerprints are collected.*
17. Inquire if the child has access to the Internet, a cellphone, or other communication devices, although be aware the child may have these without the parent's knowledge. *Before making an initial assessment that the child is missing on their own accord, an officer should determine if the child may have left to meet someone they encountered while online. Since some offenders use the internet to identify vulnerable children, what appears at first to be a case of a child who has run away, may, in fact, be a child abducted or enticed to leave by someone the child met online. Even if a child willingly decides to leave home to join someone they met online, the child should be considered at risk. Additionally, since many children have their own cellphones and other electronic communication devices and may have them while missing, an officer should note these devices during the information gathering process and obtain login/password information, obtain screen names used on social media apps, and secure all electronic devices for future examination or tracking.*
18. Prepare necessary reports and complete appropriate forms. *Information gathered by the first responding officers may be instrumental in the eventual recovery of a child. To record this important information, officers should prepare a chronological account of their involvement and actions taken from time of assignment to the point of dismissal. Reports should include everything, not just events seeming to have a direct bearing on the case. This includes if the child has prior or continuing involvement with law enforcement and/or child welfare agencies. Law enforcement has a legal responsibility to report suspected abuse, neglect, and exploitation to the appropriate child welfare agency.*

C. The **supervisor** assigned to the report of a missing child shall:

1. Obtain a briefing and written reports from the first responders and other agency personnel at the scene. *This briefing allows the supervisor to determine the scope and complexity of the missing child case and develop an appropriate response. The briefing should be conducted away from family, friends, or any other individuals who may be present. This allows officers to speak freely about case circumstances and pass along initial impressions and opinions that might be misconstrued by others.*

2. Determine if additional personnel and resources are needed to assist in the investigation. *Depending on the situation, a supervisor may determine additional personnel, including specialized units, should be called to the scene or otherwise assist in the investigation. Certain cases may also require the supervisor to activate existing interagency response protocols as established by mutual aid agreements or memorandums of understanding such as Child Abduction Response Teams (CART), Internet Crimes Against Children (ICAC) Task Forces, or the FBI Child Abduction Rapid Deployment (CARD) Team. Confirm all required resources, equipment, and assistance necessary to conduct an efficient investigation have been requested and expedite their availability. Be available to make any decisions or determinations as circumstances develop. Contact NCMEC to enlist their resources, such as Team Adam, which is a rapid-response team of experienced, retired law enforcement investigators with access to resources through federal and corporate partnerships; experience with search and rescue (SAR) operations, landfill search management; and access to resources such as poster distribution, media assistance, and analytical services (summarized in Paragraph 8 of Section D below). This assistance is provided at no cost to law enforcement agencies.*
3. Activate established protocols for working with the media — including a request for AMBER Alert activation and/or other immediate community notification methods when appropriate, including but not limited to social media, broadcast alerts, and text message networks. Requests for activation should be submitted based on your state or regional plan procedures. *Open communication with the AMBER Alert coordinator before and during investigations based on your state or regional procedures will help ensure timely activation of alerting resources, when it will aid the investigation. For agencies without a public information officer, the telecommunicator, under direction of a law enforcement supervisor, may be best situated to provide information to the media designed to elicit public assistance in the search for a missing child. In preparation for such situations, telecommunicators should have available the phone numbers of media contacts. Additionally, the telecommunicator should be prepared to immediately activate the appropriate community notification method, if so directed by law enforcement personnel.*
4. Establish an Incident Command Post (ICP). *An ICP is the field location where the primary functions of the incident command system (ICS) organizational element and overall management of the incident are performed. It consists of the incident commander and any assigned support staff. The ICP should be close enough to the center of activity to facilitate communication, control, and coordination while sufficiently isolated to allow a free exchange of ideas among ICS command and general staff. The ICP should be established away from the child's residence.*
5. Organize and coordinate search efforts. *Systematic searches are common features of missing child investigations. A supervisor should appoint a search operation coordinator who can oversee the search effort while the supervisor remains available to manage the entire investigation. Consider enlisting the assistance of NCMEC's Team*

