

**Missing Children  
in Washington State**  
*Information Sharing and Public Education*

**Kay Knapp**

**December 2001**



*Washington State  
Institute for  
Public Policy*



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# WASHINGTON STATE INSTITUTE FOR PUBLIC POLICY

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The Washington Legislature created the Washington State Institute for Public Policy in 1983. A Board of Directors—representing the legislature, the governor, and public universities—governs the Institute, hires the director, and guides the development of all activities.

The Institute's mission is to carry out practical research, at legislative direction, on issues of importance to Washington State. The Institute conducts research activities using its own policy analysts, academic specialists from universities, and consultants. New activities grow out of requests from the Washington legislature and executive branch agencies, often directed through legislation. Institute staff work closely with legislators, as well as legislative, executive, and state agency staff to define and conduct research on appropriate state public policy topics.

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## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

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While local law enforcement officers have primary responsibility for identifying and recovering missing children in Washington State, three state agencies also play a role in this effort:

- The 1985 Legislature directed the Washington State Patrol to establish the **Missing Children Clearinghouse (MCC)** to assist with the location of missing children. The MCC has a toll-free 24-hour hotline, maintains computerized links with national and state missing person systems, and distributes information on missing children to local law enforcement agencies, school districts, and the public.
- The **Department of Social and Health Services (DSHS)** provides services to some youth who have run away from their legal residence. In addition, in 1999, the Legislature enacted the HOPE Act (Chapter 267, Laws of 1999) and directed DSHS to develop a procedure for reporting missing children receiving services in each of its administrative regions to the MCC.
- The 1985 statute creating the MCC also directed the **Office of the Superintendent of Public Instruction (OSPI)** to meet semi-annually with the MCC to develop a coordinated plan for distribution of information to teachers and students in the state about missing children.

As part of the 1999 HOPE Act, the Legislature directed the Washington State Institute for Public Policy (Institute) to review the procedures established by DSHS to report missing children to the MCC and any impediments to effective utilization of those procedures, describe the utilization and operation of the MCC, and review public education and public awareness regarding missing children.

## Key Findings

### Information About Missing Children:

- In Washington, information about missing children is **recorded by local law enforcement officers** into the Washington Crime Information Center (WACIC) database and **forwarded electronically to the MCC**.
- Between **March 2000 and June 2001, 28,685 missing child reports** were filed in Washington. Thirty percent of these reports involved children reported missing multiple times.
- During that period, **16,732 individual children** were reported missing. Females were reported missing most often (58 percent), as were youth aged 15 to 17 (63 percent). Cases were closed on 51 percent of missing children within one week.

### Utilization and Operation of the Missing Children Clearinghouse:

- The **MCC becomes involved** in a missing child case **at the request of local law enforcement, parents, or other interested parties**. Since 1985, the MCC has assisted in the recovery of 2,157 children (through September 2001).
- Between **March 2000 and June 2001**, the MCC was **contacted for assistance in finding 220 children**.
- **Fifty-one percent** of requests were **made by parents**, and **51 percent of the cases** involved issues of **custodial interference**. One-third of MCC cases were initiated out-of-state.

### DSHS Reporting of Missing Children:

- **DSHS does not directly report missing children to the MCC**, but utilizes the same flow of information from local law enforcement to the MCC (through WACIC) that occurs with any report of a missing child. DSHS service providers are contractually obligated to contact law enforcement, parents, and the DSHS social worker if a child runs away from a DSHS placement.
- However, the **MCC cannot differentiate missing children reports initiated by DSHS** from other reports. Therefore, there is no way of knowing how often youth are reported missing from DSHS facilities or how long it takes for them to be recovered.
- One **option** for increasing communication regarding missing children who are receiving DSHS services would be **to require DSHS social workers to forward to the MCC key identifying information about children who run from DSHS placements**.

### Public Education Regarding Missing Children:

- The MCC has **one staff position to assist in the recovery of missing children and provide outreach and education**. Training for law enforcement and outreach to schools and other community groups occurs, but on a limited basis.
- Many **governmental entities and the public appear unaware of the existence of the MCC** and the assistance and services it provides to help identify and recover missing children.
- Clearinghouses in other states have reported successes with **public education strategies**, such as publishing the clearinghouse name and toll-free telephone number on state publications, expanding information on the clearinghouse website, and obtaining private sponsorship of outreach efforts, such as child identification (ID) kits.



## **I. INTRODUCTION**

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This report provides a profile of missing children in Washington State and describes how three state agencies interact with local law enforcement officials regarding missing children. While local law enforcement officers have primary responsibility for identifying and recovering missing children, the 1985 Legislature directed the Washington State Patrol (WSP) to establish a clearinghouse to assist with the location of missing children.<sup>1</sup>

The WSP Missing Children Clearinghouse (MCC) has a toll-free, 24-hour hotline and distributes information on missing children to local law enforcement agencies, school districts, the Department of Social and Health Services (DSHS), and the public. The MCC maintains a regularly updated computerized link with national and other statewide missing person systems or clearinghouses.

Two other state agencies also play a role in identifying and recovering missing children: the Department of Social and Health Services and the Office of the Superintendent of Public Instruction (OSPI).

### **The Role of DSHS in Reporting Missing Children**

DSHS social workers and services providers may come into contact with missing children in a variety of ways. Youth who run away and are picked up by local law enforcement may be taken to a DSHS facility, such as a crisis residential center (CRC). Alternatively, youth who are in a DSHS placement, such as a foster home or group home, may become missing by running away. In 1999, the Legislature enacted the HOPE Act (Chapter 267, Laws of 1999),<sup>2</sup> directing DSHS to develop a procedure for reporting missing children receiving services in each of its administrative regions to the MCC. DSHS was directed to notify the MCC when a child is located at a department-funded facility and also when reunification with the custodial parent occurs.

### **The Role of OSPI in Educating School Officials About Missing Children**

The Office of the Superintendent of Public Instruction (OSPI) provides advice and guidance for public school officials who may come into contact with missing children. The 1985 state statute that created the MCC also directs OSPI and the WSP to meet semi-annually to “develop a coordinated plan for the distribution of information and education of teachers and students in the school districts of the state regarding the missing children problem in the state.”<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> RCW 13.60.010

<sup>2</sup> The HOPE Act created two new state services for street youth who may also be runaways. HOPE Centers are temporary residential facilities where the youth can stay for up to 30 days while being evaluated and assessed. Responsible Living Skills Programs are permanent out-of-home placements that provide both residential placement and transitional living services for state dependent youth who are 16 to 18 years old.

<sup>3</sup> RCW 13.60.030

## The Institute's Mandate

As part of the 1999 HOPE Act, the Legislature directed the Washington State Institute for Public Policy (Institute) to review the procedures established by DSHS to report missing children to the MCC and describe the utilization and operation of the MCC:

*The Washington institute for public policy shall review the effectiveness of the procedures established in section 18 of this act. The study shall include: (1) The number of legal custodians who utilize the clearinghouse; (2) the number of children who are located after the department's procedures are operational; (3) the impediments to effective utilization of the procedures and what steps may be taken to reduce or eliminate the impediments; (4) the methods of public education regarding the availability of the program and how to increase public awareness of the program. (Chapter 267, Section 19, Laws of 1999 (uncodified))*

Section II provides an overview of how information is shared when a child is reported missing. Section III analyzes the missing children population in Washington State. Section IV examines utilization of the MCC. Section V describes the procedures DSHS uses to report missing children information to the MCC, and Section VI looks at the role public education plays in reporting and locating missing children.

## **II. HOW IS INFORMATION ON MISSING CHILDREN SHARED?**

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### **National Information on Missing Children**

Nationally, an estimated 750,000 children under the age of 18 were reported missing in 2000.<sup>4</sup> The National Center for Missing and Exploited Children (NCMEC) was founded in 1984 to serve as a focal point to assist parents, law enforcement, schools, and communities to recover missing children and raise public awareness about ways to prevent child abduction and runaways. The NCMEC is a nonprofit organization funded by the U.S. Department of Justice as well as by private donations. By 1997, all states had also established missing children clearinghouses.

