



United States Senate Committee on the Judiciary

Subcommittee on Human Rights and Law

“Abuse in Foster Care: A Deeper Look”

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I. NCMEC Background

The National Center for Missing & Exploited Children (NCMEC) is a private, non-profit organization that serves as the congressionally designated clearinghouse and national resource center to help find missing children, reduce child exploitation, and prevent child victimization. In 1981, 6-year-old Adam Walsh was with his mother, Revé, in a Florida shopping mall when he vanished without a trace. Revé and John Walsh endured 10 days searching for Adam before he was found murdered 100 miles away. Three years later, in 1984, John and Revé Walsh, alongside other child advocates directly impacted by the tragedy of child abduction and child sexual exploitation, created NCMEC.

In the nearly 40 years since its founding, NCMEC has grown to become the nation’s largest and most influential child protection organization on missing and exploited children issues. With increased public awareness, consistent training, and enhanced use of technology, NCMEC has been able to help bring more missing children home and prevent the sexual exploitation of children. To fulfill its mission, NCMEC performs five main programs of work relating to: (1) missing children; (2) exploited children; (3) community outreach; (4) educational and professional resources; and (5) family support. NCMEC fulfills its unique mission through coordination with the Department of Justice, law enforcement, support from Congress, cooperative private-public partnerships, and community engagement.

II. NCMEC’s Work to Address Children Missing from a Child Welfare Placement and the Unique Endangerments, Including Child Sex Trafficking, They Face

Since NCMEC was first established in 1984, we have worked to help find missing children. The past decade has demonstrated that children who are missing from a child welfare placement are uniquely vulnerable to life-threatening endangerments, including gang violence, mental health concerns, and sex trafficking. The issues relating to children missing from care and child sex trafficking are complex and multi-faceted. Law enforcement, child welfare agencies, educational systems, social service

support systems, medical institutions, and nonprofit service providers all play a role in addressing why children go missing from care and how they can be recovered quickly and safely and placed in an appropriate and supportive living environment. Successful solutions to these problems cannot fall solely at the feet of any single institution. There are many improvements that must be made to address this problem and these efforts require systemic changes that ensure children who are missing from care can receive the resources, opportunities, support and love that every child deserves to have a safe childhood.

A. NCMEC’s Resources to Support Recovery of Missing Children who are Victimized by Sex Trafficking

When NCMEC receives reports of missing children, we work to help locate and support the recovery of the missing child by providing a range of programs and services, including: (1) a 24/7 Call Center (1-800-THE-LOST); (2) case management support for parents, child welfare agencies, and law enforcement; (3) forensic services on long-term missing child cases and cases of unidentified deceased children; (4) analytical resources to develop leads and assist in recovering missing children and those exploited through sex trafficking; (5) family and peer support for families experiencing a missing or exploited child; and (6) a Child Sex Trafficking Recovery Services Team to provide specialized technical assistance and resources to child welfare professionals.

NCMEC’s Child Sex Trafficking Team leverages donated analytical resources and specialized technology tools to identify missing children in online escort advertisements and provide law enforcement with information that can assist in the location and recovery of the missing child. In 2020, NCMEC realized that many missing children, including especially children who were missing from a child welfare placement, were vulnerable to being victimized by sex traffickers. In response, NCMEC created a unique Child Sex Trafficking Recovery Services Team in 2020 to provide specialized technical assistance and resources to child welfare professionals in cases where a missing child was likely a victim of child sex trafficking.

In these cases, it can be difficult to identify the appropriate support and resources to aid in the recovery of the child. NCMEC’s Child Sex Trafficking Resource Specialists provide the following unique services: (1) individualized case support to triage the push and pull factors that led a young person to leave their placement; (2) introduction to promising practices around youth voice and engagement, safety planning, and relationship building to work to change those circumstances; (3) assistance in resource coordination to connect case workers to local resources in their community that offer specialized services for survivors of child sex trafficking. NCMEC collaborates with our Child Sex Trafficking Survivor Expert Working Group to ensure that its approach and program offerings are informed by those with lived experiences.

B. Children Missing from Care

In 2014, Congress passed the Preventing Sex Trafficking and Strengthening Families Act (P.L. 113-183), which required child welfare agencies to report children who go missing from foster care placements to NCMEC, in addition to reporting them missing to law enforcement. This new reporting requirement was essential because up to that time too often children who went missing from child welfare placements were not reported to NCMEC as a missing child. The passage of the Preventing Sex Trafficking and Strengthening Families Act ensured a better national understanding of this issue and called attention to the need for more appropriate resources to be dedicated to children who go

missing from state care. In December 2022, subsequent guidance was issued by the Health and Human Services (HHS) detailing specific information that child welfare agencies should report.¹

In 2022, to further assist the recovery of children missing from care, NCMEC advocated for additional federal statutory language to be passed to improve reporting of children missing from state foster care. While many state welfare agencies had made improvements, there was a large discrepancy in the quality and content of reports NCMEC was receiving. Some reports contained so little information that they were unactionable, often missing even basic information such as child endangerments and a photo of the child. To address this issue the Trafficking Victims Prevention and Protection Reauthorization of 2022 contained language encouraging state welfare agencies to include, when available: a photo of the missing child; a description of the child; and endangerment information of the child.² The inclusion of this language has led to some improvements in the reporting of missing children to NCMEC, but more changes are still needed.

