# InFOCUS

# Strengthening System Responses to Youth Missing from Care

February 2026

## Introduction

Juvenile court professionals and child welfare practitioners often face the deeply troubling reality of a youth, once considered safe, suddenly going missing. Those practitioners recognize the risks youth missing from care can face including exploitation and other imminent dangers. There are many professionals, from child welfare agencies through juvenile and family courts, who recognize that those youth who are placed out-of-home often face tremendous and unique challenges. Helping these youth build hope and stability for the future, despite lives often marked by chaos and trauma, comes with formidable challenges. One of the greatest obstacles is persuading a youth to remain in out-of-home care, especially when they want to return home or go elsewhere, even if those environments are not determined to be in their best interest.

These circumstances may be further compounded when a youth in an out-of-home placement does not feel safe or genuinely welcomed by caretakers in that setting. In other words, the factors that can lead to a youth missing from care can be complicated and perplexing, though at the core, the primary concern should be for the youth's safety first.

When youth do go missing, there are often a multitude of community members and officials getting involved in trying to locate the missing person. Responses to such incidents vary widely across the country (National Center for Missing & Exploited Children, [NCMEC], n.d.) despite federal law 34 U.S.C. § 41308 directing law enforcement agencies to notify NCMEC of each report received relating to a youth reported missing from foster care, and the Preventing Sex Trafficking and Strengthening Families Act (42 U.S.C. § 671(a)(35)(B)) mandating that state child welfare agencies report a missing youth to both law enforcement and NCMEC within 24-hours of receiving information that the youth is missing.

Even so, in practice, the questions of when to report a missing youth, how to report it, and then the types of responses one may receive after such reports, vary widely as well, both within and across states and tribal nations.


### Overview

Each year, thousands of youth are reported missing from foster care nationwide, placing them at heightened risk of victimization, exploitation, and justice system involvement. Although federal law requires immediate reporting and coordination when a youth's whereabouts are unknown, responses and practices vary widely across jurisdictions, contributing to inconsistent protection and oversight.

For courts, incidents involving youth missing from care raise critical questions about placement stability, system accountability, and youth safety. Judicial oversight can play a key role in ensuring timely reporting, monitoring agency compliance, addressing underlying risk factors, and supporting prevention-oriented practices that reduce repeat incidents.

This brief examines national trends, common risk factors, and system responses, and highlights West Virginia's Child Locator Unit as a promising approach for coordinated, data-driven practice.


When a youth goes missing from care, risks for victimization and for committing law violations increase. Safeguards, automatic and open communication channels, and response protocols are needed to locate the youth and address unmet permanency planning needs that may have contributed to the youth's departure from care. Community and system responses to these incidents indicate the degree to which the safety needs of youth are recognized and acted upon. While it can be challenging to implement and sustain effective strategies to prevent departures or to intervene when a youth is missing, there are promising approaches that states and localities should consider.


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This *InFocus* provides an overview of the scope of the problem, associated risks and systemic responses, and highlights a case study from West Virginia, a state that has implemented robust strategies to locate missing youth and gather actionable data. One important goal of this brief is to equip and inform courts and local teams with applicable research and practical guidance to prevent youth from going missing from care, to respond effectively when it occurs, and to protect youth from further harm.

## Definitions and Criteria

A youth is considered "missing from care" when the youth's whereabouts are unknown while under the responsibility of a child welfare agency or placed in an out-of-home setting such as a foster home, group home, residential treatment facility, shelter, or secure environment. This term is intentionally neutral, avoiding assumptions about intent or blame, and emphasizes the youth's absence from a protective setting rather than a deliberate act.

Under federal law 34 U.S.C. § 11292 and National Center for Missing & Exploited Children (NCMEC) standards, any youth under 18 whose location is unknown to a parent, guardian, or agency is classified as missing, and agencies must report these cases to law enforcement and NCMEC immediately, without any waiting period (National Center for Missing & Exploited Children [NCMEC], n.d.).

The Child Welfare League of America's (CWLA) *Best Practice Guidelines: Children Missing from Care* reinforces this definition in practice, noting that youth may be missing due to running away, abduction, or administrative errors, and recommends using "missing from care" to reflect the protective context rather than punitive language (Julie Gwin and Eve Malakoff-Klein, 2005 ).

***The term "runaway" is widely used in federal datasets and research; however, it can be stigmatizing and fails to capture the complexity of why youth leave placements. For this brief, we use the term youth missing from care, while noting that official data sources often use "runaway" or "whereabouts unknown."***

## National Prevalence and Data Limitations

National prevalence data are limited due to inconsistent reporting, definitional differences, and undercounting across child welfare and law enforcement systems (Office of Inspector General, 2023a; 2023b). For example, one state's child welfare agency might classify a youth as "missing" only if the youth intentionally leaves a placement without permission, while another state uses "whereabouts unknown" for any youth whose location cannot be confirmed, even if last seen at school.

