

REPORT HIGHLIGHTS



February 2026 | OEI-07-23-00480

Alaska Missed Opportunities to Protect American Indian and Alaska Native Children Missing from Foster Care



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Alaska Missed Opportunities to Protect American Indian and Alaska Native Children Missing from Foster Care

Why OIG Did This Review

- Nationwide, American Indian and Alaska Native (AI/AN) children go missing at a rate more than double their representation in the population and are more likely to go missing from a foster care placement than from any other location.
- AI/AN children in foster care are at an increased risk of human trafficking and other forms of victimization as compared to their non-AI/AN peers.
- ACF—which oversees State foster care agencies—requires State agencies to develop policies and implement protocols regarding children who go missing from foster care.

What OIG Found

For the population of AI/AN children who went missing or ran away from a foster care placement in 2023 (as documented in Alaska's case management system), Alaska missed opportunities to protect children from the risks associated with these incidents. Our review of children's case file documentation found that:

- Alaska often did not notify parties who could assist with locating children and returning them to foster care.
- In 25 percent of incidents, Alaska did not take additional steps (beyond notifications) to locate children and return them to foster care, as required.
- Alaska frequently did not assess children for signs of sex trafficking or determine their experiences while missing or after running away, as required.
- In nearly 60 percent of incidents, Alaska did not conduct all required caseworker visits before children went missing or ran away from care.
- Tribes that OIG interviewed reported experiencing a lack of communication and collaboration from Alaska when children went missing from care.
- Thirty-eight percent of children reviewed had additional incidents that were not documented in Alaska's case management system.

What OIG Recommends

1. ACF should support Alaska in improving compliance with Federal and State requirements related to children who go missing or run away from foster care.
2. ACF should develop resources for Alaska, and other States as appropriate, on working with Tribes to support children in foster care.
3. ACF should support Alaska, and other States as appropriate, to improve States' abilities to accurately track children's whereabouts.

ACF concurred with all three recommendations.

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BACKGROUND

OBJECTIVES

1. To determine the extent to which the Alaska foster care agency (Alaska) took required steps to protect AI/AN children before, during, and after children went missing or ran away from foster care.
 2. To examine the experiences of Alaska and children's Tribes in collaborating when children are missing from foster care.
-

Nationwide, American Indian and Alaska Native (AI/AN) people have gone missing at high rates, and AI/AN children who are placed in foster care are no exception.¹ A comparison of reports by the National Missing and Unidentified Persons System and the Annie E. Casey Kids Count Data Center indicates that AI/AN children are disproportionately represented among missing children; AI/AN children are missing at a rate more than double their representation in the population.² Moreover, these children are more likely to go missing from a foster care placement than from any other location.³

Federal agencies have taken actions to respond to widespread concerns about the safety of AI/AN communities and prevent future tragedies. For example, in 2024, the Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) published a report outlining its actions to reduce victimization risk in AI/AN communities across its operating divisions through public health, prevention, and intervention efforts.⁴ The Administration for Children and Families (ACF) published a framework and action plan for Missing and Murdered Native Americans. These reports provide strategies for ACF programs to work with AI/AN communities to strengthen protective factors that counter the impacts of violence.^{5, 6} In its framework, ACF states that AI/AN children in the foster care system are at increased risk of human trafficking and other forms of victimization.⁷

Children may go missing from foster care for many reasons.⁸ One of the primary reasons that children go missing from foster care is to gain access to friends, romantic partners, and families of origin.⁹ Children may also choose to leave their placements to escape restrictive rules; caregivers or other youth; bullying; boredom; or isolation.¹⁰ Additionally, they may be coerced or enticed to leave to gain access to drugs, alcohol, or sex.¹¹ When children go missing from care, they may experience serious negative consequences.¹² These negative outcomes include a heightened risk of human trafficking, as well as poorer outcomes related to health, safety, education, employment, and subsequent criminal justice system involvement.

ACF has described programmatic responses aimed at reducing children's risk of going missing.¹³ These responses include educational support, counseling and therapy, targeting supports to children who go missing repeatedly, improving placement stability, and strengthening relationships with caring adults.¹⁴

ACF funding, oversight, and guidance for State foster care agencies

Under Title IV-B of the Social Security Act (the Act), ACF provides Federal funding to States and eligible Tribes (collectively referred to as recipients) to support child and family welfare.¹⁵ This includes programs for children in foster care. Additionally, ACF administers the Federal foster care program under Title IV-E of the Act, which provides funding to recipients for the board and care of children in foster care who meet eligibility requirements.¹⁶ To receive Federal funding, recipients must submit to ACF a Child and Family Services Plan every 5 years for Title IV-B funding and a Title IV-E Plan as necessary to reflect new Federal requirements or changes within the State.¹⁷ The plans document the official policies and procedures that each agency will follow to fulfill the funding requirements of the respective programs. ACF reviews and approves these plans.

ACF conducts periodic reviews of each State's child welfare system, known as Child and Family Services Reviews, to determine whether a State is in conformity with the IV-B and IV-E State Plans and program requirements.¹⁸

ACF provides technical assistance and guidance to child welfare agencies. For example, ACF's Capacity Build Center for States provides technical assistance that aims to improve safety, permanency, and well-being outcomes for children, youth, and families. Assistance includes efforts to build skills for child welfare professionals and support improvements in program organizational capacity. Additionally, ACF has issued multiple reports providing States with guidance and resources specifically for responding to incidences of children going missing from care and to sex trafficking.^{19, 20}

Federal requirements related to children missing from foster care

In 2014, Congress passed the Preventing Sex Trafficking and Strengthening Families Act (Strengthening Families Act), which amended the Act to require that as a condition of receiving Federal foster care funding, States must implement protocols for locating any child missing from foster care.²¹ State agencies must report information on missing or abducted children immediately to law enforcement authorities, so that those authorities can enter that information into the databases of the National Crime Information Center and to the National Center for Missing and Exploited Children (NCMEC).^{22, 23} Additionally, States are required to develop policies and procedures to identify, document, and determine services for children who go missing from foster care and who are, or are at risk of becoming, victims of sex trafficking.²⁴

For children with a Tribal affiliation, there are no Federal requirements regarding the notification of children's Tribes when these children go missing from a State foster care agency.^{25, 26}

Alaska foster care agency

In each Title IV-E State plan, the State must designate a State agency to administer its foster care program.²⁷ In Alaska, the Office of Children's Services (hereinafter referred to as Alaska) is designated to administer child welfare services, including foster care.²⁸ In 2023, Alaska provided care for 3,731 children in out-of-home placements, 2,550 of whom were AI/AN.^{29, 30} Many AI/AN children are members (or eligible to be members) of Tribal Nations and are protected by the Indian Child Welfare Act (ICWA), which sets minimal federal standards for child custody cases involving these children.³¹

Policies related to children who are missing or run away from care

Alaska has established policies and procedures implementing Federal and State law (requirements) that are laid out in the Alaska *Child Protection Services Manual*.³² These policies are applicable to all children in the custody of Alaska.

