

## Report in Brief

Date: May 2022

Report No. A-07-20-06095

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 provides decisionmakers with a national snapshot of the number of missing children as well as the State-level approaches for reporting on and locating these children.

Our objectives were to:

(1) summarize nationwide data on missing children, (2) examine the policies and procedures adopted by State agencies to report and locate missing children, (3) identify any barriers and other deficiencies in the State agencies' policies and procedures related to missing children, and (4) report on the challenges that the State agencies identified with respect to reporting and locating missing children.

### How OIG Did This Audit

We based our findings on responses to a questionnaire and followup interviews we conducted with State agencies. The questionnaire and interviews focused on collecting data for all children in foster care placements who went missing at any time from July 1, 2018, through December 31, 2020 (audit period).

## National Snapshot of State Agency Approaches To Reporting and Locating Children Missing From Foster Care

### What OIG Found

There were 110,446 missing children episodes during our audit period. State agencies' data showed the following: the percentages of missing children by State ranged from 0 to 7 percent; the average number of days that the children were missing ranged from 7 to 96 days; the number of children who were still missing as of December 31, 2020, was 6,619; the average number of times children went missing ranged from 1 to 7 times; and the majority (65 percent) of missing children were 15 to 17 years old. The data also showed that among the missing children, 51 percent were females, 48 percent were males, and 1 percent were reported without gender data, or reported as transgender or undecided.

With respect to our second objective, all 50 State agencies said that they had implemented policies and procedures regarding measures to report and locate missing children. Some State agencies reported enhanced procedures when a high-risk child went missing, or created special units or had specifically designated staff to help locate missing children.

With respect to our third objective, we identified several barriers and other deficiencies in State agencies' policies and procedures. These barriers included limitations in State agencies' data systems, lack of oversight to ensure timeliness when reporting missing children, and issues involving the collaboration and exchange of information with Federal agencies and law enforcement.

With respect to our fourth objective, the most frequently identified challenges were: locating children who repeatedly go missing from foster care; obtaining cooperation from missing children's families and friends and from law enforcement; finding correct placements for children to prevent them from running away; and a lack of awareness of the support and technical assistance that the Department of Health and Human Services, Administration for Children and Families (ACF) provides.

### What OIG Recommends

This report makes no recommendations. However, we expect that ACF will use the information in this report as it works with State agencies to improve outcomes for missing children and reduce the number of missing children episodes. ACF elected not to provide formal written comments on our draft report but did provide technical comments, which we addressed as appropriate.