

## Report in Brief

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Report No. A-07-21-06102

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH & HUMAN SERVICES  
**OFFICE OF INSPECTOR GENERAL**



### Why OIG Did This Audit

Federal law requires States to provide safe and stable out-of-home care for children in foster care until they are safely returned home, placed permanently with adoptive families, or placed in other planned, permanent living arrangements. Concerns regarding States' lack of knowledge regarding the whereabouts of children who go missing from foster care (missing children) have garnered national media attention. This report examines the States' efforts to ensure that these missing children are properly reported to the National Center for Missing and Exploited Children (NCMEC).

Our objective was to examine State agencies' efforts to ensure that missing children are reported to NCMEC as required by Federal statute.

### How OIG Did This Audit

Our audit included 74,353 missing children episodes in which the child was missing 2 calendar days or longer at any time during the period July 1, 2018, to December 31, 2020. We selected a stratified random sample of 100 missing children episodes and asked the State agencies to respond to a survey regarding those episodes. We also obtained and reviewed documentation from State agencies and NCMEC to determine whether missing children were reported to NCMEC as required by Federal statute.

## State Agencies Did Not Always Ensure That Children Missing From Foster Care Were Reported to the National Center for Missing and Exploited Children in Accordance With Federal Requirements

### What OIG Found

During our audit period, State agencies did not always ensure that children missing from foster care were reported to NCMEC as required by Federal statute. Of the 100 missing children episodes in our sample, the State agencies reported 33 episodes to NCMEC in a timely manner (i.e., within 24 hours after the State agency received information that the child was missing) in accordance with Federal requirements. However, 45 missing children episodes were never reported to NCMEC, and 22 missing children episodes were not reported in a timely manner (i.e., were not reported until 2 calendar days or longer after the State agency received information that the child was missing). On the basis of our sample results, we estimated that the State agencies did not report 51,115 of the 74,353 missing children episodes in accordance with Federal requirements. Specifically, an estimated 34,869 missing children episodes during our audit period were never reported to NCMEC and an additional estimated 16,246 missing children episodes during our audit period were not reported within 24 hours after the State agencies were notified that the child was missing.

State agencies generally lacked adequate systems to readily identify whether or not they had reported missing children episodes to NCMEC accurately and in a timely manner. State agencies that do not properly report missing children episodes to NCMEC increase the risk that the children may not be safely and swiftly recovered. Therefore, the opportunity exists for HHS, Administration for Children and Families (ACF), to improve outcomes for missing children by working with State agencies to ensure compliance with Federal reporting requirements and guidance.

### What OIG Recommends and ACF Comments

We recommend that ACF work with State agencies to ensure compliance with Federal requirements to report missing children episodes to NCMEC in a timely manner. ACF concurred with our recommendation and described actions that it had taken and planned to take. ACF stated that as part of planned activities to support State agencies in maintaining compliance with these requirements, it issued new guidance on December 1, 2022, and hosted three webinars (one in November 2022 and two in January 2023) that provided information related to human and child trafficking and that focused on the requirement to report missing children episodes to NCMEC.