

**LAW-ENFORCEMENT
POLICY AND PROCEDURES
FOR REPORTS OF
MISSING AND ABDUCTED CHILDREN**

— A MODEL —

**– Developed by –
The National Center for
Missing & Exploited Children®**

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The National Center for Missing & Exploited Children

Model Law-Enforcement Policy and Procedures for Reports of Missing and Abducted Children

Overview

Reports of missing children can be among the most challenging, and emotionally charged cases a law-enforcement agency will ever experience. The attitude and approach an agency and its officers take in responding to reports of missing children may very well determine whether the child is recovered promptly and safely or remains missing for months or years or, even worse, is never recovered. Each stage of the case, therefore, from initial investigation through successful recovery, forms a critical component of a thorough law-enforcement response.

A law-enforcement agency must provide its officers with the tools enabling them to act decisively when confronted with reports of missing children. The single, most important tool an agency can provide is a clearly worded policy directive containing understandable procedures for officers to follow as a guide through each stage of the investigation.

Policies and procedures are of limited value, however, unless an agency ensures every member receives direct instruction about the policy's intent. Additionally, specific training and awareness about the overall issue of missing children will help each officer understand the critical role he or she plays in this important area of child protection. For example officers should be aware they might encounter several types of missing-child cases, each with their own unique response requirements. They include the types of cases noted below.

- A. **Nonfamily abduction** involves a child who has been wrongfully taken by a nonfamily perpetrator through the use of physical force, persuasion, or threat of bodily harm.
- B. **Family abduction** occurs when, in violation of a court order, a decree, or other legitimate custodial rights, a member of the child's family, or someone acting on behalf of a family member, takes or fails to return a child. This is also referred to as parental kidnapping and custodial interference.
- C. A **Runaway** child, often a teenager, leaves home voluntarily for a variety of reasons. This would include any child 17 years of age or younger.
- D. The **Thrownaway** is a child whose caretaker makes no effort to recover the child after running away, who has been abandoned or deserted, or who has been asked to leave his or her home and not allowed to return. While not necessarily reported to authorities as missing, children in this category frequently come to the attention of law enforcement.
- E. The **Lost, Injured, or Otherwise Missing** child is defined as a child who has disappeared under unknown circumstances. The incident may range from the child wandering away and becoming lost to the child being abducted, wherein no one witnessed the act. These circumstances sometimes involve "foul play," where those reporting the incident are attempting to cover-up a crime involving the child.

It should be noted not all missing-child incidents occurring each year in this country result in a direct law-enforcement response. Some incidents are resolved by parents, relatives, friends, or

neighbors while others are over (*i.e.*, the child escapes or returns home) before law enforcement is notified.

This discussion should point out to the law-enforcement administrator that law enforcement is usually called upon to handle the most demanding missing-child reports — those cases requiring decisive action and a carefully planned response.

When developing policy and procedures regarding missing-children cases, it is essential each response, regardless of what the initial indicators may be, 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 safety as their foremost concern, they will be more likely to collect evidence or information that might otherwise be lost during the critical, early stages of an investigation.

Using the Model Policy

This model policy about missing children has been designed to serve as a general reference and may be modified to fit the specific needs of any agency, regardless of size. It attempts to present the missing-child-response process in a logical progression from case intake through first response and case investigation on to recovery and case closure.

From the basic outline presented in this model, administrators are encouraged to add those topics unique to their agency or region of the country and incorporate actions mandated by statutes at all levels from federal to local. It should also be noted the text found 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 National Center for Missing & Exploited Children (NCMEC) publication titled *Missing and Abducted Children: A Law-Enforcement Guide to Case Investigation and Program Management*. That publication contains chapters covering each type of missing-child case and provides individual 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 "More Publications" section of www.missingkids.com. 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 a written policy and procedure, 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.

In an effort 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 not only spells out specific responsibilities, but also serves as the basis for ongoing communication and cooperation.

When law enforcement responds to the report of a missing child without a plan, time is lost and opportunities are wasted. By adopting planned strategies, officers will be able to exercise more

control over events, react more effectively to unexpected occurrences, and enhance the likelihood of swift and successful case resolution.