### **What Happens When a Child Is Reported Missing in Washington?**

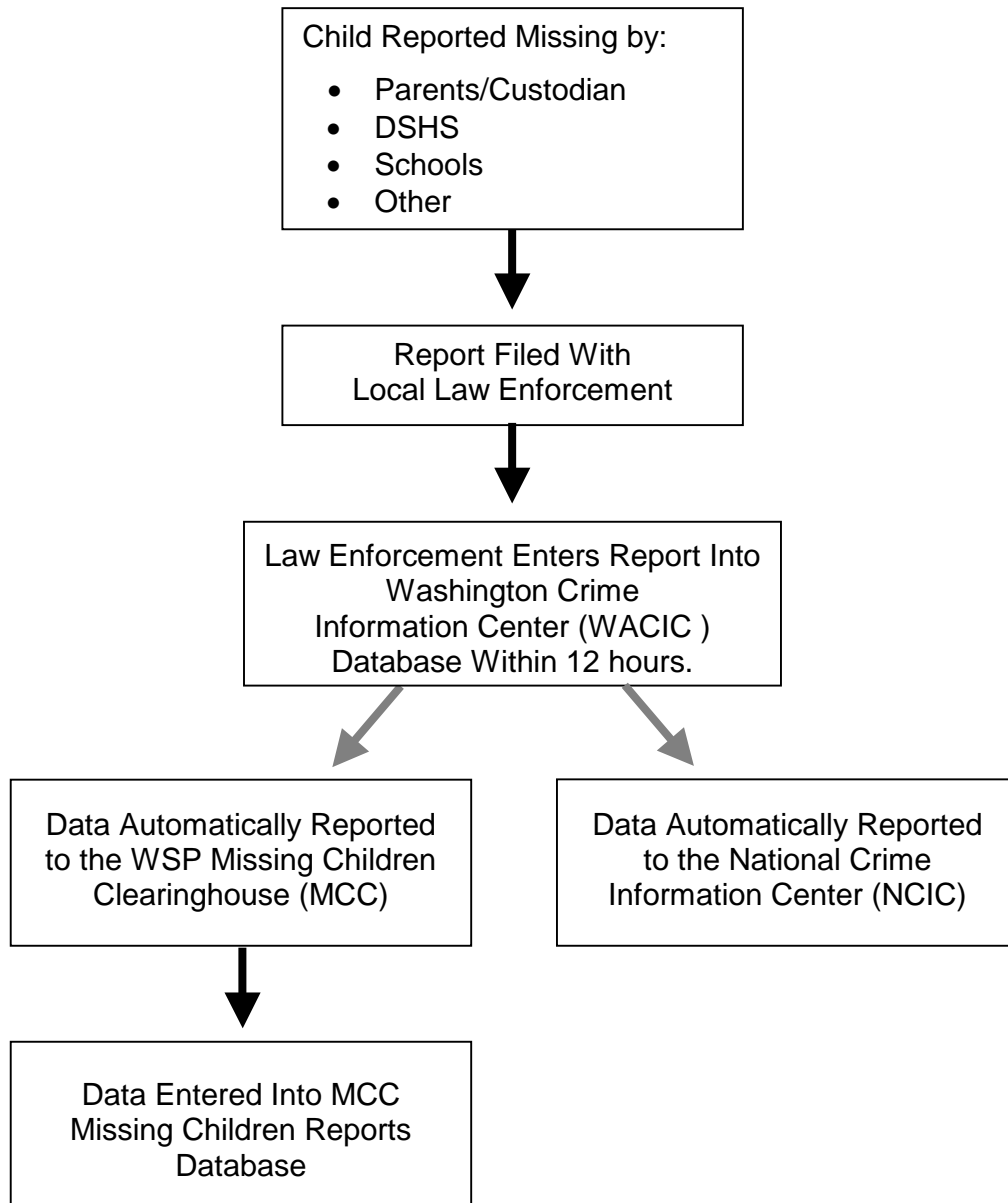
Washington's primary source of information on reported missing children is the Washington Crime Information Center (WACIC) database, maintained by the Washington State Patrol (WSP). After local law enforcement receives a report of a missing child, it is required to enter the information into the WACIC database within 12 hours. WACIC data on missing children is automatically forwarded to the National Crime Information Center (NCIC) and the MCC.<sup>5</sup> The MCC maintains a separate database that tracks the subset of cases about which it has been contacted. (This flow of information is illustrated in Exhibit 1.)

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<sup>4</sup> National Center for Missing and Exploited Children, "*Fact Sheet: 2000 Missing Children Statistics*," <<http://www.missingkids.org>>.

<sup>5</sup> Prior to 2000, the MCC did not automatically receive reports of missing children, although they had access to the WACIC database and used it to assist in recovering children.

**Exhibit 1**  
**What Happens When a Child Is Reported Missing in Washington State?**



*Note: Black arrows represent manual entry of information. Gray arrows represent automatic data transfer.*

The same process is used when a missing child is recovered. Recovery information must be entered into the WACIC database by the local law enforcement agency that filed the first missing child report. Prior to 2000, when a child returned home or was recovered and the law enforcement case was closed, the missing child report and all accompanying information was deleted. The MCC was not expected to maintain data on children who had previously been reported missing. In 2000, the WACIC database was modified to forward all missing child reports to the MCC, allowing the MCC to maintain an ongoing record of cases.<sup>6</sup>

However, there are several limitations to relying on data from the WACIC database to describe missing children in Washington:

- If a child is returned without the parents or another caretaker notifying local law enforcement, the database continues to show the child as missing.
- At age 18, children are removed from the missing children database even though their whereabouts may still be unknown.
- Some runaway or abandoned children might not have been reported missing to local law enforcement.

Furthermore, the WACIC database contains little detail about the circumstances surrounding the missing child report, including whether the child is involved in a custodial interference case, has run away, or has been abducted by a stranger.

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<sup>6</sup> While WACIC data on missing children is now automatically forwarded to the MCC, staff must enter the data manually in order to create an ongoing database.



### **III. WHAT ARE THE CHARACTERISTICS OF MISSING CHILDREN IN WASHINGTON STATE?**

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#### **Research on Missing Children**

Besides becoming lost or injured, children may become missing for a number of reasons:

- Family abduction or custodial interference;
- Runaway;
- Abandonment; or
- Non-family abduction.

The dangers and risks of missing children and the issues involved in recovering them vary. For example, custodial interference cases generally involve younger children and may be the result of sophisticated planning on the part of the abducting parent. Abducted children may be moved frequently from town to town or to a different state. Child care agencies, schools, and social welfare agencies may be asked to assist law enforcement officials in locating and recovering these children.

Runaways are more likely to be adolescents who move among friends and acquaintances or live on the street. Sometimes the families of chronic runaways make no effort at recovery or demand that these youth leave home. Runaway or abandoned youth may be located by law enforcement officials during routine policing. Research on the risks associated with runaways shows high prevalence of criminal activity, victimization, alcohol and drug use, and mental illness.<sup>7</sup>

#### **Missing Children in Washington**

With cooperation and assistance from the Washington State Patrol (WSP), the Institute analyzed WACIC data from March 2000 through June 2001 to provide a description of reported missing children in Washington State. Because the Missing Children Clearinghouse (MCC) now maintains an ongoing database of missing children, this analysis represents Washington's first opportunity to determine how many children have multiple reports or runs. This analysis necessitated identifying and combining records with the same names and birth dates to get an unduplicated count of missing children.

More than 28,000 missing children reports were filed by local law enforcement in Washington from March 2000 through June 2001. Since children could be reported multiple times, the reports were unduplicated to reveal that 16,732 children under age 18 were reported missing in Washington during that time (see Exhibit 2).