Before
incident

Before children go missing or run away. Alaska does not have policies or procedures that explicitly address reducing children's risk of going missing or running away, and there is no Federal requirement to do so.³³ However, Alaska's policy and Federal law requires children to be visited by a caseworker (referred to by Alaska's policy as a Protective Services Specialist) monthly.^{34, 35}

During
incident

When children go missing or run away. Alaska policy distinguishes between children who are missing from care and children who have run away. Children who have run away from their primary caregiver but whose whereabouts are known are referred to as runaway minors; children whose whereabouts are unknown are considered missing.³⁶ Though Alaska policy distinguishes between children who are missing and children who are runaways, the State must make a reasonable effort to locate children in both cases.

Alaska has policies and procedures to identify and report children who go missing or run away from foster care, consistent with Federal requirements.³⁷ Caseworkers must take steps to locate children and return them to their authorized placement or other designated place of safety.³⁸ Caseworkers should report missing and runaway children to law enforcement for entry into the National Crime Information Center database. For children considered missing, caseworkers will contact the intake unit immediately to ensure that children are entered into the NCMEC database.³⁹ Caseworkers should also notify children's school, Tribal representative, and guardian ad litem (GAL),⁴⁰ and others as appropriate, to inform them of missing and runaway children.⁴¹

When children return to foster care. Alaska has policies and procedures following children's return to care, consistent with Federal requirements.⁴² Caseworkers should ask children about their experiences while away from care and assess for possible signs or information regarding if children are at risk or have been a victim of sex trafficking.⁴³ If there are signs indicating sex trafficking, caseworkers should report the concerns to the intake unit immediately.⁴⁴ Caseworkers must also document all significant case actions relating to the incident in progress notes.⁴⁵ This includes information on why children were absent from care and any information regarding potential indicators of sex trafficking.

Methodology

Scope

For the population of AI/AN children who were identified as missing or runaway by Alaska in CY 2023, this evaluation determined whether Alaska documented taking required steps before, during, and if children returned to care, after going missing or running away.⁴⁶

Data Collection

We requested all policies and procedures from Alaska related to children going missing or running away from care.

We requested from Alaska the population of AI/AN children who were on missing or runaway status at any point in CY 2023. For these children, we requested case file documentation related to children's missing/runaway incident(s).



The population identified by Alaska included children and young adults **aged 11 to 20**.

For this evaluation, we refer to this population as **children**.

We conducted interviews with a portion of children's Tribes and Alaska to learn about their experiences collaborating when children are missing from care. We interviewed one Tribal consortium composed of many Tribes and two individual Tribes, which together represented 37 percent of Tribes in children's cases in our review.

Data Analysis

We determined whether children's case file documentation indicated that Alaska took required steps to protect children before, during, and if they returned to care, after going missing or running away. Specifically, we reviewed 71 incidents (47 children) for actions Alaska took before and during children's missing or runaway incidents and 56 incidents (35 children) for actions Alaska took after children returned to care. For the 47 children reviewed, we noted additional missing and runaway incidents described in children's case files that were not documented in the data Alaska shared from its case management system. For additional information on the missing and runaway incidents we reviewed, see the Detailed Methodology.

We reviewed interviews from children's Tribes and Alaska for themes regarding their experiences working together when children were missing from care.

Limitations

Alaska may have provided services to children who were not documented in children's case files; therefore, this study may underestimate the extent to which Alaska provided children with services. Further, the information we received from Tribal interviews may not reflect the experiences of all Tribes involved in children's cases.

Standards

We conducted this study in accordance with the *Quality Standards for Inspection and Evaluation* issued by the Council of the Inspectors General on Integrity and Efficiency.

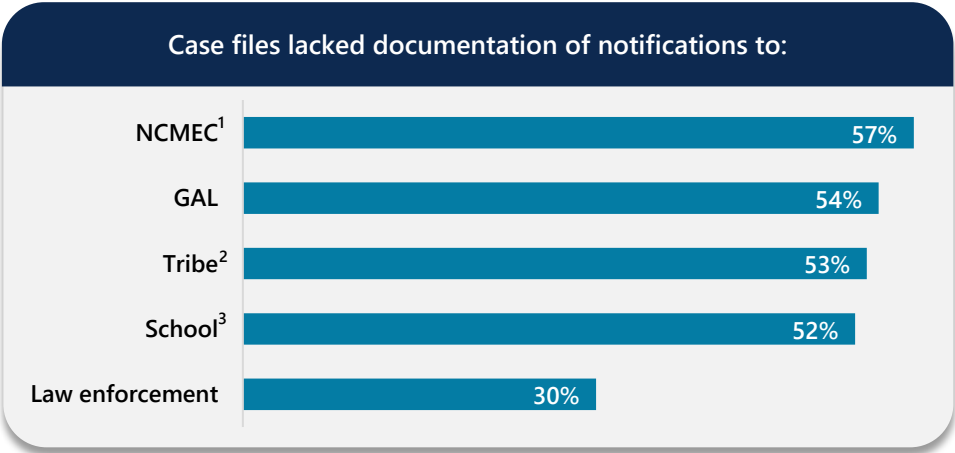
FINDINGS

The findings in this evaluation are based on actions Alaska documented in children’s case files. Our review included 47 AI/AN children with 71 unique missing or runaway incidents—referred to throughout this report as “incidents.” The duration of children’s incidents ranged from less than 24 hours to 445 days.

Alaska often did not notify parties who could assist with locating children and returning them to foster care

The case files of children who went missing or ran away often lacked documentation indicating that Alaska notified parties who could assist with locating and returning children to an approved placement. These parties include law enforcement, NCMEC, children’s Tribes, schools, and GALs. Incidents that lacked documentation of notifications to one of these parties ranged from 30 to 57 percent. See Exhibit 1 for the percentage of incidents that lacked documentation of notifications to one of these parties.

Exhibit 1. Percent of incidents that lacked documentation in children’s case files of notifications (N=71)



Source: OIG review of Alaska case files, 2026. NCMEC=National Center for Missing and Exploited Children; GAL=guardian ad litem.

¹ This analysis is limited to 44 incidents in which children were less than 18 years old and their location was unknown at the time of the incident.

² This analysis is limited to 60 incidents in which Tribes were active in children’s cases.

³ This analysis is limited to 31 incidents in which children were in school during the incident.

Alaska often did not notify law enforcement or the National Center for Missing and Exploited Children, as required, when children were identified as missing or runaway

Children's case files lacked documentation indicating that Alaska made required notifications to law enforcement in 30 percent of incidents and to NCMEC in 57 percent of incidents. State and Federal policy require Alaska to make notifications to local law enforcement when children are identified as missing or runaway.^{47, 48} In addition, children considered missing are required to be reported to NCMEC.^{49, 50} Without documentation of these notifications, Alaska cannot be assured that caseworkers made required reports to law enforcement or NCMEC. Additionally, supervisors and future case managers may be unable to determine which notifications caseworkers completed when children were missing or ran away.