**Note:** *In addition to AMBER Alerts, protocols for Endangered Missing Advisories and other alerts/advisories should also be included.*

*Adam search and rescue specialists who can assist with managing the search and obtaining resources available through federal partnerships and corporate partner organizations.*

6. *Ensure all required notifications have been made. Because dissemination of information is an integral part of the search for a missing child, the supervisor should help ensure all officers, other departments and agencies, and all investigative networks are supplied with accurate details. Prepare a missing poster or flier/bulletin with the child/abductor's photo and description. Distribute in appropriate geographic regions. NCMEC can assist with the creation and distribution of these posters as well as posting on social media outlets.*
7. *Establish a liaison with the victim family. Families of a missing child will experience extreme stress. Supervisors should establish a liaison with the victim family who can explain what investigative actions are being employed and what they can do to assist in the search. The liaison may be a member of the agency or partner agency victim specialist. The liaison, as well as NCMEC's Media Team, can help the family work with the media. NCMEC's Team HOPE is also available to help. Members of Team HOPE have all experienced the trauma of having a missing or sexually exploited child. They offer compassionate peer support, empathy, understanding, kindness, and friendship to families who are still searching, have recovered their children safely, have located their children deceased, and families with children who have been sexually exploited.*
8. *Confirm all agency policies and procedures are observed. In addition to providing the innovative direction required during a missing child investigation, a supervisor must also help ensure adherence to the rules and regulations of their professional law enforcement agency. Established policies and procedures, especially those related to missing children, should be regularly reviewed to help ensure compliance during roll call/shift briefing training sessions.*
9. *Manage media relations in coordination with agency public information officer or same of a partner agency. Many missing child investigations, especially those involving large scale search efforts, are likely to draw media attention. Supervisors should manage media presence in a way to complement rather than conflict with the investigation. NCMEC can assist with media relations, including releases to the public through numerous media outlets and social networking platforms.*

**D.** The **investigator** assigned to the report of a missing child shall:

1. *Obtain a briefing from agency personnel at the scene. This briefing should be conducted prior to interviews with family members of the missing child or witnesses who may have been identified during the initial stage of the case. The objective is to assist the investigator in formulating an effective interview strategy.*
2. *Verify the accuracy of all descriptive information. The verification process should include all details developed during the preliminary investigation. During the interview process the investigator should be alert to facts or statements in conflict with those gathered by the first responder.*

3. Initiate a neighborhood investigation. *A thorough canvass of the neighborhood should be conducted without delay. The objective is to identify and interview all people near the missing location/ within the abduction zone who may be able to provide information related to the incident. Investigators should use a standardized set of questions during the canvass to help ensure completeness and uniformity of information and facilitate establishment of a database to track leads. A record should also be made of all vehicles parked within the neighborhood and any other conditions that may have future investigative value. Access should also be made to Sex Offender Registries to determine if individuals designated as sex offenders reside, work, or are otherwise associated with the area. NCMEC can provide the MACE Leads Management application and applicable questionnaires that can be used during a neighborhood canvass. Additionally, NCMEC has analysts who can assist with sex offender and attempted abduction radius searches around the missing location, as well as other analytical support as noted in Paragraph 8 below.*
4. Obtain a brief history of recent family dynamics. *Information about family dynamics, obtained from family members, neighbors, teachers, classmates, employers, coworkers, friends, and witnesses, can offer valuable insights into what may have happened to the missing child and where they may be found. Records of family contact maintained by law enforcement agencies, social service departments, schools, and other organizations should also be obtained and evaluated.*
5. Explore the basis for any conflicting information. *When preliminary investigative steps have been taken, investigators should compare notes with the first responder, fellow investigators, and other agency personnel to identify and work through conflicting information. This collaborative evaluation will provide the investigative staff with a solid foundation upon which to structure future case directions. Correct and investigate the reasons for any conflicting information.*
6. Involve a specialized unit within the agency, state, or federal law enforcement for additional resources and coordination if information surfaces regarding possible child sexual exploitation, such as child sex trafficking, child sexual abuse material, or online enticement. *Examples include ICAC Task Forces, the FBI's Crimes Against Children & Human Trafficking Unit, Homeland Security Investigations, and/or child advocacy centers.*
7. Complete all remaining key investigative steps. **Key** investigative steps include, when applicable:
  - *Collecting articles of the child's clothing for scent tracking purposes; reviewing and evaluating all available information and evidence collected; securing the child's last medical and dental records; and collecting reference DNA samples from family members;*
  - *Contacting landfill management and requesting delay or segregation of trash collected from key investigative areas;*
  - *Developing and executing an investigative plan;*
  - *Conducting a criminal history background check on all principal suspects, witnesses, and participants in the investigation;*