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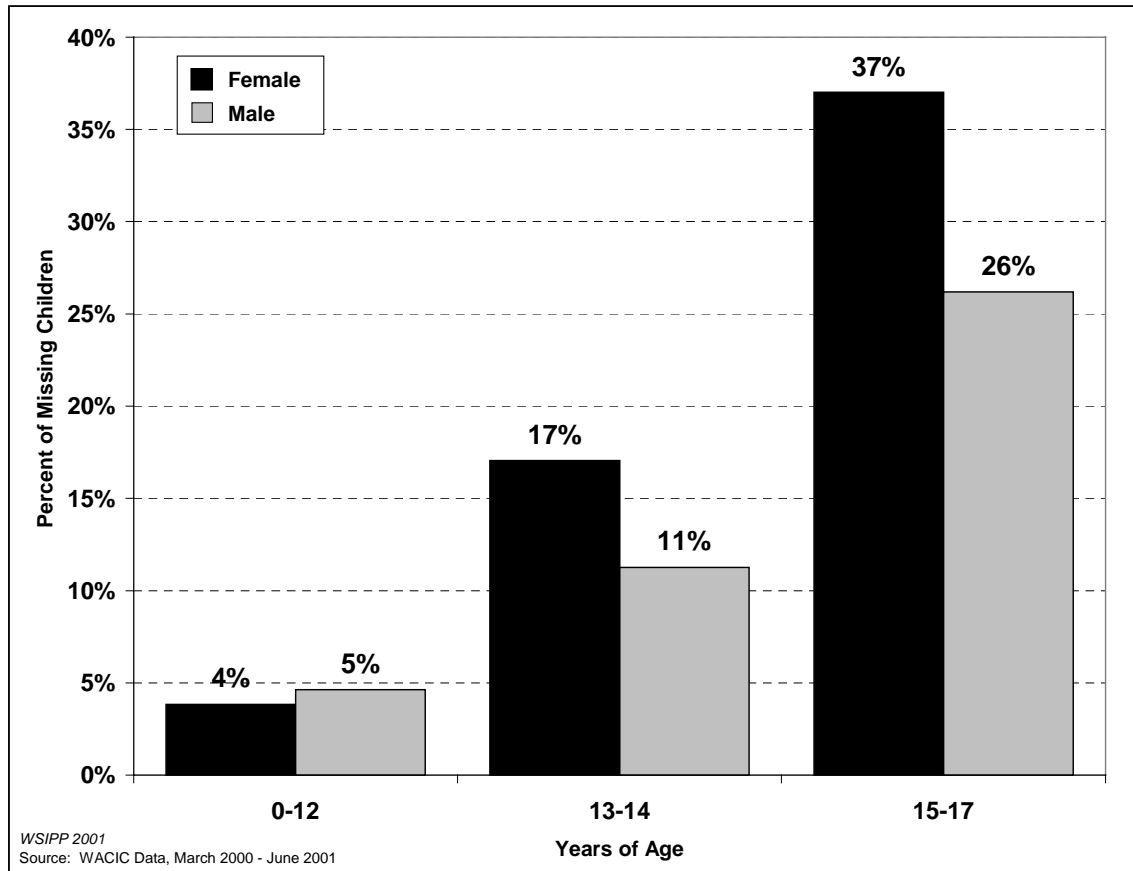
<sup>7</sup> Les Whitbeck and Dan Hoyt, *Nowhere to Grow: Homeless and Runaway Adolescents and Their Families* (New York: Aldine de Gruyter, 1999), 8-10.

**Exhibit 2**  
**Missing Children Reported in Washington, March 2000–June 2001**

<b>Number of Missing Children Reports Filed by Law Enforcement:</b>	<b>28,685</b>
<b>Number of Reported Missing Children:</b>	<b>16,732</b>

**Age.** Exhibit 3 shows the age and gender of the reported missing children.<sup>8</sup> Overall, 58 percent of the reported missing children were female, and 42 percent were male. Sixty-three percent of the reported missing children were aged 15 to 17 compared with 9 percent who were 12 or younger. Based on its experience, the MCC has observed that younger children who are reported missing tend to be involved with cases of custodial interference, and missing adolescents are more likely to be runaways.<sup>9</sup>

**Exhibit 3**  
**Ages of Reported Missing Children in Washington State**



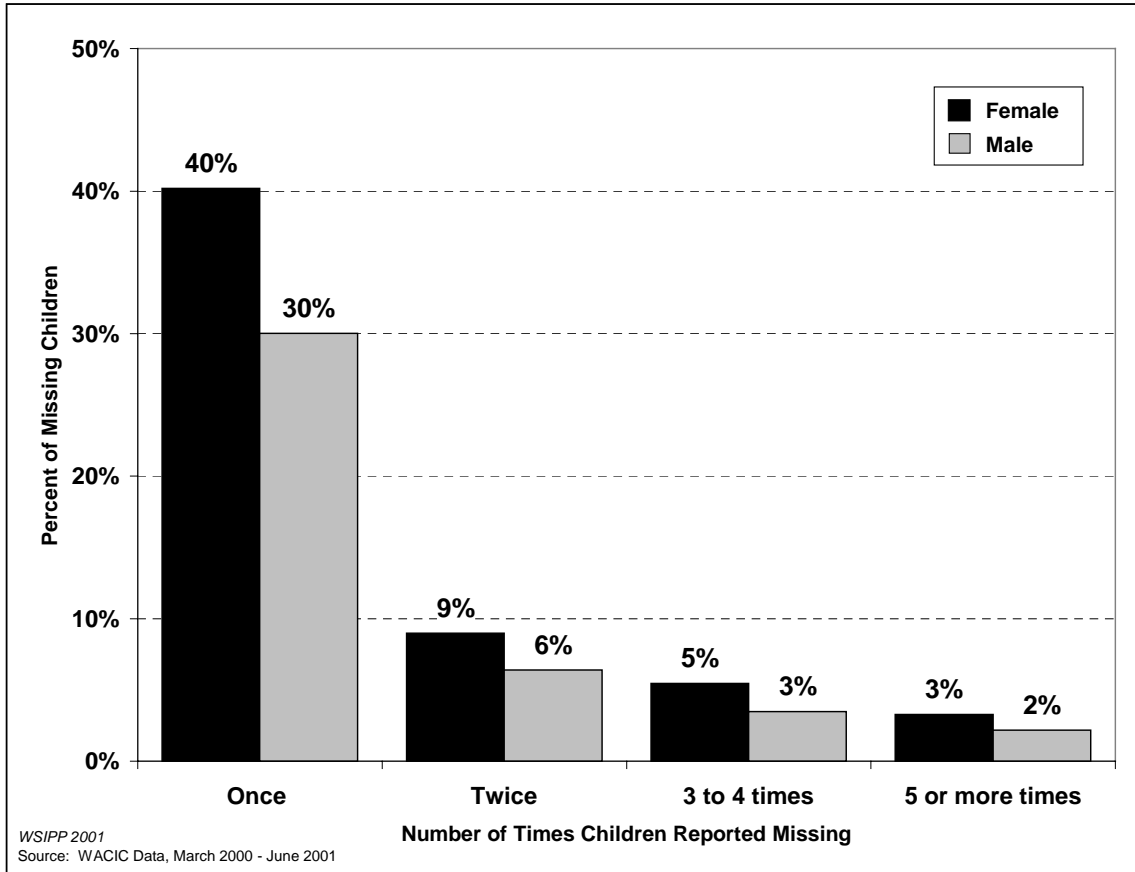
<sup>8</sup> Unless otherwise noted, the analysis in this report uses the unduplicated total of children reported missing (16,732) in order to describe the population of missing children. If the purpose was to describe the caseload of all missing children cases, the more appropriate unit of analysis would be the duplicated total of missing children reports (28,685). Numbers may not total exactly due to missing data.

<sup>9</sup> Author interview with MCC staff, Spring 2001.