These supports provide additional resources that can help caseworkers locate children missing from care more quickly. Law enforcement is required to enter missing children into the National Crime Information Center registry to disseminate information about the event.⁵¹ Moreover, NCMEC can assist with distributing posters that alert the community about a missing child, providing technical assistance to law enforcement, and supporting case management efforts.

Alaska frequently did not notify other parties who could assist with locating children and returning them to a placement, consistent with State policies

Although it is not required by Federal law, Alaska's policy directs caseworkers to notify children's Tribal representatives, schools, and GALs, as appropriate, to inform them of missing and runaway children.⁵² These community networks may have additional information about these children and can play an important role in assisting caseworkers during these incidents.

In 53 percent of incidents, children's case files lacked documentation indicating that Alaska notified Tribes when children went missing or ran away from care. Tribes may have knowledge of children's whereabouts or additional resources that can aid caseworkers' efforts to locate children and return them to care. In interviews with OIG, Tribes reported that they may be able to connect with relatives and other community members with whom caseworkers from outside the region may not be familiar. In addition, in instances in which children go missing in rural or remote locations, local Tribes may be able to provide immediate support while caseworkers travel to a region.

Similarly, children's case files frequently lacked documentation indicating that Alaska made notifications to children's schools (52 percent) and GALs (54 percent) when children were missing or ran away from care.⁵³ As with notifications to other entities, these parties may have access to unique information that could help Alaska quickly locate children and return them to care. For example, in one case, a child's school

notified a caseworker that a child was in attendance. The caseworker visited the school, met with the child, and discussed the child’s placement preferences.

Although children’s case files serve as the official record of actions that Alaska takes in children’s cases, officials stated that caseworkers do not always document these conversations in children’s case files.

In 25 percent of incidents, Alaska did not take additional steps to locate children and return them to foster care, as required

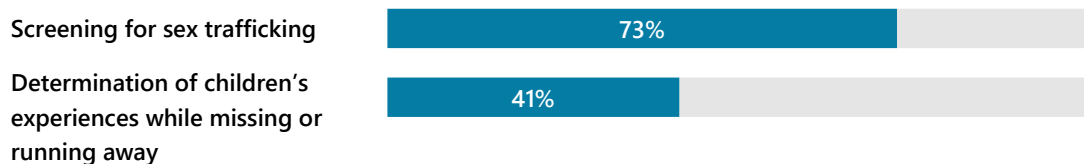
In 25 percent of incidents, children’s case files lacked documentation that Alaska took additional steps, beyond notifications, to locate children and return them to authorized placements. Consistent with Federal law, Alaska’s policy requires caseworkers to take steps to locate children and return them to their authorized placement or other designated place of safety.^{54, 55} However, for these children, we were unable to identify any documentation of additional steps that Alaska took. As such, Alaska may have missed opportunities to ensure children’s safe and timely return to care.

In cases in which Alaska documented steps to locate and return children, the actions varied greatly. In one case, Alaska made extensive efforts to locate a missing child, including visiting the child’s place of work, coordinating efforts across State law enforcement agencies, and visiting an airport to obtain information about the child’s travel. In another case, Alaska contacted a child’s family member, who facilitated efforts to reach out to the child through social media.

Alaska frequently did not assess children for signs of sex trafficking or determine their experiences while missing or after running away, as required

For children who returned to care, Alaska frequently did not document efforts to assess children for sex trafficking or determine children’s experiences while missing or after running away. Alaska’s policy and Federal law require caseworkers to ask children about their experiences while away from care and assess for possible signs or

Exhibit 2. Children’s case files lacked documentation of required assessments occurring after children returned to care (N=56)



Source: OIG review of Alaska case files, 2026.

■ Case files lacking documentation

information regarding whether children are at risk or have been victims of sex trafficking.^{56, 57}

The case files for 73 percent of incidents lacked documentation indicating that children were screened for sex trafficking. For these cases, Alaska may have missed critical information regarding whether children were at risk of becoming or were victims of sex trafficking. Without this information, children may not have been connected with needed services to address their experiences. Moreover, Alaska may not have been informed to take action on reducing children's risk of harm in the future.

*After returning to care, one child reported spending time with and receiving gifts from an older male. Despite this, the child's case file **lacked documentation indicating that Alaska inquired about whether the gifts or other experiences the child had while away from care were related to sex trafficking.***

Alaska does not use a specific screening tool when assessing children for signs or information regarding sex trafficking, and in cases in which children were screened, the type of screening children received differed. Of the screenings that occurred, 60 percent included questions to the children about their safety and sexual experiences. Twenty-seven percent of screenings consisted of a forensic interview at a Child Advocacy Center. Other screenings included (1) a note about indicators regarding a child's involvement in sex trafficking and (2) a screening during an intake at a youth facility.

Additionally, in 41 percent of incidents, children's case files lacked documentation indicating that Alaska determined children's experiences after they returned to care. In these cases, we were unable to identify information Alaska obtained regarding the time children were away from care. This includes conversations with the children regarding where children stayed, with whom children stayed, and what children did while away from care. For these children, Alaska may have missed important information that could inform Alaska on how to reduce children's risk of going missing or running away again in the future.

In nearly 60 percent of incidents, Alaska did not conduct all required caseworker visits before children went missing or ran away from care

In 58 percent of incidents, children's case files lacked documentation of all required caseworker visits in the 6 months before children went missing or ran away. On average, the children in our review missed approximately one and a half visits each in the 6 months before their incident.

According to Alaska's policy and Federal law, children in foster care must be visited by a caseworker on a monthly basis.^{58, 59} In addition to enabling caseworkers to assess children's safety, well-being, and cultural continuity, monthly caseworker visits are intended to ensure that children remain in their placements.⁶⁰ When monthly caseworker visits are missed, caseworkers may be unable to assess whether children's needs are being met in their current placements, a crucial step in ensuring permanency.

In an interview with OIG, Alaska reported that extreme weather conditions and the remote location of some children's placements can hinder efforts to provide children in foster care with monthly caseworker visits. Alaska shared that ICWA workers—who work to ensure that AI/AN children in State child welfare systems remain connected to their families, cultures, and communities—may also regularly visit children in foster care.^{61, 62} Although ICWA workers may also work to ensure children's well-being in their placements, Alaska reported that these visits could not take the place of required caseworker visits, per ACF policy.⁶³

Alaska provided most children with at least one supportive measure associated with reducing children's risk of going missing

Alaska does not have policies that address reducing children's risk of going missing, and there are no Federal requirements to do so. However, ACF has identified practices, such as providing therapy and improving placement stability, which may reduce children's risk of going missing.