Since passage of these laws relating to reporting children missing from care the number of cases of children missing from child welfare placements reported to NCMEC has increased exponentially. Of the 27,644 cases of missing children NCMEC assisted law enforcement with in 2022, 21,494 were children reported missing from foster care.³ Through its cross-divisional work on missing and exploited children cases, NCMEC has long been aware of the vulnerabilities that missing children face. The risks from these vulnerabilities are especially heightened when a child goes missing⁴ from a child welfare placement.

NCMEC has worked closely with state child welfare agencies to ensure child welfare professionals know that reporting a child missing from care to NCMEC opens the door to a variety of resources that can assist in the quick and safe recovery of the child. NCMEC has created a unique online reporting form for child welfare agencies to use in reporting children missing from care to NCMEC and has a number of staff who are devoted to collaborating with child welfare agencies around cases and NCMEC resources. In 2017, NCMEC convened a roundtable discussion to address the rise of missing children from state care. The roundtable focused on the intersecting issues of children missing from care and child sex trafficking and helped establish potential solutions. In 2023, NCMEC launched three on-demand modules to provide child welfare professionals with an overview of important legislation related to child sex trafficking and children missing from care, provide guidance on reporting children missing from care to NCMEC, and outline NCMEC resources that could support locating and recovery planning for missing youth. While we are better equipped to support child welfare services and aid in recovering children missing from care, much work remains to be done.

¹ Responding to Human Trafficking among Children and Youth in Foster Care and Missing from Foster Care *available at* <https://www.acf.hhs.gov/policy-guidance/responding-human-trafficking-among-children-and-youth-foster-care-and-missing>

² Trafficking Victims Prevention and Protection Reauthorization Act of 2022, Pub. L. No. 117-348, § 137, (last visited at Nov. 4, 2023) *available at* <https://www.congress.gov/117/plaws/publ348/PLAW-117publ348.pdf>.

³ Our 2022 Impact, National Center for Missing & Exploited Children, 2023, (last visited Nov. 3, 2023) *available at* <https://www.missingkids.org/ourwork/impact#findmissingchildren>.

⁴ NCMEC defines a child missing from care as a child who is missing from the legal guardianship of a child welfare agency. The child could be missing from a foster home, a group home, a residential placement, a psychiatric residential placement, a kinship placement, or may have run away from a child welfare office or hotel placement.

III. Children Missing from Care and Child Sex Trafficking

NCMEC’s data consistently shows that child sex trafficking often arises in a situation where a child has gone missing. In 2022, 1 in 6 of the children reported missing to NCMEC were identified as likely victims of child sex trafficking. This number is closer to 1 in 5, for children reported missing to NCMEC from foster care. The trends NCMEC has evaluated over the past four decades reveal that 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 vulnerable children are frequently mislabeled as “runaways” or “habitual runners,” terms that place stigma and blame on children as opposed to recognizing that they are leaving their placements for a reason. NCMEC works to combat these harmful stereotypes by providing psychoeducation in case-based consultations we have with law enforcement, child welfare, and parents, as well as by providing live and on-demand trainings to help professionals understand running behavior. In 2023, NCMEC launched a free, online training entitled, “Child Sex Trafficking: Understanding Running Behavior and Trauma- Informed Youth Engagement,” to provide on-demand instruction and skill-building for youth serving professionals to better understand the reasons why young people may run away or go missing from care.

While any child can be targeted by a trafficker, data, research, and testimony from individuals with lived experience inform us that traffickers often target youth who have already experienced abuse or neglect, lack strong support or family systems, and feel disconnected or rejected from their home or community. Unfortunately, children in child welfare placements often meet this definition due to the abuse and neglect they have often experienced prior to coming into care coupled with the ongoing struggle that child welfare agencies nationwide face in supporting foster home placements that can support youth who are experiencing trauma.

Children in child welfare placements often come into care due to early childhood abuse or neglect, trauma that can impact both their self-worth and the way they relate to others. They are often placed in foster homes or congregate care settings that may not have the training, policies, or tools to support youth in processing and healing from their trauma. These placements are also often under-resourced and fail to provide children with opportunities to engage in normal adolescent activities, opportunities for self-exploration, exploring their goals and interests, and making connections that can foster love and belonging. For many children, running away from their placements can be an attempt to keep themselves safe, to meet unmet needs, or as a trauma response.