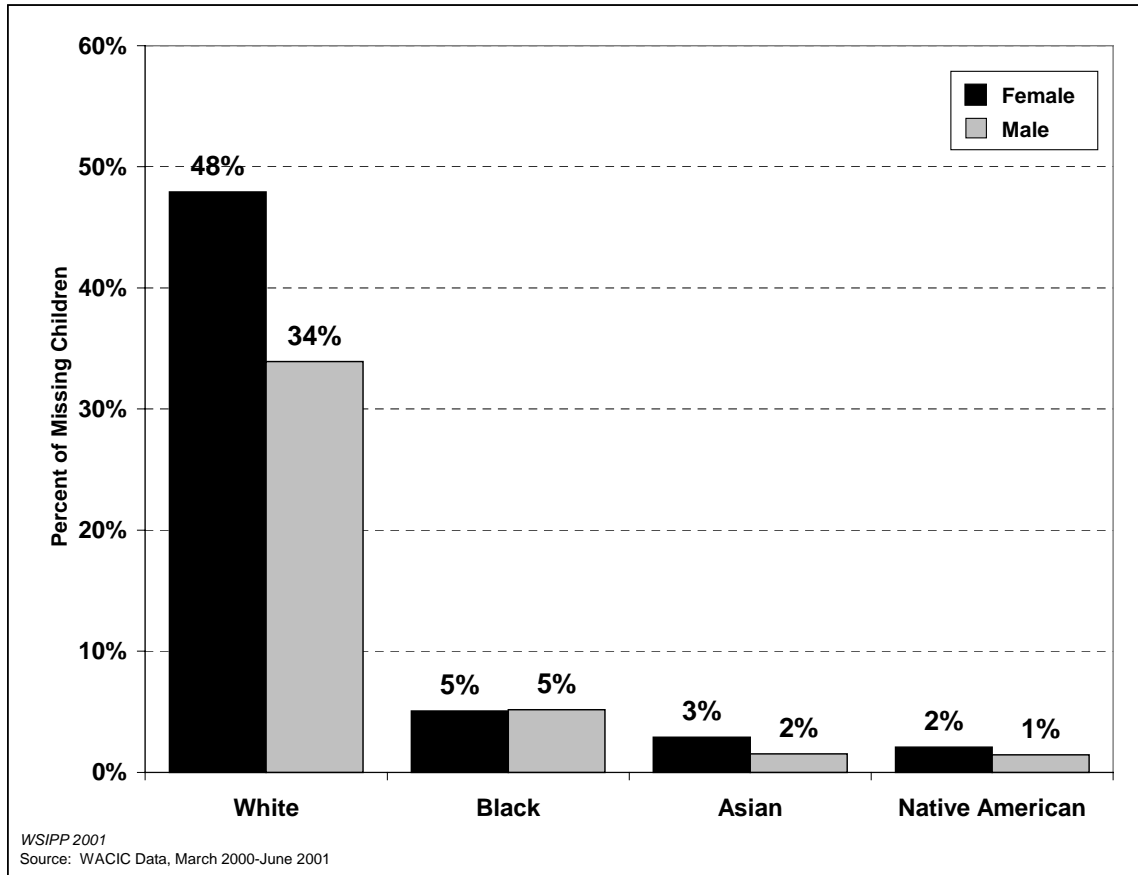
**Number of Times Reported Missing.** Exhibit 4 compares the gender of missing children with the number of times they were reported missing. Seventy percent of the children (11,738 out of 16,732) were reported missing once. Thirty percent were reported missing multiple times. Females were reported missing multiple times more often than males. These data do not reveal whether females actually disappear more frequently than males, or whether parents or caretakers are more likely to report missing girls.

*Exhibit 4*  
**Number of Times Children Were Reported Missing in Washington State**



**Race.** The race of reported missing children is shown in Exhibit 5.<sup>10</sup> Eighty-two percent of reported missing children were White. For the most part, the pattern noted above—that more females than males were reported missing—holds across the racial categories. Fifty-nine percent of White children reported missing were females. Among Asians, however, there was a larger disproportionality among females and males, with females representing 66 percent of reported missing children. An almost equal number of females and males were reported missing among Black children.

**Exhibit 5**  
**Race of Reported Missing Children in Washington State**

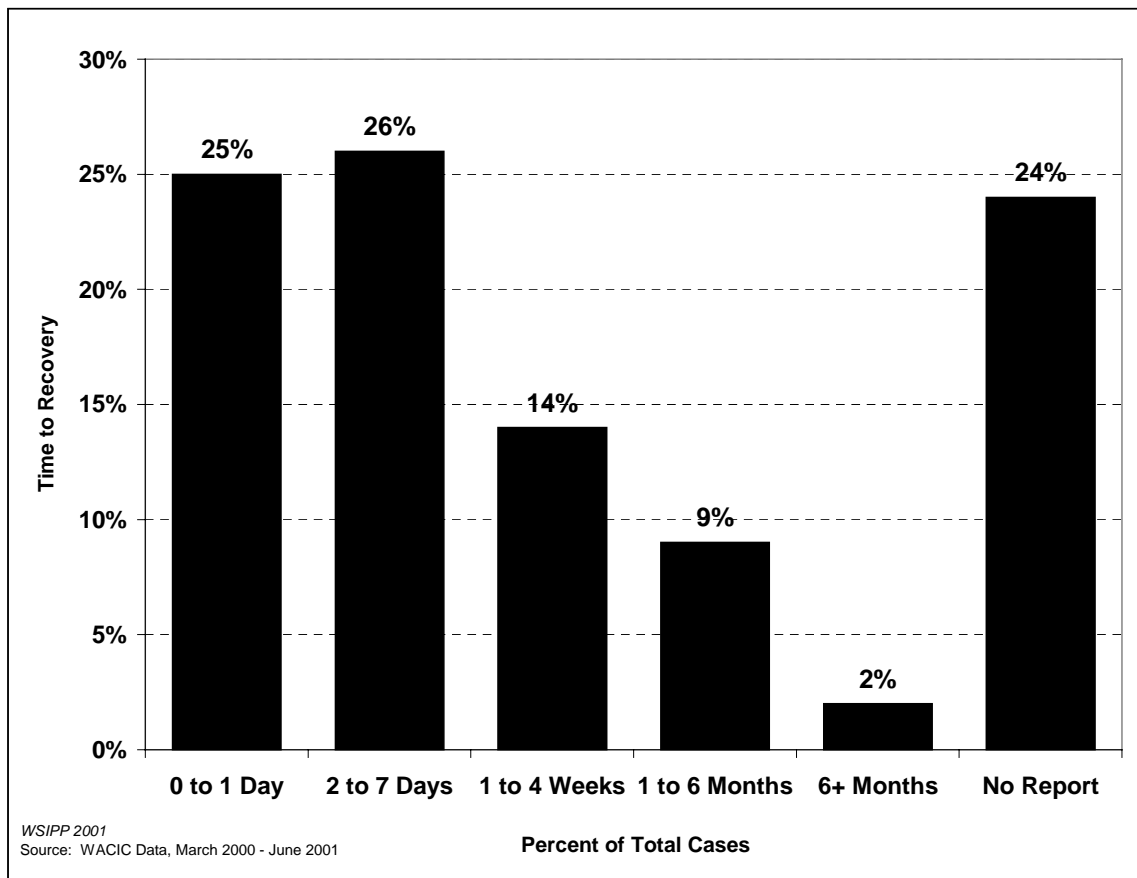


<sup>10</sup> The racial categories used by law enforcement do not identify Hispanic as a separate ethnicity or race. Therefore, it is not possible to determine if children of color are more or less likely to be reported missing compared with the overall population of children. The WACIC categories included are Native American (582 children), Asian (732 children), Black (1,702 children), and White (13,594 children). Data was not available on 122 children.

**Time to Recovery.** The WACIC database contains the date a local law enforcement official closes a missing child case. Since some children are reported missing multiple times, this analysis of how long it takes to recover a missing child is based on the 28,685 missing children reports (rather than the 16,732 individual children reported missing). Exhibit 6 displays the length of time the child was missing before the case was closed. Twenty-five percent of missing children were recovered within one day, and an additional 26 percent were recovered within one week.