For 80 percent of incidents, children received at least one supportive measure associated with reducing their risk of going missing in the 6 months before or after going missing or running away. These measures varied greatly in frequency and type, and included services such as counseling/therapy, supportive adult connections, and enhanced activities. For example, in one case, a caseworker identified an ICWA placement⁶⁴ after a child stated they would not stay at a residential facility. This child also received therapy with their parent and participated in sports and water activities. In another example, a child talked to a counselor after they returned to care.

Our analysis did not evaluate the quality of these supportive measures or their impact on reducing children's risk of going missing or running away. However, these measures provide examples of practices States may implement to address reducing children's risk of going missing or running away.

Tribes that OIG interviewed reported experiencing a lack of communication and collaboration from Alaska when children went missing from care

In interviews with OIG, Tribes reported experiencing several difficulties working with Alaska while children were missing from care. Tribal representatives reported not

having any assurances that they would be notified if children went missing from care. They described experiencing a lack of report notifications and difficulty reaching out to placements and law enforcement to assist in finding children when they were missing. One Tribal representative shared that they find out about missing children from checking the missing persons clearinghouse list, rather than from Alaska. Tribal representatives stressed the importance of timely notifications because they know the terrain, communities, and relatives, which could allow them to either locate or support children if they were in the region.

In addition to assistance Tribes can provide while children are missing, Tribal representatives emphasized the importance of being involved at the beginning of a case to provide supports that may help reduce children's risk of going missing. These supports include assisting Alaska in finding appropriate relative placements; providing financial support for children's placements; and maintaining family visitation.

Tribes we interviewed also reported several challenges in collaborating with Alaska on children's cases. One Tribal representative reported not being notified of important reports regarding a child's case until after an investigation was closed. Another Tribal representative described an interaction with Alaska in which the Tribe was asked to provide rides to a visiting caseworker but was excluded from meaningful participation in the child's case.

"I don't know how many times we can say ... [Alaska] needs to involve us so that we can find solutions for our kids."

When asked about working with Tribes, Alaska emphasized that it focuses on building relationships and forming a collective approach to locate children. Alaska reported that it met with Tribes at least monthly, if not weekly, to discuss cases or different issues among regions. However, both Tribes and Alaska reported that they experienced staffing issues; difficulty accessing rural or urban areas; and complex case coordination with multiple parties that made it difficult to work collaboratively.

Thirty-eight percent of children reviewed had additional incidents that were not documented in Alaska's case management system

Our review included 47 children who had at least one missing or runaway incident in 2023 documented in Alaska's case management system. For 38 percent of these children (18 of 47), we found notes in their case files describing additional incidents that were not documented in Alaska's case management system. The scenarios of these undocumented missing or runaway incidents included cases in which children's whereabouts were unknown, and cases in which children's locations were known but they were in unapproved placements—for example, staying with biological siblings. When children's missing or runaway status is not updated in Alaska's case management system, Alaska may be unaware that children are no longer in their approved placements. This lack of awareness can delay efforts to locate children and return them to their placements and can present challenges in conducting oversight of these cases.

Alaska Policy

Children who have run away from their primary caregiver, but whose whereabouts are known, are referred to as **runaway minors**; children whose whereabouts are unknown are considered **missing**.

Source: Alaska Office of Children's Services, Child Protection Services Manual, section 2.2.5, October 2016.

Alaska reported a challenge with its case management system to accurately track children's locations during missing or runaway incidents

In an interview with OIG, Alaska described a limitation with its case management system that makes it difficult to determine if children's whereabouts are known during a missing or runaway incident. Specifically, the case management system does not capture details about children's current locations when documenting their missing or runaway status.

Alaska described instances in which caseworkers knew children's whereabouts but were unable to capture details about current location when documenting children's missing or runaway status in Alaska's case management system. As a result, Alaska would have to search through children's case file documentation to determine children's whereabouts rather than rely on the status indicated in its case management system. This limitation could hinder Alaska's efforts to identify or determine children's location as they work to return missing or runaway children to care.

*"Part of the issue with this is **our system is not easily managed to add a new element that says, 'This kid is actually with Mom.'** Instead, it says, 'Missing or run away or whereabouts unknown.' And then **you have to dig through the case to actually figure [it] out.**"*

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

American Indian and Alaska Native (AI/AN) children go missing at a rate more than double their representation in the population and are at an increased risk of human trafficking and other forms of victimization as compared to their non-AI/AN peers. In 2023, Alaska often failed to document taking required actions when children went missing or ran away from a foster care placement and missed opportunities to protect these children from the risks associated with these incidents. Without documentation of these actions, Alaska cannot be assured that caseworkers took required steps to locate children and return them safely to care. Additionally, supervisors and future case managers may be unable to determine whether case managers completed every required action that was applicable to each child's case.

When children were missing or ran away, Alaska did not always make required notifications or take additional steps to locate children and return them to a placement. After children returned to care, Alaska did not consistently screen children for sex trafficking or determine their experiences while away from care. In addition, some children's Tribes raised concerns regarding Alaska's communication and collaboration before and when children go missing from care. These Tribes pointed to ways that they can help locate children missing from care and support they can provide that may help prevent children from going missing or running away.

Additionally, Alaska experienced difficulties in accurately tracking children in its case management system, which may impede the State's effectiveness in preventing and responding to children going missing from care. Notably, 38 percent of children in our review had at least one additional incident not captured in Alaska's case management system. Further, Alaska pointed to limitations in its case management system's capacity to reliably track children's whereabouts during an incident. This system limitation is not unique to Alaska, as OIG found a similar problem in a prior evaluation.⁶⁵

ACF provides oversight of and support to State foster care agencies. Alaska described challenges it encounters in responding to some incidents, such as extreme weather conditions and the remote location of some children's placements. Such challenges may heighten the importance of ACF's role in working with the State to help ensure the safety of children who go missing.

In past work reviewing six States, OIG recommended that ACF (1) support States in efforts to reduce children's risk of going missing, locate children, and address children's needs after they return to care; and (2) work with States to improve compliance with requirements to screen children who return to foster care after going missing for sex trafficking.^{66, 67} In addition to these efforts, we urge ACF to address the gaps identified in this report and improve the capacity of Alaska, and other States as appropriate, to reliably track children's whereabouts.

We recommend that ACF:

Support Alaska in improving compliance with Federal and State requirements related to children who go missing or run away from foster care

ACF should support Alaska in efforts to improve compliance with requirements when children go missing or run away and when children are located and return to care. This support could include assisting Alaska in the development of a checklist with directions for caseworkers on how to complete required actions. The checklist could include guidance on standard screening questions to determine children's experiences after returning to care and identify victims of sex trafficking. Additionally, ACF could assist Alaska in implementing a process to track whether required actions have been taken. This process could include oversight steps to ensure that required actions are taken, as appropriate.

