



Children Missing from Care Initiative

What is the National Center for Missing & Exploited Children?

The National Center for Missing & Exploited Children (NCMEC) was created as a private, non-profit organization in 1984 and designated by Congress to serve as the national clearinghouse on issues relating to missing and exploited children. NCMEC provides services to families, child welfare agencies, private industry, law enforcement, victims, and the general public to assist in the prevention of child abductions, the recovery of missing children, and the provision of services to combat child sexual exploitation.

NCMEC performs 15 specific programs of work, funded in part by federal grants (34 U.S.C. § 11293):

- operate the official national resource center and information clearinghouse for missing and exploited children;
- operate a national, 24-hour toll-free hotline, 1-800-THE-LOST® (1-800-843-5678) to intake reports of missing children and receive leads about ongoing cases;
- provide technical assistance and training to families, law enforcement agencies, State and local governments, elements of the criminal justice system, nongovernmental agencies, local educational agencies, and the general public in the prevention, investigation, prosecution, and treatment of cases involving missing and exploited children;
- operate the CyberTipline, an online reporting mechanism that the public and electronic service providers may use to report Internet-related and other instances of child sexual exploitation; and
- coordinate with child welfare agencies and law enforcement in the reporting of children missing from the foster care system.

Connecting Resources to Help Keep Children Safe

The passage of the Preventing Sex Trafficking and Strengthening Families Act in 2014, was a bipartisan effort to improve the lives of children in care. Under the provisions of this law, state agencies are required to report children who go missing from care, to both law enforcement **and** to NCMEC, no later than 24 hours after receiving information that a child has gone missing from care.

As the national clearinghouse on missing and exploited children issues, NCMEC is uniquely positioned to provide significant and continuous support to state agencies that are searching for children missing from their care. NCMEC provides an array of resources, including case management, poster distribution, social media, law enforcement technical assistance, outreach teams, and case analysis. Every report of a missing child receives a prompt response from NCMEC's case management staff who coordinate directly with all case workers, social workers and/or law enforcement agencies involved to provide resources to help safely locate the missing child.

Reporting all children missing from care to NCMEC is not just a best practice and legal requirement. NCMEC can provide missing child case support, to assist state agencies fulfilling these requirements and ultimately help provide a better response to children in need. Visit [cmfc.missingkids.org](https://www.missingkids.org) for additional information including:

- information on NCMEC services;
- guidance on reporting children missing from care;
- technical assistance on missing from care policy guidelines; and
- resources and information on child sex trafficking.

When a child goes missing, **immediately** call law enforcement and make a report.

After a report is made to law enforcement, call NCMEC at 1-800-THE-LOST® (1-800-843-5678).

For additional information visit: <https://www.missingkids.org/theissues/cmfc> and scroll down to the section labeled,

What NCMEC Is Doing About It



FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS FOR SOCIAL SERVICE AGENCIES

Q: What is the definition of a missing child?

A: Federal law (34 U.S.C. § 11292) defines a “missing child” as any individual less than 18 years of age whose whereabouts are unknown to their parent, legal guardian, or other person exercising parental rights over the child. This broad definition includes children who may have (1) been abducted by a non-family member; (2) wrongfully taken or retained by a person related to them; (3) wandered away from a safe environment and become lost; (4) been displaced by disaster; (5) run away from a home, foster home, or state care facility; or (6) otherwise gone missing **for any reason at all**. In some jurisdictions, state law expands on the broad federal definition and provides further guidance on how agencies should treat missing child cases in their state.

Q: If I report the missing child to my local law enforcement, do I also have to make a report to NCMEC?

A: The law requires child welfare to report children missing from care to **both** your local law enforcement agency **and** to NCMEC. Although we make every effort to ensure good communication, please be aware that a report to law enforcement (even if they properly enter the child into the National Crime Information Center, (NCIC) system does not automatically generate a report to NCMEC. A separate report to NCMEC has to be made after law enforcement is contacted.

Q: How long do I need to wait before reporting a missing child to law enforcement?

A: There is NO waiting period. In fact, federal law prohibits law enforcement agencies from establishing or maintaining a waiting period before accepting a missing child report. If a child in your legal guardianship goes missing from care, for any reason, **immediately** contact **your local law enforcement agency** and then NCMEC.

Q: Can I still call NCMEC if law enforcement refuses to take my missing child report?

A: Yes. Federal law requires law enforcement agencies to respond in a specific way, regardless of the reason why a child is missing (or if the child has gone missing or run away in the past). Law enforcement agencies are prohibited from establishing or maintaining a waiting period before accepting a missing child report, and must promptly enter information regarding a missing child into the NCIC system within two hours of receiving a report. See 34 U.S.C. § 41308. If you encounter any difficulties making a report to law enforcement or having information entered about a child missing from care into NCIC, contact NCMEC at 1-800-THE-LOST®(1-800-843-5678).

Q: Should I only report a missing child who is believed to be a victim of sex trafficking to NCMEC?

A: Federal law requires that state agencies report any child who has gone missing from their care.

Q: Does NCMEC publicize that a missing child is in foster care or a victim of child sex trafficking?

A: No. NCMEC takes care to protect and maintain the privacy of information regarding missing children and consults with the child’s parent(s) and/or legal guardian(s) and the investigating law enforcement agency before disseminating any identifying information publicly. Additionally, NCMEC does not generally make any public reference to the fact that a child is missing from care, was in state custody at the time they went missing, or that they are likely the victim of child sex trafficking.

Q: What about young adults missing from care?

A: NCMEC can also assist with unemancipated youth missing from care who are 18, 19 or 20 years old and still under the legal guardianship of a state agency.