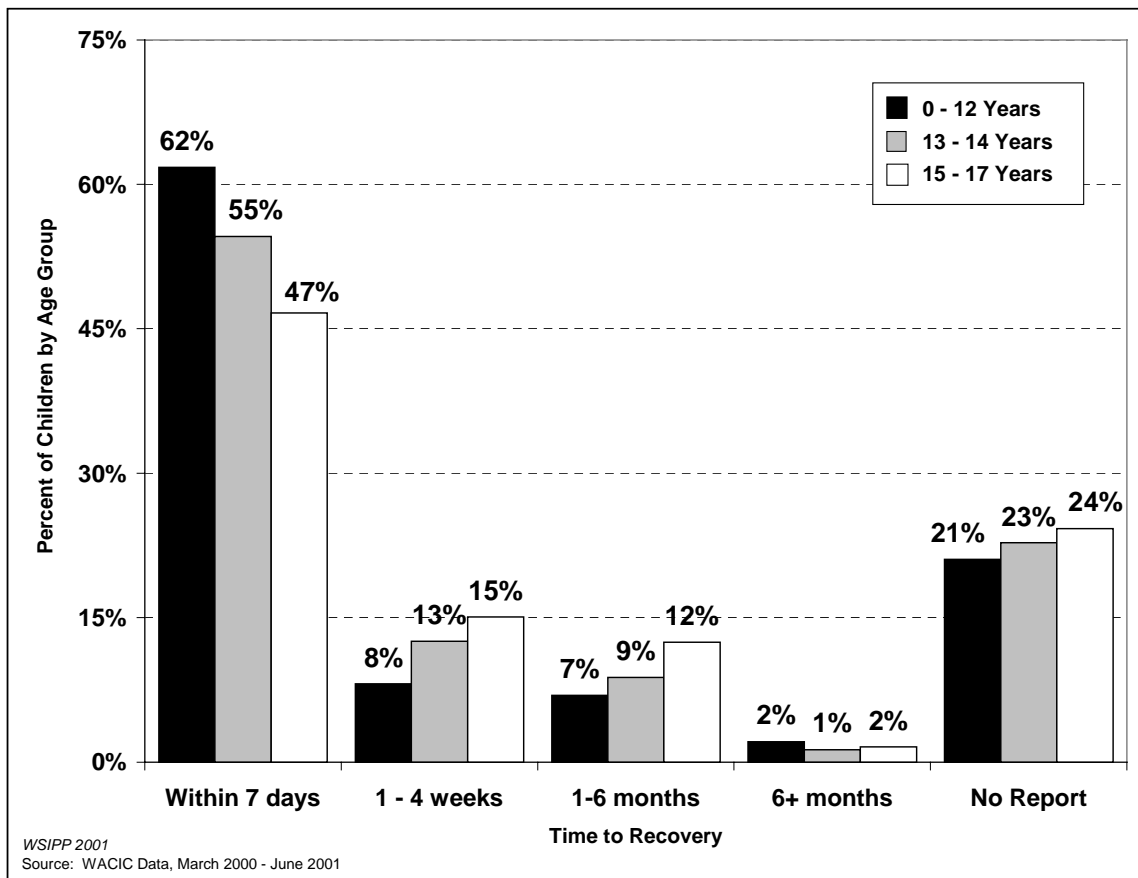
Of the cases analyzed, 6,766 (24 percent) were still reported missing as of June 2001. According to the MCC, many of these cases probably represent youth who returned home, but the parent or caretaker had not notified local law enforcement to cancel the missing child report.

**Exhibit 6**  
**Length of Time Before Child Is Recovered in Washington State**



As Exhibit 6 shows, most missing children are recovered relatively quickly. Based on its experience, the MCC has observed that the first time youth run away, they usually return home within a few days. The second time they run, they often return home within seven to ten days. Custodial interference cases may take a much longer time to resolve before the child is returned to the custodial parent. Exhibit 7 displays the length of time before recovery by age of the child. Although 62 percent of children under age 12 are returned within a week, younger children are over-represented in the group missing six or more months.<sup>11</sup> Forty-seven percent of youth aged 15 to 17 also return within a week.

**Exhibit 7**  
**Length of Time Before Child Is Recovered by Age**



<sup>11</sup> Children under 12 represent 8 percent of the overall number of missing cases, but 11 percent of cases taking six or more months to close.

## **IV. WHO UTILIZES THE MISSING CHILDREN CLEARINGHOUSE?**

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The Missing Children Clearinghouse (MCC) provides assistance in locating children missing in Washington or another state when contacted by a parent or other interested party (such as another relative or an attorney), or by local law enforcement. Law enforcement must be notified about a missing child before the MCC can become involved in the case. The initial contact to the MCC is usually via the 24-hour, seven-day-a-week hotline. The hotline is staffed by MCC personnel during regular working hours. In the evenings and on weekends, messages are recorded and picked up at the beginning of the next business day.

### **Local Law Enforcement**

Local law enforcement officers may call the MCC for assistance with a missing child case. Much of the assistance provided by the MCC comes in the form of database searches. For example, the MCC will search for a suspect in a custodial interference case by using various state and federal databases. A request might come from an officer who is contacting the MCC for the first time because of limited experience with this type of case. A request might also come from an officer who has previously used the MCC and understands the nature of the assistance that is available.

MCC staff use first-time requests for assistance as an opportunity to provide technical assistance to the officer. Staff walk officers through the process, asking questions and offering suggestions about tools that can be used to locate suspects and missing children.<sup>12</sup> The MCC also coordinates the exchange of information between law enforcement, school officials, social workers, and other interested parties regarding the location and return of the missing child.

Requests for assistance from law enforcement officers outside the state generally occur when an officer or another state clearinghouse has reason to believe that a missing child has run or been moved to a Washington location.

### **Parents or Other Interested Parties**

When the MCC is contacted by a parent or another interested party, staff obtain details about the specifics of the case. The MCC checks the WACIC and NCIC databases to determine whether the child has been reported missing. If not, the MCC contacts local law enforcement to ensure information about the missing child is entered into the database. In alleged custody interference cases, the custodial status of a parent is not always immediately obvious. The MCC assists in clarifying custodial status by advising the parent to take court documents to local authorities or explaining the procedures for obtaining an

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<sup>12</sup> Tools for locating suspects and children include flagging passports, drivers' licenses (especially if it is close to renewal time), birth certificates, and school records; tracking mail through the U.S. Postal Service; and searching the NCIC data system to identify the location of any traffic violations associated with the suspect.

emergency temporary custody order so that law enforcement officials can proceed with a custodial interference investigation.

The same procedures are used with out-of-state parental requests for assistance when the parent has reason to believe that the child has run or been taken to Washington. The MCC shares information about suspects and the missing child with local law enforcement in the originating state. Information is not shared directly with the parent.

## Utilization of the MCC

Exhibit 8 summarizes information from the MCC website on cases involving the MCC as of September 2001.

**Exhibit 8**  
**MCC Utilization Indicators**  
**As of September 2001**

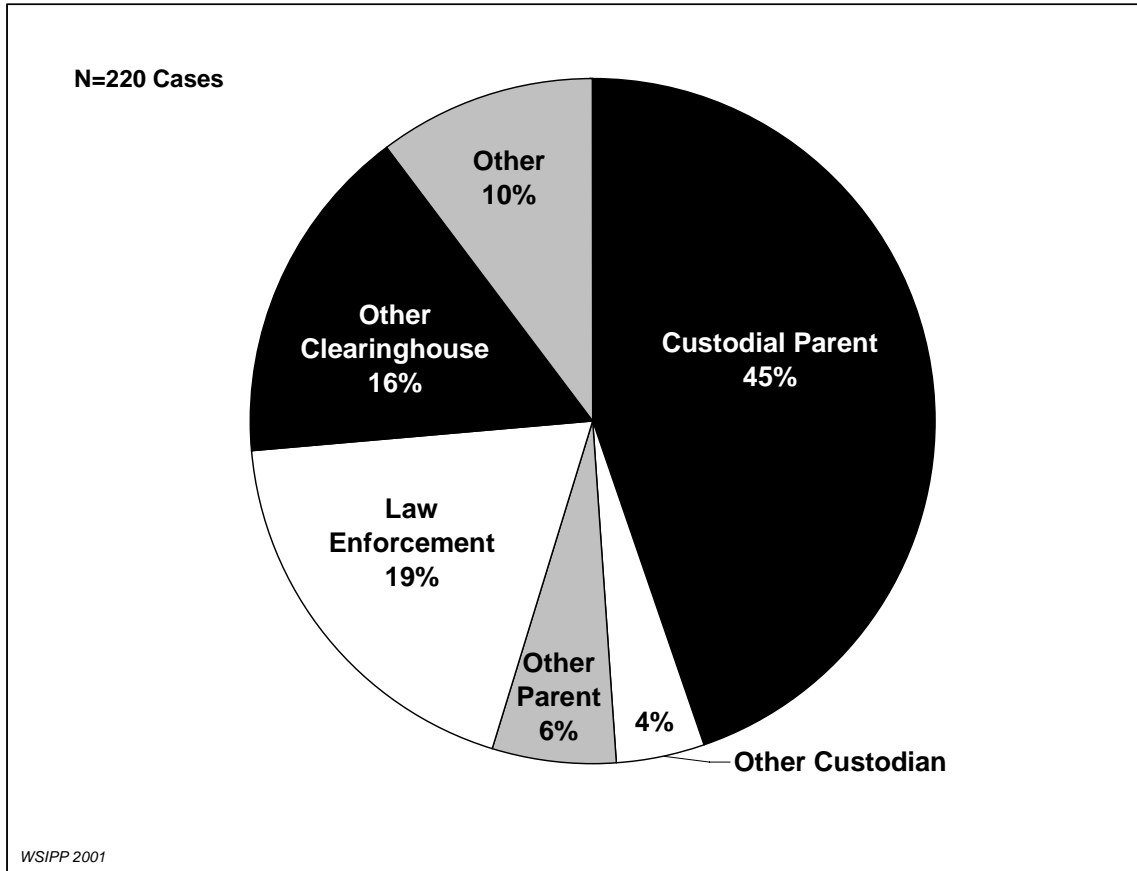
<b>Children Located with Clearinghouse Assistance:</b>	
This Month.....	24
Year-to-Date.....	137
Since 1985 .....	2,157
<b>Cases Opened:</b>	
This Month.....	23
Year-to-Date.....	377
<b>Tips/Leads Received From NCMEC .....</b>	
	26