Develop resources for Alaska, and other States as appropriate, on working with Tribes to support children in foster care

In addition to existing guidance on State-Tribal relationships, ACF should work with Alaska, Tribes, and other States as appropriate to develop resources on collaborating with Tribes to support children in foster care. These resources should address ways for States to work with children's Tribes when children go missing or run away from care. It should also address opportunities for Tribes and ICWA workers to formally support case management efforts. To accomplish this, ACF could use existing meetings or groups such as Tribal Consultations, the Native American Affairs Advisory Council (NAAAC), or the ACF Tribal Advisory Committee to identify best practices for States when working with Tribes on children's cases. ACF should disseminate these resources to Alaska and other States whose foster care programs interact with Tribes, as appropriate.

Support Alaska, and other States as appropriate, to improve States' abilities to accurately track children's whereabouts

ACF should support Alaska, and other States experiencing similar challenges, with improving States' abilities to accurately track children who are missing or have run away from care. ACF should consider ways to address and provide assistance to States in resolving these challenges. As a first step, ACF could conduct a survey to identify States that experience challenges with tracking children's missing or runaway status, including their locations when known. As a next step, ACF could work with States to identify ways to address these challenges. In instances in which States, such as Alaska, are in the process of updating their child welfare information systems, ACF

could provide targeted assistance to address their ability to accurately track children's whereabouts.⁶⁸

AGENCY COMMENTS AND OIG RESPONSE

ACF concurred with all three of our recommendations.

In response to our first recommendation—that ACF support Alaska in improving compliance with Federal and State requirements related to children who go missing or run away from foster care—ACF described resources available to support States, including Alaska, in identifying and serving children missing from care. These resources are available through the Children’s Bureau, the National Center for Innovation and Advancement, and the National Tribal Child Welfare Center for Innovation and Advancement. We ask that ACF share these resources with Alaska and provide documentation of these efforts in its final management decision. Although this assistance is voluntary, we encourage Alaska to use these resources to improve compliance with requirements when children go missing or run away from foster care.

In response to our second recommendation—that ACF develop resources for Alaska, and other States as appropriate, on working with Tribes to support children in foster care—ACF reported that the National Tribal Center for Innovation and Advancement will prepare a compendium of resources available for Alaska and other States. ACF also highlighted past efforts it has taken to support States’ efforts to locate children missing from care. We appreciate ACF’s commitment to preparing a compendium of resources for Alaska and other States to use when working with Tribes to support children in foster care and the other steps ACF has taken to support States in locating missing children. We ask that ACF provide documentation of the published compendium in its final management decision.

In response to our third recommendation—that ACF support Alaska, and other States as appropriate, to improve States’ abilities to accurately track children’s whereabouts—ACF described resources including products, peer supports, and targeted technical assistance that are available to any State or Tribe that seeks help. We ask that ACF share these resources with Alaska, and other States as appropriate, and provide documentation of these efforts to assist States. We encourage Alaska to utilize available resources to improve its ability to accurately track children’s whereabouts.

Though we did not make formal recommendations to Alaska, the State also provided comments on our draft report. Alaska noted steps it has already taken to improve its ability to track children’s whereabouts and offered additional steps ACF could take to support efforts to partner with Tribes. For the full text of ACF’s and Alaska’s comments, see Appendix B.

DETAILED METHODOLOGY

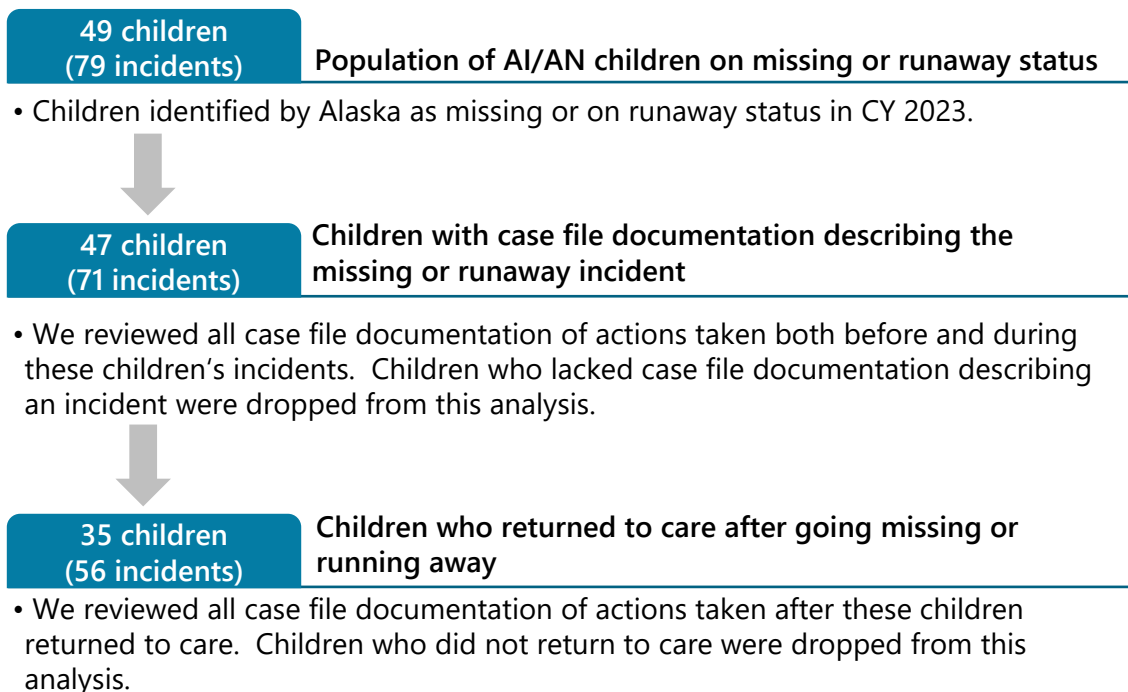
Data Collection

We collected all relevant policies and procedures from Alaska related to children going missing or running away from care. We followed up with Alaska to confirm that the list of policies and procedures was comprehensive, and that our interpretation of the policies and procedures was correct.

We requested from Alaska the population of AI/AN children who were on missing or runaway status at any point in CY 2023. See Exhibit 3 for an overview of the population. For these children, we requested case file documentation from 6 months before children went missing or ran away to 6 months after children's incidents ended.

We conducted interviews with a portion of the children's Tribes and Alaska to learn about their experiences collaborating when children go missing from care. We interviewed one Tribal consortium composed of many Tribes and two individual Tribes, which represented 37 percent of Tribes in children's cases. The interviews consisted of open-ended questions regarding Tribes' and Alaska's experiences working together.

Exhibit 3. Population of AI/AN children on missing or runaway status in Alaska in CY 23



Data Analysis

Case File Review. We determined whether case file documentation indicated that Alaska provided the population of AI/AN children with services according to Alaska's policies and procedures.