It is a national crisis when children feel like being on the streets or with a trafficker is a better place for them to be than their foster care placement. Today, NCMEC is handling 6,910 active cases of missing children nationwide. While not every one of those children will experience child sex trafficking, each day they are gone they are at an increased risk for experiencing a number of adverse childhood experiences that can have a lasting impact on their physical and mental health, as well as their future wellbeing. NCMEC has seen these negative impacts firsthand, including increased risk for sex trafficking and abuse, teen pregnancy, sexually transmitted infections, mental health conditions, substance abuse, self-harm, and suicide.

NCMEC is committed to continuing our support of child welfare by offering specialized training, including through NCMEC Connect, a free training platform with specific trainings and technical assistance geared towards state welfare agencies, such as foster care placements, run prevention, and child sex trafficking. NCMEC also offers one-on-one consultations and personalized assistance to child welfare workers when a child is missing from their care. NCMEC partners with child welfare

workers to support them in developing trauma-informed and victim-centered plans for children that work to address the root cause of why that child is running from care.

IV. Conclusion

NCMEC applauds Chairman Ossoff and Ranking Member Blackburn's continued dedication to the safety of our children and their focus on the unique vulnerabilities that children missing from care face.⁵ Since the passage of the Strengthening Families and Preventing Sex Trafficking Act, it has become apparent that children go missing from child welfare placements at an alarming rate. NCMEC's work on these cases also demonstrates that many of these children run repeatedly, often do not receive the recovery services or appropriate placements they need and are incredibly vulnerable to endangerments when they run from state care. This situation is not limited to any one state or child welfare system – it is a national epidemic that requires continued examination and evaluation of potential solutions, including new laws, that can support child welfare agencies, law enforcement, NCMEC, and victim service providers to reduce the number of children missing from care and provide better opportunities for their safe recovery. If the United States is going to commit to protecting vulnerable children, legislation is a critical step on the path forward. NCMEC urges Congress to prioritize legislation focused on children missing from care as legislators craft their ongoing agendas for the 118th session of Congress and beyond.

Hope is what keeps NCMEC striving to achieve its mission. We hope that every missing child will be found and safely recovered. We hope that children in foster care will be surrounded by caring and compassionate adults and that they will have opportunities for healing, self-exploration, and caring relationships that we know all children need in order to thrive.

⁵ Attached below are Charts 1-2; they contain relevant NCMEC data relating to children missing from care in Georgia and their victimization through sex trafficking.

CHART 1⁶
CHILDREN MISSING FROM CARE: GEORGIA
INTAKED BETWEEN 1/1/2018 AND 12/31/2022

The data provided in this report is for all children reported to NCMEC who went missing from care (CMFC) in Georgia. The individual counts of missing children represent each unique child reported to NCMEC. The total number of missing episodes includes every missing incident reported to NCMEC. Some children might be represented in this count more than once because they had multiple missing incidents during this time frame.

Year	Children Missing from Care:	
	Count of Individual Children	Total Number of Missing Episodes
2018	318	419
2019	356	476
2020	431	599
2021	366	512
2022	319	430
TOTAL	1,790	2,436

⁶ Disclaimer and Definitions: The information provided in this report does not reflect all cases of missing or abducted children, only those reported to NCMEC. As the national clearinghouse for missing and exploited children, NCMEC will assist in any missing-child case at the request of law enforcement. (Prepared by Missing Child and Data Analytics Team).

CHART 2⁷

CHILDREN MISSING FROM CARE AND LIKELY CHILD SEX TRAFFICKING VICTIMIZATION: GEORGIA INTAKED BETWEEN 1/1/2018 AND 12/31/2022

The data provided in this report is for all children reported to NCMEC who went missing from care (CMFC) in Georgia and were likely victims of child sex trafficking (CST). The individual counts of missing children represent each unique child reported to NCMEC that was missing from care and likely a victim of CST. The total number of missing episodes includes every missing incident reported to NCMEC that involved a child missing from care and was likely a victim of CST. Some children might be represented in this count more than once because they had multiple missing incidents during this time frame.

Year	Missing from Care: Likely Child Sex Trafficking Victims	
	Count of Individual Children	Total Number of Missing Episodes
2018	75	109
2019	72	117
2020	91	149
2021	84	129
2022	88	120
TOTAL	410	624

⁷ Disclaimer and Definitions: The information provided in this report does not reflect all cases of missing or abducted children, only those reported to NCMEC. As the national clearinghouse for missing and exploited children, NCMEC will assist in any missing-child case at the request of law enforcement. (Prepared by Missing Child and Data Analytics Team).