- Establishing a phone hotline for receipt of tips and leads; and
- Considering establishment of an e-mail address or other methods of electronically receiving leads.

8. Complete all remaining coordination steps. Key coordination steps include helping to ensure details of the case have been reported to NCMEC and preparing and updating bulletins for local law enforcement agencies, the missing children clearinghouse in that state or territory, FBI, and other appropriate agencies. NCMEC's Team Adam can assist with landfill search assessments if it appears likely from the investigation that the child may be located within a landfill.

NCMEC has teams of analysts who can provide support for missing and unidentified child cases as well. Analysts utilize public records databases, NCIC/Nlets, social networking platforms, and other open-source intelligence combined with information from NCMEC's internal systems to provide comprehensive analytical reports about abductors/offenders' current/historical places of residence, employment, vehicles, and travel. Analysts can also conduct searches on the child when applicable, to include possible online activity or indicators of possible sex trafficking risk or victimization.

Consider requesting the FBI CARD Team to assist with the investigation and provide resources.

9. Implement effective case management. An information management system is an essential part of the overall investigative process. Depending on the resources available, it is best to utilize a computerized system to record, index, cross-reference, and retrieve the facts amassed during an investigation.

**Note:** NCMEC can provide the MACE Leads Management software and forms to assist with leads management.

10. Evaluate the need for additional resources and specialized services. The complexity of many missing child incidents may necessitate the use of resources and services, both from within the agency and other organizations as well. Investigators should be aware of the input obtainable from resources such as the FBI; NCIC; missing children clearinghouses within states and territories; and NCMEC's Team Adam.

11. Update descriptive information. If it appears the missing child incident will not be promptly resolved, investigators should help ensure the descriptive record, especially the information entered in the NCIC Missing Person File, is updated to include dental characteristics, scars, marks, tattoos, and fingerprints along with additional articles of clothing, jewelry, or unique possessions.

12. Monitor media relations. While information gained through effective media relations is often of significant value in a missing child case, investigators should review all notices prior to release to help ensure investigative objectives are not unintentionally compromised.

- E. An officer assigned to the report of an **unidentified person**, whether living or deceased, who appears to be a child, shall:

1. Obtain a complete description. Officers who are assigned to this task should use standardized information gathering forms, such as the NCIC Unidentified Person File Worksheet and data collection guide. This information should be gathered in cooperation with the medical examiner or coroner. In cases involving skeletal remains,

consideration should be given to consulting with a forensic anthropologist and forensic odontologist to help ensure all pertinent and accurate information has been gathered. NCMEC's Forensic Services Unit can assist with facilitating these resources.