- For 71 incidents (47 children), we reviewed case file documentation to determine whether Alaska provided children with monthly caseworker visits, as required, in the 6 months before children went missing or ran away. We excluded from this analysis months when children were not in care and therefore no visit would be expected.
- For 71 incidents (47 children), we reviewed case file documentation to determine whether Alaska (1) made notifications to law enforcement, NCMEC, children's Tribes, GALs, and schools when children were identified as missing or runaway, when applicable; and (2) took other steps to locate children and return them to an authorized placement, as required. Examples of other steps we considered included caseworkers searching or visiting suspected locations of children; reaching out to contact children directly; and communicating with children to identify a safe, authorized placement for children's return. We looked for these notifications and steps regardless of the duration of children's missing or runaway incidents.⁶⁹
- For 56 incidents (35 children) in which children returned to care, we reviewed case file documentation to determine whether Alaska (1) assessed children for any signs of sex trafficking and (2) determined children's experiences as required after children returned to care. Examples of information we considered for assessing children for signs of sex trafficking included information on children's safety, sexual experiences, and screening questions directly tied to sex trafficking. Examples of information we considered for determining children's experiences while away from care included information on where children were staying, with whom children were staying, and what children did while away from care. In some cases, questions for either requirement overlapped.
- For 71 incidents (47 children), for the 6 months before and after each incident, we reviewed case file documentation to determine whether Alaska provided children with any supportive services associated with reducing children's risk of going missing, consistent with practices identified by ACF.⁷⁰ These measures included preference/placement strategies, educational support, enhanced activities, counseling or therapy, supportive adult connections, additional visitation, and other related activities. We did not determine the appropriateness or quality of the measures children received, or whether they reduced children's risk of going missing.

- For the 47 children reviewed, we noted additional missing and runaway incidents described in children's case files. We determined the number of children who had additional incidents that were not documented, on the basis of our review of the data Alaska shared with our team from its case management system.

After completing our review of children's case files, we followed up with Alaska to ensure accurate understanding of our review of the documentation. We shared our preliminary results with Alaska. For some cases, Alaska provided supplemental data and documentation. We updated our data on a case-by-case basis using the supporting documentation Alaska provided.

Interviews. We reviewed the interviews with children's Tribes and Alaska to learn about their experiences working together on children's cases. We reported salient themes regarding their experiences when children go missing.

APPENDICES

Appendix A: Related OIG Work

OIG has issued previous work on (1) children who go missing from foster care and (2) the Alaska foster care agency. Below is a list of related OIG reports.

Title	Report No.	Date Issued
Alaska Experienced Challenges in Meeting Federal and State Foster Care Program Requirements During the COVID-19 Pandemic	A-06-21-07006	June 2, 2023
State Agencies Can Improve Their Reporting of Children Missing From Foster Care to Law Enforcement for Entry Into the National Crime Information Center Database as Required by Federal Statute	A-07-21-06104	May 12, 2023
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	A-07-21-06102	March 3, 2023
In Five States, There Was No Evidence That Many Children in Foster Care Had a Screening for Sex Trafficking When They Returned After Going Missing	OEI-07-19-00371	July 5, 2022
National Snapshot of State Agency Approaches To Reporting and Locating Children Missing From Foster Care	A-07-20-06095	May 19, 2022
Case Study: Missouri's Efforts To Protect Children Missing From Foster Care	OEI-07-19-00372	September 28, 2021

Appendix B: Agency Comments

Following this page are the official comments from ACF and the State of Alaska.

GENERAL COMMENTS FROM THE DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH & HUMAN SERVICES ON THE OFFICE OF INSPECTOR GENERAL'S DRAFT REPORT ENTITLED: – ALASKA MISSED OPPORTUNITIES TO PROTECT AMERICAN INDIAN AND ALASKA NATIVE CHILDREN MISSING FROM FOSTER CARE (OEI-07-23-00480)

January 28, 2026

The U.S. Department of Health & Human Services (HHS) appreciates the opportunity from the Office of Inspector General (OIG) to review and comment on this draft report.

Recommendation

Support Alaska in improving compliance with Federal and State requirements related to children who go missing or run away from foster care. (Recommendation 1)

HHS Response

The Administration for Children and Families (ACF) concurs with OIG's recommendation.

On behalf of Children's Bureau (CB), the National Center for Innovation and Advancement and the National Tribal Child Welfare Center for Innovation and Advancement provides training and technical assistance to public child welfare agencies through its services—products, peer supports, targeted technical assistance—and is available to support states and jurisdictions in the area of how to best identify and serve children missing from care. This technical assistance is voluntary, but the CB Regional Office staff will highlight that it is available to help Alaska in improving compliance with federal and state requirements related to children who go missing from foster care.

Recommendation

Develop resources for Alaska, and other States as appropriate, on working with Tribes to support children in foster care. (Recommendation 2)

HHS Response

ACF concurs with OIG's recommendation.

We appreciate and share OIG's focus on and concern about children missing from foster care. In our response to the OIG's recommendation regarding the requirement to report children missing from foster care to the National Center for Missing and Exploited Children (A-07-21-06102), we identified a number of activities that we have taken to support states' efforts to locate children missing from foster care. Those activities are also relevant to addressing the findings in this report. We reiterate them here as a reminder and for consistency and have added a few recent activities that have taken place since that response was submitted.

Information Memorandum

On December 1, 2022, ACF's Administration on Children, Youth, and Families; CB; Family and Youth Services Bureau; and the Office on Trafficking in Persons released a joint Information Memorandum (IM), entitled Responding to Human Trafficking among Children and Youth in Foster Care and Missing from Foster Care, that provides an overview of federal statutes related

GENERAL COMMENTS FROM THE DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH & HUMAN SERVICES ON THE OFFICE OF INSPECTOR GENERAL'S DRAFT REPORT ENTITLED: – ALASKA MISSED OPPORTUNITIES TO PROTECT AMERICAN INDIAN AND ALASKA NATIVE CHILDREN MISSING FROM FOSTER CARE (OEI-07-23-00480)

to human trafficking among children and youth in the child welfare system and highlights resources to meet those requirements.

On January 27, 2023, ACF organized a national briefing call, “Responding to Human Trafficking through the Child Welfare System,” to further highlight the resources in the IM that are available to assist child welfare and youth-serving organizations in responding to concerns of human trafficking among children and youth, particularly those missing from foster care.

In response to OEI-07-23-00480, ACF will update resources for Alaska and other states as appropriate, on working with tribes to support children in foster care. We will direct the National Tribal Center for Innovation and Advancement to prepare a compendium of resources available.

Recommendation

Support Alaska, and other States as appropriate, to improve States’ abilities to accurately track children’s whereabouts. (Recommendation 3)

HHS Response

ACF concurs with OIG’s recommendation.

