

Children Missing from Care Initiative



What is the National Center for Missing & Exploited Children?

The National Center for Missing and 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 22 specific functions pertaining to missing and exploited children, including the following duties listed in 42 U.S.C. § 5773(b):

- 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 individuals and law enforcement agencies 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 child sexual exploitation; and
- coordinate with child welfare agencies and law enforcement in the reporting of children missing from the foster care system.

A full list of NCMEC's 22 operational functions may be obtained here: <http://www.missingkids.org/authorization>.

Connecting Resources to Help Keep Children Safer

The passage of the Preventing Sex Trafficking and Strengthening Families Act (Preventing Sex Trafficking Act), signed into law by President Obama on September 29, 2014, illustrates a bipartisan effort to improve the lives of children in care. Under Title I of the Preventing Sex Trafficking Act, state social service agencies are required to immediately report children who go missing, or who are abducted, from foster care, to both law enforcement **and** to NCMEC.

As the national clearinghouse on missing and exploited children issues, NCMEC is uniquely positioned to provide significant and continuous support to social service agencies that are searching for children missing from their care. For many years prior to the passage of the Preventing Sex Trafficking Act, NCMEC successfully coordinated with social service agencies in several states and supported their efforts to locate and return missing children and NCMEC continues to do so.

NCMEC provides an array of resources, including case management, poster distribution, social media, on-site law enforcement technical assistance and outreach teams, and case analysis. Every report of a missing child receives a prompt response from one of NCMEC's case management teams 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.

NCMEC stands ready to provide missing child case support as state child welfare agencies adjust their policies to include the requirement that all children missing from care be reported to NCMEC. Visit cmfc.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: cmfc.missingkids.org

FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS FOR SOCIAL SERVICE AGENCIES

Q: What is the definition of a missing child?

A: Federal law (42 U.S.C. § 5772) defines a “missing child” as “any individual less than 18 years of age whose whereabouts are unknown to such individual’s legal custodian.” 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. Please be aware that a report to law enforcement and subsequent entry of the child into the FBI’s National Crime Information Center (NCIC) system does not automatically generate a report to NCMEC. A separate report to NCMEC must also be made after law enforcement is contacted.

Q: Is there any kind of waiting period for reporting a missing child to law enforcement?

A: No, 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. 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 42 U.S.C. § 5780. 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: NCMEC can receive reports for any child missing from care. Additionally, federal law now requires that social service agencies report any child who has gone missing from their care for any reason.

Q: Does NCMEC publicize that a missing child is in child welfare 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 foster care, was in state custody at the time they went missing, or that they are likely the victim of child sex trafficking.

Q: Does NCMEC take reports of young adults missing from care who are 18 years of age or older?

A: Yes, NCMEC takes reports of unemancipated young adults missing from care who are 18, 19 or 20 and still under the legal guardianship of a social service agency and provides assistance on such cases. Suzanne’s Law, codified at 42 U.S.C. § 5779(a), extended the same reporting and investigative procedures that were already in place for missing children under the age of 18 to missing young adults. For this reason, NCMEC also takes reports of emancipated young adults who are 18-20 years of age from the investigating law enforcement agency.