**Comments or questions regarding this Model Policy and Procedure are welcomed.
Please contact NCMEC's Jimmy Ryce Law Enforcement Training Center at
1-800-THE-LOST (1-800-843-5678).**

Model Missing Children's Policy

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

I. Policy Purpose

Describe the objective(s) 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 significant 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 covering that jurisdiction chooses not to take a missing-child report, this agency will assume reporting and investigative responsibility.
- C. Questions concerning parental custody occasionally 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 the missing child(ren) is paramount, members of this agency will open a case when it can be shown the child has been removed, without explanation, from his or her usual place of residence. If custody has not been established by the Court, then the law-enforcement responsibility is to ensure the child is safe only.

III. Definitions

Describe what circumstances control report acceptance.

- A. The term **missing child** refers to a person who is
 - 1. Younger than 18 years of age and
 - 2. Whose whereabouts are unknown to his or her custodial parent, guardian, or responsible party
- B. A missing child will be considered **at risk** when one or more of the **risk factors** noted in paragraph C are present.
- C. **Risk factors** refer to a missing child who is
 - 1. 13 years of age or younger. *This age was designated because children of this age group have not established independence from parental control and do not have the survival skills necessary to protect themselves from exploitation on the streets* **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 his or her age and developmental stage. *The zone of safety will vary depending on the age of the child and his or her developmental stage. In the case of an infant, for example, the zone of safety will include the immediate presence of an adult custodian or the crib, stroller, or carriage in which the infant was placed. For a school-aged child the zone of safety might be the immediate neighborhood or route taken between home and school.*
 - b) Has mental or behavioral disabilities. *If the child is developmentally disabled or emotionally/behaviorally challenged, he or she may have difficulty communicating with others about needs, identity, or address. The disability places the child in danger of exploitation or other harm.*
 - c) Is drug dependent, including prescribed medication and/or illegal substances, and the dependency is potentially life-threatening. *Any drug dependency puts the missing child at risk. The diabetic or epileptic child requires regular medication or his or her condition may become critical. The abuser of illegal drugs, on the other hand, may resort to crime or become 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 will accept a missing-person case, a delay in reporting might also indicate the existence of neglect, abuse, or exploitation within the family.*
- e) Is in a life-threatening situation. *The environment in which the child is missing may be particularly hazardous. Examples of a dangerous environment could be a busy highway for a toddler, an all-night truck stop for a teenager, or an outdoor environment in inclement weather for a child of any age.*
- f) Is in the company of others who could endanger his or her welfare. *A missing child in such circumstances is in danger not only of sexual exploitation, but also of involvement in criminal activity such as burglary, shoplifting, and robbery or other violent crimes.*
- g) 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 of risk to the child.*
- h) 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 investigation indicates a possible abduction, violence at the scene of an abduction, or signs of sexual exploitation.*

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

1. If it is determined **risk factors** are involved in the report of a missing child, the child will be considered **at risk**, and an expanded investigation, including the use of all appropriate resources, will immediately commence. *While all missing-child incidents should be thoroughly investigated, those involving risk factors indicate a heightened likelihood of danger to the child and, therefore, require an intensive response.*
2. If appropriate, existing interagency response protocols — including the **AMBER Alert** system and/or other immediate community notification methods, if available — should be considered. While AMBER Alerts are typically for abducted children, there are other tools available such as the Endangered Missing Advisory. *Preplanned strategies for responding to missing-child reports are essential for successful case resolution. 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 questioning the caller about the 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 Standard for Public Safety Telecommunicators when Responding to Calls of Missing, Abducted, and Sexually Exploited Children provides good guidance about formulating such questions. Each telecommunicator should be familiar with this guide.*

2. Dispatch, in a prompt manner, an officer to the scene of the report. *The officer who routinely patrols the vicinity of the report is best suited to handle the first response since he or she should be familiar with the area and is likely to have knowledge of unusual activities, suspicious people, known offenders, and other neighborhood dynamics. The handling of certain missing-child reports, such as suspected runaways, over the phone is discouraged since accurate assessments of risk to the child cannot be made. **Note: (1) The National Child Search Assistance Act (NCSAA, 42 U.S.C. §§ 5779 and 5780) mandates law enforcement’s immediate response to reports of missing children, no establishment or observance of a waiting period before accepting a case, immediate entry of descriptive information about the missing child into the Federal Bureau of Investigation’s (FBI) National Crime Information Center (NCIC) Missing Person File, and close liaison with NCMEC in missing-child cases. (2) The Prosecutorial Remedies and Other Tools to end the Exploitation of Children Today Act of 2003 (PROTECT Act, Pub. L. No. 108-21) amended the National Child Search Assistance Act to extend the same NCIC reporting responsibility and other benefits to missing young adults 18, 19, and 20 years of age. (3) The Adam Walsh Child Protection and Safety Act (Adam Walsh Act, Pub. L. No. 109-248) mandates NCIC entry must be made by law enforcement within two hours of receipt of a report of a missing or abducted child. This replaces the term “immediately” in the National Child Search Assistance Act. Current Criminal Justice Information Services guidance regarding this time limit is two hours from the moment the minimum amount of information for NCIC entry has been obtained.***