Source: WSP Missing Children Clearinghouse website, <<http://www.wa.gov/wsp/crime/mischild.htm>>.

**Assistance Provided by the MCC.** As noted previously, the MCC maintains a separate database that tracks the subset of cases about which it has been contacted. Between March 2000 and June 2001, the MCC provided assistance in 171 cases involving 220 children. The MCC is most often asked to assist in cases involving younger children, which frequently involve custodial interference. Seventy percent of the requests involved children aged 12 or younger, and 50 percent involved children aged six or younger. About one-third of the requests for assistance were from out-of-state.

Exhibit 9 shows who requested MCC assistance between March 2000 and June 2001. Assistance was most frequently provided to a custodial parent (45 percent), followed by law enforcement (19 percent) and other national or state clearinghouses (16 percent).

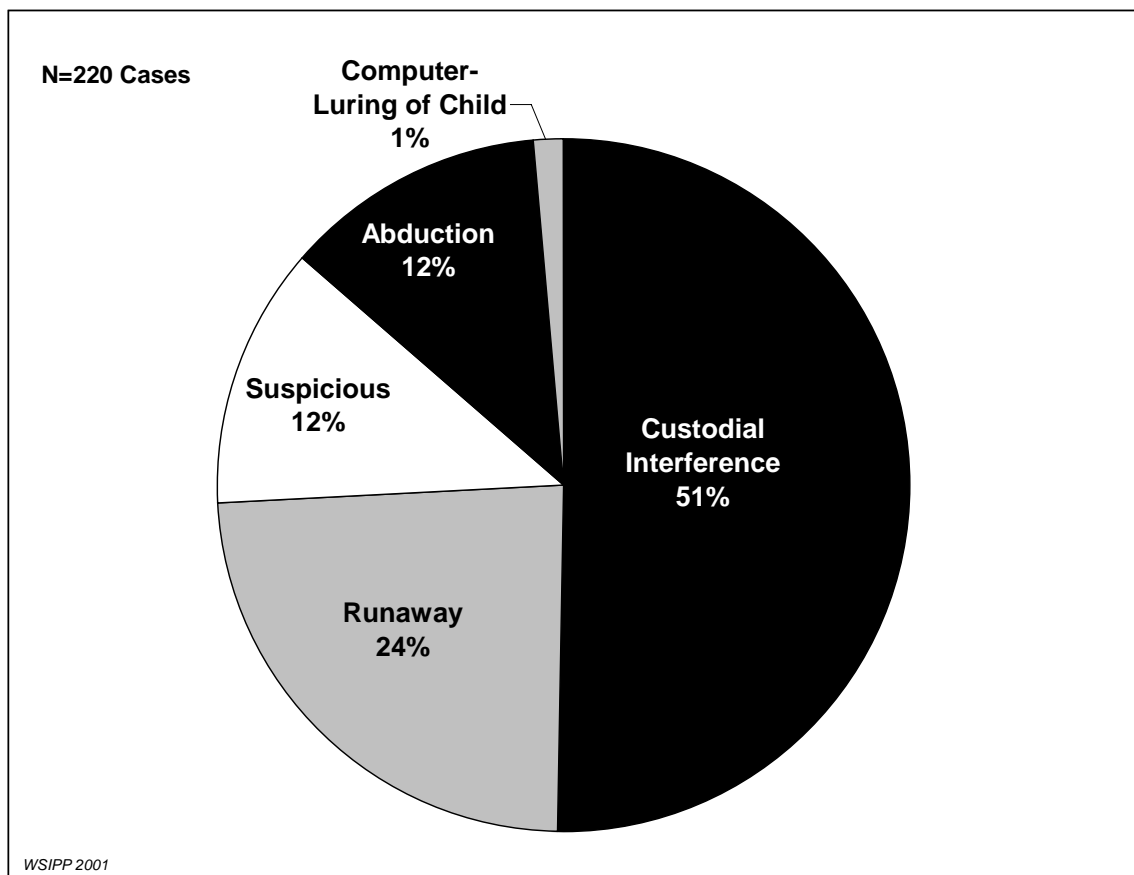
**Exhibit 9**  
**Who Requested MCC Assistance?<sup>13</sup>**  
**(March 2000–June 2001)**



<sup>13</sup> The “Other” category likely includes attorneys or non-custodial relatives of the child. “Other Parent” is likely a non-custodial parent reporting a runaway child.

Exhibit 10 displays the types of cases where the MCC provided assistance. Custodial interference investigations represented 51 percent of the MCC's assisted cases. Runaways represented 24 percent of cases. "Suspicious" means that the parent or custodian does not know what happened but suspects that the child might have been lured away.

**Exhibit 10**  
**What Type of Cases Did the MCC Assist?**  
**(March 2000–June 2001)**



Of the 220 missing children the MCC assisted in locating during the period under review, approximately one-third were officially recovered by the end of June 2001. An additional 27 percent of the cases were marked as "closed," which can indicate that the child was recovered and the court case resolved, but may also mean that an out-of-state child has left Washington and moved to another state. Forty-three percent of the cases remained open.

The time it took to recover the children ranged from less than a week to over a year. Half the recovered children in MCC-assisted cases were found within one week to three months. Missing children who were runaways tended to be found more quickly than others. Almost 90 percent of recovered runaways were found within three months. Victims of custodial interference tended to take longer to recover. Only 45 percent of recovered custodial interference children were found within three months.



## V. HOW DOES DSHS REPORT MISSING CHILDREN?

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The 1999 HOPE Act directed the Department of Social and Health Services (DSHS) to develop a procedure for reporting missing children information to the Missing Children Clearinghouse (MCC):

*The department of social and health services shall develop a procedure for reporting missing children information to the missing children clearinghouse on children who are receiving departmental services in each of its administrative regions. The purpose of this procedure is to link parents to missing children. When the department has obtained information that a minor child has been located at a facility funded by the department, the department shall notify the clearinghouse and the child's legal custodian, advising the custodian of the child's whereabouts or that the child is subject to a dependency action. The department shall inform the clearinghouse when reunification occurs. (Chapter 267, Section 18, Laws of 1999)*

A possible reason for legislative interest in communication between DSHS and the MCC is because runaways, abandoned children, and custodial interference victims can easily come into contact with DSHS through crisis residential centers (CRCs), HOPE Centers, Child Protective Services, or income maintenance and other welfare programs.

### **What Happens When Children Run From a DSHS Placement?**

It is not uncommon for adolescents temporarily or permanently in the state's care to run away from a DSHS placement, such as a foster home, group home, CRC, or HOPE Center. When a youth runs away, DSHS service providers are expected to call local law enforcement to report the missing youth and to contact the parents or other legal custodian, as well as the DSHS caseworker. Within each contract between DSHS and service providers, there is standard language pertaining to the provider's reporting responsibilities if a youth runs away from a placement. When local law enforcement is contacted, the process described in Exhibit 1 for recording a missing child report is followed: that is, information is entered into the WACIC database and then electronically forwarded to the NCIC and the MCC.