2. Report the unidentified child's case to NCMEC and enter the case information into the National Missing and Unidentified Person System (NamUs) and NCIC's Unidentified Person File. *The NCIC file is compared daily with the contents of the NCIC Missing Person File. Entries with common characteristics are flagged and both agencies are informed. Agencies should expect to receive this information/response overnight.*
  3. Use all available resources to aid in identification of the child to include a facial reconstruction that can be distributed to the public and working with the medical examiner/coroner to secure a DNA sample, dental radiographs, and fingerprints. *NCMEC's Forensic Services Unit can assist with these efforts.*
  4. Cancel all notifications after identification is confirmed.
- F.** An officer assigned to the **recovery or return** of a missing child shall:
1. Verify the located child is the reported missing child. *An officer should personally verify all recoveries of children. The benefits of this practice include assessing the child's safety, gaining intelligence about possible offenders, and helping to prevent future missing incidents. The interview should primarily focus on the child's well-being and be approached in a way that reduces blame and builds rapport so the child feels comfortable reaching back out when they feel ready to share additional information. If any information or concerns surface regarding the possible sexual abuse and/or exploitation of a child while missing, law enforcement should immediately reach out to their local Child Advocacy Center (CAC) [nationalcac.org/find-a-cac/](http://nationalcac.org/find-a-cac/) to coordinate a child-centered forensic interview. They can also contact their local Internet Crimes Against Children (ICAC) Task Force [icactaskforce.org/Pages/ContactsTaskForce.aspx](http://icactaskforce.org/Pages/ContactsTaskForce.aspx) agency for additional support.*
  2. Secure intervention services, if appropriate. *During the verification process, officers should be alert for indications additional services may be needed before the child can be safely reunited with their family. These services may include mental and/or physical health examinations and arrangements for family counseling. NCMEC's Family Advocacy Division can assist with the reunification of the child and secure services to assist the child and family.*
  3. Plan appropriate placement options for when a child is recovered. *This can significantly reduce trauma and anxiety for the child, legal guardians, and/or parents. Coordination of reunification of a missing child with their family can be complex and may benefit from the assistance of specialists depending on the length of time the child was missing and circumstances of the missing incident. In the case of children who have run away, law enforcement will be responsible for arranging the return of the child to their family. Or, based on the information available upon and immediately following recovery, it may be necessary to engage the local department of social services/child welfare to help locate emergency placement and housing while*



To learn more about child sexual exploitation, including child sex trafficking, visit:

[MissingKids.org/theissues](http://MissingKids.org/theissues)

[MissingKids.org/education/training](http://MissingKids.org/education/training)

additional information is collected. If the child was located outside the jurisdiction from which they were missing and beyond driving distance, NCMEC can assist with the safe return of the child through private sector transportation partnerships. Additional resources may be available through child welfare's Interstate Compact for the Placement of Children or the Interstate Compact for Juveniles, which can sometimes assist with transportation arrangements for specific categories of children.

4. Place the child in custody and transport them to the appropriate facility for admission in the case of an endangered runaway from another jurisdiction or from out-of-state who has been located and for whom a warrant exists or for whom an NCIC missing-person hit is verified. Depending on the state or jurisdiction, the child may be the subject of a pick-up order for a status offense (e.g. truancy, running away, curfew violation) or a warrant for an underlying criminal offense. This should be considered when assessing placement facilities. If appropriate, or required by state law, this section might also include a proviso concerning an agency's authority regarding 16- and 17-year-old missing children who, when located, may have state-specific requirements for special treatment, limits on being detained, or options to transport them to a specific placement instead of returning home if certain conditions exist.
5. Complete the appropriate supplemental reports and cancel all outstanding notifications, including notifying the NCMEC assigned case manager. Along with cancellation of the NCIC Missing Person File entry and other notifications regarding the case, a supplemental report should be completed describing the child's activities while missing and circumstances of the recovery/return.

**Note:**

Agencies may also wish to consider using this policy as the basis for creating or updating an already existing agency policy about missing persons who are older than 20.



**Comments or questions regarding this Model Policy and Procedure are welcomed.**

**Please contact NCMEC's Training Team at [training@ncmec.org](mailto:training@ncmec.org) or 1-800-THE-LOST® (1-800-843-5678).**

**Acknowledgment**

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