3. 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.*
4. 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 message alerting other officers, and other agencies if necessary, about the circumstances of the missing episode. 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 dangers 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.*
5. Search agency records for related information, specifically any records such as those pertaining to the family, the place where the child was last seen, and the child's residence. *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 this case. Complaints of or reports about incidents such as attempted abductions, prowlers, public lewdness, loitering, and suspicious people will be of particular 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.*
6. Safeguard all pertinent records. *The telecommunicator should also 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.*
7. Activate established protocols for working with the media — including activation of the **AMBER Alert** system and/or other immediate community-notification methods when appropriate. *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 also be prepared to immediately activate the*

appropriate immediate, community notification method if so directed by appropriate 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 if circumstances warrant. *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 would be inappropriate to delay response to conduct a random search by doing things such as circling through parks, checking playgrounds, or stopping suspicious individuals. Unless in immediate response to the missing child's safety, these activities can be handled by other patrol units.*
2. Interview the parent(s) or person who made the initial report. *The purpose of this interview is to gain an insight into the circumstances surrounding the missing episode and other information needed to conduct an initial assessment of the case. 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. One such form can be found in NCIC's Missing Person File Information Kit, available through your agency Terminal Control Operator. All details should be thoroughly documented for more in-depth review later by investigative personnel who can compare statements made with investigative facts.*
3. Obtain a detailed description of the missing child including photo(s) and videos. *The collection of information about the missing child, including race, height, weight, hair and eye color, clothing, and other noteworthy features, should be done promptly and relayed to other officers who may be assisting in 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 are immediately believed to be available, several areas commonly forgotten would include cell phones with cameras as well as photos included on social-networking sites.*
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, 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. Note: A search of the home should be conducted even if the missing child was last seen elsewhere.*

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 episode 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 episode. *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 keep the missing child's safety in mind 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 complained about being approached by anyone. Comparison of information gathered from the reporting party, witness, and other sources may prove vital to case direction.*
8. Interview the individual(s) 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 the witness, 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 his or her age and developmental stage. *Responding officers should attempt to determine how far a missing child could travel from the location where last seen before he or she would most likely be at risk of injury or exploitation. This perimeter should, under many circumstances, define the first search zone.*
10. Make an initial assessment of the type of incident. *By employing all available assessment tools (i.e., 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 need for additional resources. **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.*

11. Obtain a description of the suspected abductor(s) and other pertinent information. *Officers need to immediately record witness information, not only for general investigative use but also before witnesses forget or speak to others who may confuse or make suggestions about what was actually observed. If 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, vehicles, and circumstances. In the case of a suspected family abduction, the reporting party may have photos of the abductor or other valuable information.*
12. Determine the correct NCIC Missing Person File category and ensure notification is promptly transmitted. *There are 5 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 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 ensure other officers and agencies are provided with up-to-date facts.*
14. Identify and separately interview everyone at the scene. *The name, address, home and work phone numbers of everyone present at the scene, along with his or her relationship to the missing child, should be recorded. 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 in resolution of the case.*
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. Officers are again reminded to conduct a thorough, immediate search of the child's home and property — 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.*
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." In addition to external crime scenes, the missing child's home, and particularly his or her bedroom,*

should be secured and protected until evidence and identification material such as hair, fingerprints, and bite marks are collected.