The Institute could not independently verify that DSHS service providers call local law enforcement each time a child runs away from a placement. Local law enforcement does not automatically forward a paper copy of the missing child report to DSHS regional offices or the service providers. In the more urban administrative regions (King and Snohomish Counties), DSHS caseworkers record the missing child case number so they can more easily communicate with law enforcement officers in tracking the case and create a record of the number of times a youth runs away from their programs. In the other administrative regions, the caseworker often does not record the missing child case number.

If a youth stays in the community and is picked up by law enforcement during routine policing, the missing child report is canceled, and the youth is brought to a CRC or other appropriate facility.

## **What Happens When Missing Children Seek DSHS Services?**

Runaway youth seldom seek out a DSHS facility. Youth only enter CRCs after social worker, parent, or law enforcement interventions. Social workers must authorize placement of children in foster homes, group homes, or other facilities. These referral sources already know whether the child has been reported missing.

When HOPE Centers were created in 1999, however, they offered the possibility for runaway youth to self-refer to the facility. When a youth arrives at a HOPE Center, the Placement and Liaison Specialists (PALS) must meet with the youth, assess the youth's legal status (which includes whether or not the youth has run away from home), and notify DSHS within eight hours of arrival. When HOPE Centers were first created, the MCC provided DSHS with copies of a missing child report form that HOPE Center staff could fax to the MCC if a runaway youth came to a center. However, self-referral of youth to HOPE Centers has rarely occurred, and the MCC has never received any faxed reports.<sup>14</sup> DSHS assumes that providers would not harbor runaways without properly notifying custodians or law enforcement because of the liability the provider would assume under those circumstances.<sup>15</sup>

## **How Does DSHS Contact the WSP Missing Children Clearinghouse?**

DSHS does not directly report missing children to the MCC. Rather, DSHS utilizes the same flow of information that occurs for any child who is reported missing: any time local law enforcement is contacted about a missing child, data is forwarded through the WACIC to the MCC. DSHS did not adopt separate procedures or protocols for reporting to the MCC.

The MCC, however, cannot differentiate missing children reports initiated by DSHS from other reports. Therefore, there is no way of knowing how often youth are reported missing from DSHS facilities or how long it takes for them to be recovered.

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<sup>14</sup> Intake records from HOPE Centers indicate that only 17 out of more than 250 youth entered a HOPE Center through self-referral.

<sup>15</sup> DSHS officials who administer youth programs expressed concern about the potential interaction of runaway youth with other DSHS programs, particularly Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF). It is possible for TANF grants to be provided to youth who have established an acquaintance with an adult acting as *loco parentis*. The concern is that the program may unknowingly enable runaways to maintain that status by providing them benefits. There are approximately 16,000 child-only TANF grant recipients in an average month, but there is no indication of whether the child is a runaway.

## What Steps Could Be Taken to Improve Reporting of Missing Children by DSHS to the MCC?

If there is an interest in increased communication and information regarding missing children who are receiving DSHS services, the following options could be considered:

- Option 1:** Include a field in the WACIC database for local law enforcement to identify missing children reported from DSHS.
- Option 2:** Require DSHS service providers to report missing or runaway children directly to the MCC.
- Option 3:** Require DSHS social workers to forward key identifying information about children who run from DSHS facilities or placements to the MCC.

**Option 1** is potentially costly and cumbersome to implement because it requires re-programming an existing comprehensive law enforcement data system as well as training and orientation for all law enforcement officers. Accountability for ensuring reporting of DSHS missing children would rest not with DSHS, but with the law enforcement officer recording a report of a missing child.

**Option 2** places accountability on DSHS service providers to report missing children to the MCC, but could be costly and cumbersome for the MCC. The MCC would have to create a separate database on DSHS-reported cases. The information reported by the service providers directly to MCC could potentially be inconsistent with what was recorded by local law enforcement in the WACIC, causing confusion and an inability to align the two largely duplicative record-keeping systems. Service providers, which include all foster parents, group homes, CRCs, and treatment facilities, would have to report missing children to an additional entity (they must already report to law enforcement, parents or custodians, and the DSHS caseworker).

**Option 3** places accountability on DSHS social workers to forward information to the MCC. Information such as date reported missing, child's name and date of birth, and location and type of facility should already be collected by social workers any time a service provider reports a missing child. The MCC and DSHS could devise a simple method for social workers to forward the information to the MCC on a regular basis, perhaps using e-mail. The MCC would need to "flag" records in its database that result from a DSHS report, but this would avoid entry of a large quantity of duplicative information. At present, there is no way of knowing how many records per month this would entail. A large number of social workers would need to be trained to implement this practice on a consistent basis.

Exhibit 11 compares the relative burden of each option on various entities: local law enforcement, the MCC, and DSHS service providers or social workers.<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> Officials at the MCC and DSHS were consulted regarding the relative burden of each option and concur with the Institute's portrayal in Exhibit 11.

*Exhibit 11*  
**Comparison of Options to Improve Reporting  
of Missing Children by DSHS to the MCC**

<b>Additional Burden of Reporting</b>				
	<b>Local Law Enforcement</b>	<b>MCC</b>	<b>DSHS Providers</b>	<b>DSHS Social Workers</b>
<b>Option 1</b>	High	None	None	None
<b>Option 2</b>	None	High	High	None
<b>Option 3</b>	None	Low–Medium	None	High

## VI. WHAT OUTREACH AND EDUCATION OCCURS IN WASHINGTON STATE REGARDING MISSING CHILDREN?

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Multiple local and state agencies have roles in identifying, reporting, and recovering missing children. Community outreach and public education about missing children serves two purposes: (1) prevention, which includes providing strategies parents can use to reduce the risk of child abduction or recognize potential runaway risks, and (2) recovery, which includes timely calls to appropriate officials, accessing resources such as a clearinghouse, and training of school officials to recognize possible signs of a missing child to facilitate a safe and rapid recovery of missing children. State clearinghouses have an important, but not exclusive, role to play in these functions.

### Community Outreach and Public Education in Washington

The MCC has one staff position to assist in the recovery of missing children and provide outreach and education. The Legislature funded a second staff position in conjunction with the HOPE Act to maintain a database on missing children. MCC staff time is primarily devoted to the recovery of missing children, with outreach and education provided when possible.

**Training for Law Enforcement.** The MCC has a curriculum for training law enforcement officers on state and federal laws that apply to missing children, tools to assist in the recovery of missing children, and assistance available from both the MCC and the Washington State Task Force on Missing and Exploited Children.<sup>17</sup> Currently, this training is seldom provided because of limited staff time. Other training is offered through the U.S. Department of Justice and the National Center for Missing and Exploited Children, but involves travel costs for participants. As noted earlier, the MCC uses first-time requests by local law enforcement as an opportunity to provide one-on-one technical assistance and training for officers.

**Outreach to Schools.** State statute directs the Office of the Superintendent of Public Instruction (OSPI) and the Washington State Patrol (WSP) to meet twice a year to develop a coordinated plan for educating personnel in school districts in the recognition and appropriate intervention of suspected missing children:

*The superintendent of public instruction shall meet semiannually with the Washington state patrol to develop a coordinated plan for distribution of information and education of teachers and students in the school districts of the state regarding the missing children problem in the state. The superintendent of public instruction shall encourage local school districts to*

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<sup>17</sup> The Task Force on Missing and Exploited Children was created in 1999 (Senate Bill 5108) after the disappearance of a young girl, Teeka Lewis, in Tacoma. The Task Force actively participates in police investigations of missing children at the request of local officials, whereas the MCC maintains more of a technical assistance and referral role. The Task Force also provides training in the detection of abused, abducted, and exploited children.

