

Report in Brief

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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 law enforcement for entry into the National Crime Information Center (NCIC) database.

Our objective was to examine State agencies' efforts to ensure that missing children are reported to law enforcement for entry into the NCIC database 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 reviewed documentation from State agencies and NCIC to determine whether missing children were reported to law enforcement for entry into the NCIC database as required by Federal statute.

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

What OIG Found

During our audit period, State agencies did not ensure that some children who went missing from foster care were reported to law enforcement for entry into the NCIC database as required by Federal statute. Of the 100 missing children episodes in our sample, the State agencies reported 86 episodes 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, eight 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), and six episodes were never reported to law enforcement for entry into the NCIC database. On the basis of our sample results, we estimate that the State agencies did not report 13,983 of the 74,353 missing children episodes in accordance with Federal requirements. Specifically, an estimated 5,659 missing children episodes during our audit period were not reported within 24 hours after the State agencies were notified that the child was missing, and an additional estimated 8,324 missing children episodes during our audit period were never reported for entry into the NCIC database.

State agencies generally lacked adequate systems to readily identify whether or not they had reported missing children episodes to law enforcement accurately and in a timely manner. State agencies that do not properly report missing children episodes to law enforcement for entry into the NCIC database 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.

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 law enforcement for entry into the NCIC database in a timely manner. ACF concurred with our recommendation and described actions that it had taken and planned to take. ACF stated that it had issued guidance highlighting human trafficking resources and guidance that noted the requirement to report children missing to law enforcement for entry into NCIC; hosted a webinar and training modules that provided information related responding to child and youth trafficking; and would provide additional technical assistance and training to State agencies.