17. Inquire if the child has access to the Internet, cell phone, and/or other communications device. *Before making an initial decision the child has run away, an officer should determine if the child may have left to meet someone he or she encountered while online. Since some offenders are known to use the Internet to identify vulnerable children, what appears at first to be a runaway case, may, in fact, be a child abducted or enticed to leave by someone the child first met online. Even if a child willingly decides to leave home to join someone first met online, the child should be considered at risk. Additionally, since many children have their own cell phones/other electronic communications devices and may have them while missing, an officer should note these devices during the information-gathering process.*
18. Prepare necessary reports and complete appropriate forms. *Information gathered by the first responding officer(s) may be instrumental in the eventual case resolution. To record this important information, officers should prepare a chronological account of their involvement and actions in the case 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.*

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

1. Obtain a briefing and written reports from the first responder(s) and other agency personnel at the scene. *This briefing allows the supervisor to determine the scope and complexity of the case and develop an appropriate response. The briefing should be conducted away from family, friends, or any other individuals who may be present. Doing so will allow 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. 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.*
3. Consider activation of the **AMBER Alert** system and/or other immediate community notification methods. *If circumstances indicate the chances for the child's safe recovery would be increased by immediate public awareness, a supervisor should promptly activate such efforts.*

4. Establish a command post. A *command post* is a field headquarters/office for scene management. It is used as a center for organizing personnel, launching and monitoring search and rescue operations, and directing investigative efforts as well as a focal point for deciding the division of investigative labor on-site, administering on-site change of command, responding to investigative inquiries, and gathering intelligence. As a general rule the command post should be close enough to the center of activity to facilitate control and coordination, but sufficiently isolated to allow a free exchange of ideas among responders. Establish a command post 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.
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 ensure all officers, other departments and agencies, and all investigative networks are supplied with accurate details. Prepare a flier/bulletin with the child/abductor's photo and description. Distribute in appropriate geographic regions. Note: NCMEC is able to assist with this step.*
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. In addition the liaison can help the family work with the media.*
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 ensure adherence to the rules and regulations of their professional law-enforcement organization. Established policies and procedures, especially those related to missing children, should be regularly reviewed to ensure compliance.*
9. Manage media relations. *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.*

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. Its 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 within the abduction zone who may be able to provide information related to the incident. According to a key child-homicide study, unknowing witnesses are those who see some aspect of a crime but at the time do not realize they are witnessing part of a crime or potential abduction. It was found there were unknowing witnesses in 32.9% of those cases studied. This indicates a neighborhood or area canvass would be of great importance in generating investigative leads.¹ Investigators should use a standardized set of questions during the canvass to 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.*
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 he or she 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. Complete all remaining key investigative and coordination 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; contacting landfill management and requesting delay or segregation of garbage and dumping containers 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*

¹Katherine M. Brown, Robert D. Keppel, Marvin E. Skeen, and Joseph G. Weis. *Investigative Case Management for Missing Children Homicides: Report II*. Olympia, Washington: Office of the Attorney General, State of Washington, and U.S. Department of Justice’s Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention, May 2006, NCJ 218936, page 44.

hotline for receipt of tips and leads; and considering establishment of an e-mail address or other methods of electronically receiving leads. Key coordination steps include ensuring details of the case have been reported to NCMEC and preparing and updating bulletins for local law-enforcement agencies, the missing-children clearinghouse, FBI, and other appropriate agencies.

7. 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 software designed for effective case management.*
 8. 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; and NCMEC — in particular **Team Adam**, which is a rapid-response team of experienced, retired law-enforcement investigators.*
 9. Update descriptive information. *If it appears the case will not be promptly resolved, investigators should ensure the descriptive record, especially the information entered into 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.*
 10. 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 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 ensure all pertinent and accurate information has been gathered. NCMEC's Forensic Services Unit can provide assistance in this area.*
 2. Enter the unidentified child's description into the NCIC Unidentified Person File. *This 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. NCMEC's Forensic Services Unit; NamUs (National Missing and Unidentified Persons System); missing-children clearinghouses; and other professionals, such as medical examiners, may be of assistance in the identification.*
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, in fact, the reported missing child. An officer should personally verify all returns. The benefits of this practice include assessing the child's safety, gaining intelligence about possible offenders, and helping to prevent future episodes.*
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 his or her family. These services may include mental and/or physical health examinations and arrangements for family counseling.*
3. *Arrange the return of the child to his or her legal guardian or an appropriate children's shelter in the case of a runaway or missing child from within department jurisdiction who has been located and who is not wanted on a warrant or other law violation.*
4. *Place the child in custody and transport him or her to the appropriate facility for admission in the case of a 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.*
5. *Complete the appropriate supplemental reports and cancel all outstanding notifications. 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.*

Notes:

If appropriate this section might also include a proviso concerning an agency's limited authority regarding 16- and 17-year-old missing children who, when located, may not be detained or required to return home unless certain conditions exist.

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 Jimmy Ryce Law Enforcement Training Center at
1-800-THE-LOST (1-800-843-5678).**

Acknowledgment

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