On behalf of CB, the National Center for Innovation and Advancement and the National Tribal Child Welfare Center for Innovation and Advancement provides training and technical assistance to public child welfare agencies through its services—products, peer supports, targeted technical assistance—and is available to support states and jurisdictions in the area of how to best identify and serve children missing from care. This technical assistance is voluntary, but the Children’s Bureau Regional Office staff will highlight that it is available to improve Alaska’s ability to accurately track children’s whereabouts. This technical assistance is available to any state or tribe who seeks help.

Sincerely,



Alex J. Adams
Assistant Secretary
Administration for Children and Families



THE STATE
of **ALASKA**
GOVERNOR MIKE DUNLEAVY

Department of
Family and Community Services

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December 9, 2025

TO: Natassja Helton
Senior Program Analyst
Administration for Children and Families

CC: Erin Bliss
Assistant Inspector General for Evaluation and Inspections

**SUBJECT: GENERAL COMMENTS FROM THE OFFICE OF CHILDREN'S SERVICES
ON THE OFFICE OF INSPECTOR GENERAL'S DRAFT REPORT ENTITLED: – Alaska
Missed Opportunities to Protect American Indian and Alaska Native Children Missing from
Foster Care (OEI-07-23-00480)**

The Office of Children's Services (OCS) of Alaska's Department of Family and Community Services appreciates the opportunity from the Office of Inspector General (OIG) to review and comment on this draft report. Additionally, it is appreciated that the report incorporated the commentary Alaska provided during the review process.

Recommendation

Support Alaska in improving compliance with Federal and State requirements related to children who go missing or run away from foster care.

OCS Response

OCS does not concur with OIG's Recommendation

While Alaska appreciates the offer of assistance in creating a checklist, Alaska is not confident that an administrative measure will address the underlying issues. Technical or administrative requirements have long proven to be ineffective at improving outcomes.

Recommendation

Develop resources for Alaska, and other States as appropriate, on working with Tribes to support children in foster care.

OCS Response

OCS concurs with OIG's recommendation

Partnering with Tribes has long been a priority in Alaska. This recommendation opens an opportunity for ACF to include caseworker visits performed by Tribes to be counted in our compliance metrics. This not only honors Tribal sovereignty and supports collaborative child welfare efforts but would enhance the well-being of Tribal families.

Recommendation

Support Alaska, and other States as appropriate, to improve States' abilities to accurately track children's whereabouts. (Recommendation 3)

OCS Response

OCS concurs with OIG's recommendation

Alaska has already taken steps to address this recommendation and made modifications in the database that allows for more accurate tracking under these circumstances. This change ensures better visibility and accountability. Targeted assistance provided by ACF that would be beneficial is providing a CCWIS compliant database that is used across the nation. This would streamline reporting and data tracking as well as eliminating the continual requirement by states to update their unique databases to achieve federal reporting mandates and compliance.

Alaska remains committed to continuous improvement and appreciates the ongoing collaboration.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to read "K. Kovel", written in a cursive style.

Kim Kovel, Commissioner

ABOUT THE OFFICE OF INSPECTOR GENERAL

Office of Inspector General

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ENDNOTES

¹ Congressional Research Service, [Missing and Murdered Indigenous People \(MMIP\): Overview of Recent Research, Legislation, and Selected Issues for Congress](#), July 3, 2023. Accessed on Feb. 25, 2025.

² Ibid.

³ Between 2012 and 2022, 1,557 American Indian/Alaska Native children were reported missing from foster care compared to 617 from their homes and 181 from school or daycare. NCMEC, [An Analysis of Missing Native American Children 2012-2021](#), 2022. Accessed on Apr. 20, 2023.

⁴ HHS, [Supplemental Response to the Not One More: Findings & Recommendations of the Not Invisible Act Commission](#), November 2024. Accessed on Jan. 8, 2025.

⁵ ACF, [Missing and Murdered Native Americans: A Public Health Framework for Action for the Administration for Children and Families and the Communities It Serves](#), October 2020. Accessed on Apr. 20, 2023.

⁶ ACF, [Culture Is Prevention: A Strength Based, Culturally Grounded Journey Toward Prevention, Intervention, and Healing | ACF's Action Plan for Missing and Murdered Indigenous People](#), October 2023. Accessed on July 23, 2025.

⁷ ACF, [Missing and Murdered Native Americans: A Public Health Framework for Action for the Administration for Children and Families and the Communities It Serves](#), October 2020. Accessed on Apr. 20, 2023.

⁸ Motivations for running from care are often categorized as “pull” factors that cause youth to run to something (e.g., friends, family, excitement) or “push” factors that cause youth to run from something (e.g., caregivers, placement setting). ACF, [Report to Congress: The Child Welfare System Response to Sex Trafficking of Children](#), December 2018. Accessed on Dec. 7, 2023.

⁹ ACF, [Report to Congress: The Child Welfare System Response to Sex Trafficking of Children](#), section 2.3, December 2018. Accessed on Dec. 7, 2023.

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² ACF, [Report to Congress: The Child Welfare System Response to Sex Trafficking of Children](#), section 2.4, December 2018. Accessed on Dec. 7, 2023.

¹³ ACF, [Report to Congress: The Child Welfare System Response to Sex Trafficking of Children](#), section 2.5, December 2018. Accessed on Dec. 7, 2023.

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ See §§ 432(a) and (b)(2) of the Act for Title IV-B eligibility requirements for Tribes. In accordance with §§ 428(c) and 479B(a) of the Act, “Tribes” refers to any federally recognized “Indian tribe,” including any Alaska Native village and “tribal organization” as defined in 25 U.S.C. § 450b(e) and (l).

¹⁶ Under Title IV-E of the Social Security Act, States and Tribal Title IV-E agencies may enter agreements whereby the Tribe receives Federal funding to administer all or some IV-E requirements, including foster care. Additionally, upon approval of a Plan, a Tribe may receive IV-E funding, which includes funding for foster care among other programs, directly from the Federal government, rather than through an agreement with the State. Our review does not include children under Tribal jurisdiction under either arrangement. This report only addresses the foster care program and not other title IV-E programs.

¹⁷ The Act §§ 1357.15 and 471.