*cooperate by providing the state patrol information on any missing children that may be identified within the district. (RCW 13.60.030)*

The OSPI website includes a missing children page that discusses situations suggestive of an abduction or concealment of a child. The page lists the contact, e-mail address, and telephone number for the MCC and includes links to the NCMEC and WSP.<sup>18</sup> On previous occasions, the MCC has suggested that OSPI send a letter to teachers before the start of the school year alerting them to indicators of missing or exploited children, but OSPI has not yet implemented this strategy.

In the past, the MCC also provided training for school administration personnel. According to MCC staff, training for registrars and others who review transcripts for new students can be particularly effective in identifying possible cases of custodial interference and other abductions. This training is not currently provided due to limited staff time at the MCC and limited training time available to school administrators. The semiannual meetings directed by statute have not taken place in the past year after a staffing change occurred at OSPI.

**Other Outreach.** MCC speaking engagements tend to be limited to an occasional event with a community group (e.g., home-schooling parents and children) or participation in a workshop, such as meetings of the DSHS Adolescent Workgroup or CRC service providers. Staff also participate in criminal and juvenile justice and child-oriented safety fairs and distribute information sheets and magnets with the MCC telephone number.

The MCC web page includes a brief description of services, statistics on assistance provided, and links to the NCMEC. A missing child photo page shows approximately a dozen children who resided in Washington at the time of their disappearance or who may have traveled to Washington. MCC staff consider rapid dissemination of pictures (within 24 hours) one of the key recovery tools for missing children. The MCC estimates that rapid dissemination of pictures is responsible for one out of every seven recoveries.

The limited resources for outreach and education may be contributing to lack of awareness among other governmental entities and the public about the MCC and the assistance and services it could provide to help identify and recover missing children. OSPI officials interviewed by the Institute were only peripherally aware of the MCC. Some DSHS staff in regional administrative offices only knew of the MCC because they attended a recent DSHS training session that MCC staff also attended. According to the MCC, it frequently receives calls from local law enforcement officers who have not previously heard of the clearinghouse.

## **Community Outreach and Public Education in Selected Other States**

State missing children clearinghouses are loosely organized into regional coalitions that meet in conjunction with an annual national meeting sponsored by the NCMEC. Outreach and educational material developed by the NCMEC is made available to state clearinghouses, usually at minimal or no charge. Clearinghouses also share their materials with one another.

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<sup>18</sup> Office of the Superintendent of Public Instruction, <<http://www.k12.wa.us/genadm/missing>>.

**Resources Available.** State clearinghouses vary in their functions and resources. For example, Montana has no staff specifically devoted to the clearinghouse. An existing 24-hour help desk manages data and information requests that pertain to missing children. The Maryland clearinghouse, on the other hand, employs three staff and does extensive outreach to parents and to the community. It also assists in investigations.

Clearinghouses with more extensive outreach efforts tend to be staffed at a slightly higher level than Washington's clearinghouse, but most clearinghouses in small- or medium-size states have no more than two or three staff. Clearinghouses with more extensive outreach also leverage other state and local government resources whenever possible, and many of their outreach efforts that achieve high visibility within the community are funded by corporate sponsors and donations.

**Examples of Outreach and Education Efforts.** The Institute examined approaches to community outreach and public education in several states to identify possible opportunities for the MCC to increase public awareness of its services and to assist in the recovery of missing children.

- **Marketing.** Five years ago, Maryland's clearinghouse tried some relatively inexpensive marketing. Previously, it had done little outreach and education. The marketing strategies included the following:
  - Printing the clearinghouse name and toll-free telephone number on all state maps;
  - Ensuring the clearinghouse appeared in all telephone directories and each library's information and referral system; and
  - Mailing information packets to all county executive offices.

According to Maryland officials, this marketing resulted in an increased number of events and speaking opportunities, which they made a concerted effort to attend. Telephone calls to the clearinghouse have increased by at least 50 percent per year since it began these outreach efforts.

- **Identification Kits.** Many state clearinghouses distribute identification (ID) kits to parents through public events. The kits can be kept by parents and used by law enforcement in case a child is ever missing. The distribution of kits also provides an educational opportunity about keeping children safe. An ID kit might include the fingerprints, photo, DNA sample, and descriptive information of a child. Costs range from \$0.12 to \$1.50 per kit, depending on the items it contains and its level of sophistication.

Some states solicit corporate donations to purchase sophisticated ID kits, such as the *KidCare Photo ID*. Donors can place their logo on the kits as a form of advertising and public relations. Other states create their own, less expensive kits. Missouri has moved away from relying on fingerprints (which require the assistance of law enforcement officials) and provides parents with a "bite-mark plate." Using a small piece of Styrofoam, this approach ensures a dental record, even for children who have never gone to a dentist.

- **Education and Training.** Some state clearinghouses have purchased a child safety curriculum for students, *Kids and Company: Together for Safety*, developed by the NCMEC. The curriculum is then loaned to schools for use in kindergarten through sixth grade classes. Missouri received copies of an HBO program, *How to Raise a Street Smart Child* from the NCMEC and loans them to PTAs and other parent and community groups. Maryland's clearinghouse teamed with police departments and a non-profit agency to create a training package for law enforcement. It was funded with grant money and includes a video, a facilitator's guide, and an officer's field guide. The Maryland clearinghouse is giving a copy of the training program to all other state clearinghouses.
- **Expanded Websites.** Some state clearinghouse websites contain substantial educational information for parents, including prevention, recovery, and reconciliation information, especially for runaway situations. The Utah clearinghouse believes that websites are the most effective outreach vehicle for parents, given the clearinghouse's limited resources.



## **CONCLUSION**

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Nationally, an estimated 750,000 children under the age of 18 were reported missing in 2000. In Washington, information about missing children is recorded by local law enforcement and forwarded to state and national clearinghouses to assist in identification and recovery.

Between March 2000 and June 2001, 28,685 missing child reports were filed in Washington. Thirty percent of these reports involved children reported multiple times. During that period, 16,732 individual children were reported missing. Females were reported missing most often (58 percent), as were youth aged 15 to 17 (63 percent). Cases were closed on 51 percent of missing children within one week.

### **Utilization of the WSP Missing Children Clearinghouse**

The MCC becomes involved in a missing child case at the request of local law enforcement, parents, or other interested parties. Since 1985, the MCC has assisted in the recovery of 2,157 children (through September 2001). Between March 2000 and June 2001, the MCC was contacted for assistance in 171 cases involving 220 children. Over half of the requests were made by parents, and over half of the cases involved issues of custodial interference. Just under one-fourth involved runaways. One-third of MCC cases were initiated out-of-state.

### **DSHS's Role in Reporting Missing Children**

DSHS service providers are expected (and contractually obligated) to contact law enforcement, parents, and the DSHS social worker if a child runs away from a DSHS placement. Runaway children rarely self-refer to a DSHS facility, except in limited numbers to HOPE Centers. Since HOPE Centers opened, 17 youth have self-referred and no reports on their runaway status have been filed with the MCC.

DSHS does not directly report missing children to the MCC, but utilizes the same flow of information from local law enforcement to the MCC that occurs with any report of a missing child. However, the MCC cannot differentiate missing children reports initiated by DSHS from other reports. There is no way of knowing how often youth are reported missing from DSHS facilities or how long it takes for them to be recovered.

If there is legislative interest in increased communication and information regarding missing children who are receiving DSHS services, several options could be considered. The most feasible may be to require DSHS social workers to forward key identifying information to the MCC about children who run from DSHS placements, although this would require training and a new practice for a large number of social workers across the state.

## **Community Outreach and Public Education?**

Many governmental entities and the public appear unaware of the existence of the MCC and the assistance and services it provides to help identify and recover missing children. The MCC has one staff position to assist in the recovery of missing children and provide outreach and education. Training for law enforcement and outreach to schools and other community groups occurs, but on a limited basis. Regular meetings between the WSP and OSPI are mandated by statute, but have not occurred since a change in staff at OSPI.

Clearinghouses in other states have reported successes with some of the following outreach and public education strategies:

- Publishing the clearinghouse name and toll-free number on state publications.
- Working with libraries to include the clearinghouse in information and referral systems.
- Revamping the clearinghouse web page to provide more prevention, recovery, and reconciliation information, as well as immediate installation of photos of missing children.
- Using NCMEC materials and educational curriculum more extensively.
- Obtaining private sponsorship of outreach efforts, such as child ID kits.