



Children Missing From Care

Children Missing from Care: Frequently Asked Questions of 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.

A report to NCMEC should be promptly made (immediately and no later than 24 hours) when the legal guardian agency does not know the whereabouts of the child missing from a foster home, relative placement or any child placement agency. This does not include when a child or youth is in an unauthorized or unapproved placement but the agency knows the child’s whereabouts (e.g., the child is verified to be attending school or their place of employment). It also does not include when a child leaves a foster home or child placement agency without permission but the agency, relative or foster parent knows where the child or youth has gone. There may be scenarios in which the child does not fall under the federal definition of missing that will be examined on a case-by-case basis.

Q: Why do I have to report the missing child to NCMEC if I've already reported to my local law enforcement agency?

A: NCMEC and law enforcement are two separate entities. NCMEC is a non-profit organization whose core mission is to help find missing children, reduce child sexual exploitation, and prevent child victimization. NCMEC works with families, victims, child welfare, law enforcement, private industry, and the public to support its core mission. NCMEC provides added support and advocacy between all of these disciplines and assists to recover missing children. NCMEC also provides resources to children, youth and families for continued support and healing beyond recovery. 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: What if law enforcement refuses to take my missing child report?

A: 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](#).

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 (which means the child's whereabouts are unknown) from their care.

Q: What about young adults missing from care?

A: Although no longer considered a child under U.S. federal law, NCMEC can assist with cases of young adults between the ages of 18 - 20 years old who are missing and the young adult remains under the ongoing guardianship of a state or county welfare agency. Each state has its own policies and laws related to foster care extending to young adults. If the young adult is consenting to be in extended foster care or any other voluntary service the department is able to offer or the young adult has come back to foster care after turning 18 and requested services voluntarily, the young adult would not qualify for NCMEC resources.

If there is a court order in place specifying legal guardianship of the state to make legal decisions on behalf of the young adult (i.e., due to mental health needs, differing abilities, etc.), the young adult would qualify for NCMEC resources and should be reported.

NCMEC will also assist with missing young adult cases reported by law enforcement.

Q: How do I make a report to NCMEC?

After a report is made to law enforcement, you can make a report by calling NCMEC at 1-800-THE-LOST® (1-800-843-5678) or making an online report here after creating an account:

<https://cmfc.missingkids.org/reportit/Account/LogOn>



Case Worker Guide to Reporting Missing Children

<https://www.ncmec.org/content/dam/missingkids/pdfs/cmfc-case-worker-guide-reporting-missing-children.pdf>

Q: Q: What can I expect when making a report to NCMEC?

A: The report will require specific, basic identifying information about the child and circumstances concerning how, when and where the child went missing. As the core mission of NCMEC is to find missing children, reduce sexual exploitation and prevent victimization, you can expect the report will be followed up and efforts will be made in consultation with the reporting source to carry out this mission. You can expect that your case will be assigned, and a case manager will be reaching out to follow up on your behalf. NCMEC will work with the legal guardian agency and law enforcement to provide everything from posters to analytical support. NCMEC will also offer appropriate recovery and family advocacy services to parents, legal guardians, and members of a child’s support system to design plans that prevent future victimization and/or exploitation. Depending on the information gathered, NCMEC’s Recovery Services Team will reach out in cases where it is believed the child is suspected of being trafficked to support the agency in recovery planning. NCMEC’s Family Advocacy Division may also reach out to provide support in certain circumstances.

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.

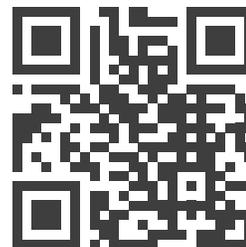
Q: What is the expectation when a child has been located?

A: Please let the assigned NCMEC Case Manager know when a missing child has been located. This is very important so that case managers will know when the services they are providing are no longer needed and when other resources through the Recovery Services Team or Family Advocacy Division can be offered or provided. If a NCMEC Case Manager does not hear from you after a period of time, you can expect they will reach out for a status update on the missing child. On-going communication with NCMEC concerning developments in the case or recovery of the child may help with a more expedient recovery if there are subsequent missing incidents or may prevent future incidences of trafficking or other endangerments.

Q: In a situation where a caseworker may be working with a family whose child is not in the agency’s care and custody, but the caseworker becomes aware that the child is missing, how should this be handled?

A: Any child whose whereabouts are unknown to a legal guardian or parent should be reported to NCMEC. However, there are a few requirements of which child welfare professionals or other third-party reporters should be aware. One is that the parent/legal guardian’s full contact information must be provided to NCMEC and a report must also be made or attempt to be made to law enforcement. NCMEC will ultimately need certain authorizations from the parent in order to provide resources such as posters. Ideally, if you are working with a parent, best practice would be to have the parent make the referral or to make the referral in collaboration with the parent.

For any additional questions not covered by this FAQ guide, please feel free to email CMFC@NCMEC.org.



[NCMEC.org/CMFC](https://www.ncmec.org/cmfc)

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