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- ¹⁸ The Child and Family Services Reviews do not explicitly review compliance with requirements when children go missing from a foster care placement. ACF may conduct a “partial review” to address conformity with requirements outside of the scope of the Child and Family Services Reviews. 45 CFR § 1355.32(d).
- ¹⁹ ACF, [Information Memorandum on Youth Missing from Foster Care and Trafficking](#), Dec. 1, 2022. Accessed on May 28, 2025.
- ²⁰ ACF, [Report to Congress: The Child Welfare System Response to Sex Trafficking of Children](#), section 2.5, December 2018. Accessed on Apr. 26, 2021.
- ²¹ The Act § 471(a)(35)(A)(i).
- ²² The Act § 471(a)(35)(B).
- ²³ NCMEC is a private nonprofit organization whose mission is to help find missing children, reduce child sexual exploitation, and prevent child victimization. NCMEC, [About Us](#). Accessed on Dec. 7, 2023.
- ²⁴ The Act § 471(a)(9)(C)(i).
- ²⁵ Federal law does not require immediate notification to a child’s Tribe within 24 hours of learning that the child is missing from foster care. Federal law only requires a State to provide Tribes notice when a State court becomes involved when a child is missing or is returned to foster care placement. 25 U.S.C. § 1912(a).
- ²⁶ ACF has published broad guidance on State-Tribal relationships; however, this guidance does not address expectations for notifying Tribes when a child goes missing from a State foster agency. For information on Tribal-State partnerships, see <https://www.childwelfare.gov/topics/tribal-child-welfare/tribal-state-partnerships/?top=1528>.
- ²⁷ The Act § 471(a)(2).
- ²⁸ To reduce the disproportionate number of AI/AN children in State custody, the State of Alaska and certain Alaska Native Tribes and Tribal organizations have entered into a compact for Tribes to encourage collaboration and cooperation in child welfare programs and efforts to protect Alaska’s children. State of Alaska, [Alaska Tribal Child Welfare Compact](#). Accessed on Feb. 6, 2026.
- ²⁹ Alaska Office of Children’s Services, [Alaska Office of Children’s Services Statistical Information: Five Calendar Years \(January through December\)](#). Accessed on Apr. 10, 2025.
- ³⁰ Tribes in Alaska may operate their own foster care program independently from the State. As of October 2024, three Tribes implemented or are in the process of implementing a Title IV-E program to operate a foster care program in Alaska. ACF, [Tribes with Approved Title IV-E Plans](#). Accessed on June 9, 2025.
- ³¹ This review did not assess Alaska’s compliance with ICWA requirements.
- ³² Alaska Office of Children’s Services, *Child Protection Services Manual*, July 2022.
- ³³ For additional information on programmatic responses to address children’s risk of going missing or running away, see ACF, [Report to Congress: The Child Welfare System Response to Sex Trafficking of Children](#), December 2018.
- ³⁴ The Act § 422(b)(17).
- ³⁵ Alaska Office of Children’s Services, *Child Protection Services Manual*, section 3.2.1, October 2016.
- ³⁶ Alaska Office of Children’s Services, *Child Protection Services Manual*, section 2.2.5, October 2016.
- ³⁷ The Act § 471(a)(35)(B).
- ³⁸ Alaska Office of Children’s Services, *Child Protection Services Manual*, section 2.2.5, October 2016.
- ³⁹ *Ibid*.
- ⁴⁰ A guardian ad litem is an individual who is appointed by the court to serve as an advocate for the best interests of the child and to ensure that the court has adequate information regarding the case in order to consider all options. Alaska Office of Children’s Services, *Child Protection Services Manual*, section 4.1, September 2013.
- ⁴¹ Alaska Office of Children’s Services, *Child Protection Services Manual*, section 2.2.5, October 2016.

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- ⁴² The Act §§ 471(a)(9)(C)(i) and 471(a)(35)(A)(i).
- ⁴³ Alaska Office of Children's Services, Child Protection Services Manual, section 2.2.5, October 2016.
- ⁴⁴ Ibid.
- ⁴⁵ Ibid.
- ⁴⁶ Our evaluation does not include children who were cared for by Tribal foster care programs with Title IV-E funding in Alaska.
- ⁴⁷ Alaska Office of Children's Services, Child Protection Services Manual, section 2.2.5, October 2016.
- ⁴⁸ The Act § 471(a)(35)(B).
- ⁴⁹ Alaska Office of Children's Services, Child Protection Services Manual, section 2.2.5, October 2016.
- ⁵⁰ The Act § 471(a)(35)(B).
- ⁵¹ 34 U.S.C. §§ 41307-41308.
- ⁵² Alaska Office of Children's Services, Child Protection Services Manual, section 2.2.5, October 2016.
- ⁵³ Ibid.
- ⁵⁴ Ibid.
- ⁵⁵ The Act § 471(a)(35)(A)(i).
- ⁵⁶ Alaska Office of Children's Services, Child Protection Services Manual, section 2.2.5, October 2016.
- ⁵⁷ The Act §§ 471(a)(9)(C)(i) and 471(a)(35)(A)(i).
- ⁵⁸ Alaska Office of Children's Services, Child Protection Services Manual, section 3.2.1, October 2016.
- ⁵⁹ The Act § 422(b)(17).
- ⁶⁰ Alaska Office of Children's Services, Child Protection Services Manual, section 3.2.1, October 2016.
- ⁶¹ NICWA, [A Guide to Compliance with the Indian Child Welfare Act](#), October 2021. Accessed on Apr. 17, 2025.
- ⁶² ICWA workers serve as the tribal representative in children's cases in the child welfare system.
- ⁶³ ACF policy states that a caseworker eligible to conduct monthly caseworker visits can be any caseworker to whom the State or local Title IV-B/IV-E agency has assigned or contracted case management or visitation responsibilities. Within these parameters, the State may determine which caseworkers are appropriate to conduct the visits in accordance with the provisions of the Act. ACF, Child Welfare Policy Manual, section 7.3, Q&A # 5, April 2007.
- ⁶⁴ ICWA specifies the following order of preferential placement for Indian child in foster care: (1) the child's extended family, (2) a foster home specified by the child's tribe, (3) an Indian foster home, or (4) an institution for children approved or operated by an Indian tribe. 25 U.S.C. § 1915(b).
- ⁶⁵ A previous OIG report on the Missouri foster care agency identified similar challenges with its case management system. Missouri's case management system did not distinguish between children who were missing from their placement but whose whereabouts were unknown from those who were in an unapproved—but known—placement.
- ⁶⁶ OIG, [Case Study: Missouri's Efforts To Protect Children Missing From Foster Care \(OEI-07-19-00372\)](#), Sept. 28, 2021.
- ⁶⁷ OIG, [In Five States, There Was No Evidence That Many Children in Foster Care Had a Screening for Sex Trafficking When They Returned After Going Missing \(OEI-07-19-00371\)](#), July 5, 2022.
- ⁶⁸ For an overview of State foster care agencies updating their case management information systems, see <https://acf.gov/cb/training-technical-assistance/ccwis-status>.
- ⁶⁹ Federal law requires State agencies to report immediately, and in no case later than 24 hours after receiving the information, on missing or abducted children to law enforcement and to NCMEC. The Act § 471(a)(35)(B)(i). Additionally,

Alaska's policy does not define a minimum length of time before a child is considered missing or to have run away. Alaska Office of Children's Services, Child Protection Services Manual, section 2.2.5, October 2016.

⁷⁰ ACF, [*Report to Congress: The Child Welfare System Response to Sex Trafficking of Children*](#), section 2.5, December 2018. Accessed on Dec. 7, 2023.

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