In contrast, law enforcement may only enter cases into the National Crime Information Center (NCIC) if certain criteria are met, such as suspected abduction. As a result, an incident of a youth missing from care may be captured in one system's data but not another, contributing to undercounting, a delayed response, and gaps in accountability.

Despite these limitations, available data provide insight into the scope of the issue. Historical Adoption Foster Care Analysis Reporting System (AFCARS) trends indicate an average of 6,500 youth missing from care at any point between 2010–2019 (Branscum & Richards, 2022).

More recently, the NCMEC assisted with 23,160 cases of youth missing from care in 2024 (NCMEC, 2025). In the same year, 1.3% of youth in foster care on September 30 were recorded as "runaway" (2,841) or "whereabouts unknown" (1,484) (Children's Bureau, 2025). While that percentage may appear small, it represents thousands of youths whose safety and custody status were unknown at a single point in time.

## Patterns and Risk Factors Associated with Incidents of Missing from Care

Research identifies recurring patterns and risks among youth who experience incidents of missing from care. These patterns can serve as indicators of heightened vulnerability shaped by system involvement, placement instability, and unmet needs. Key patterns documented in the literature are listed on the next page.

Research also suggests that youth missing from care face heightened vulnerability during periods of absence and after returning. Documented risks include homelessness, educational disruption, justice system involvement, and adverse physical and mental health outcomes.

Of particular concern is the increased risk of commercial sexual exploitation (CSE). Traffickers target system-involved youth due to pre-existing vulnerabilities such as prior abuse, poverty, and substance use (Gambon & O'Brien, 2020; Thompson, 2025; Franchino-Olson, 2019). This dynamic contributes to what researchers describe as "dual victimization" where youth removed from their homes for safety reasons experience additional harm while missing from care (Garcia et al., 2024).

| OBSERVED PATTERNS AND RISK FACTORS | |
|---|---|
| **AGE** | Youth missing from care are most often older adolescents, with average ages ranging from approximately 16 to 16.8 years (Lin, 2012; Branscum & Richards, 2022). |
| **BIOLOGICAL SEX** | Recorded incidents more frequently involve females missing from care (Lin, 2012; Branscum & Richards, 2022). |
| **RACE** | Certain racial and ethnic groups are more likely to be represented among youth missing from care, reflecting broader trends within the child welfare system. |
| **BEHAVIORAL HEALTH** | Youth missing from care exhibit elevated rates of substance use and emotional or behavioral challenges. Approximately one-quarter are identified as having an emotional disturbance, and roughly one-third entered care due in part to behavioral concerns (Branscum & Richards, 2022). |
| **PLACEMENT INSTABILITY** | Youth who go missing experience substantially greater placement instability, averaging nearly seven placements compared to fewer than three for their peers. Congregate care settings are associated with the highest risk of missing episodes (Latzman, 2019). |
| **REPEAT EPISODES** | Prior missing episodes are a strong predictor of future occurrences, suggesting cumulative risk over time (Bowden & Lambie, 2015). |
| **JUSTICE SYSTEM INVOLVEMENT** | Youth missing from care are more likely to experience delinquency referrals during periods of absence (Halemba, 2015; Sarri et al., 2016). |

## Risks and Harms Associated with Missing from Care

Research also suggests that youth missing from care face heightened vulnerability during periods of absence and after returning. Documented risks include homelessness, educational disruption, justice system involvement, and adverse physical and mental health outcomes. Of particular concern is the increased risk of commercial sexual exploitation (CSE). Traffickers target system-involved youth due to pre-existing vulnerabilities such as prior abuse, poverty, and substance use (Gambon & O'Brien, 2020; Thompson, 2025; Franchino-Olson, 2019). This dynamic contributes to what researchers describe as "dual victimization" where youth removed from their homes for safety reasons experience additional harm while missing from care (Garcia et al., 2024).

## Why Youth Become Missing from Care

Patterns observed among youth missing from care are reflected in research on why they disengage from or become absent from placements. Motivations are commonly described as falling into two overlapping categories: being pulled toward something and being pushed away from something.

- **Pull factors** include efforts to reconnect with family members, friends, or romantic partners; participation in social activities; and a desire for autonomy or a sense of normalcy.
- **Push factors** include negative interactions with peers or staff, restrictive or punitive rules, boredom, lack of meaningful relationships, or unsafe placement conditions (Crosland et al., 2018).
- In some cases, youth return to or seek out traffickers due to coercive trauma bonding and manipulation, further increasing risk while missing from care (Sanchez et al., 2019; O'Brien et al., 2017).

Many of these push factors are within system control, highlighting opportunities for prevention through placement stability, relational support, and trauma-informed practices.

## Federal, State, Local System Responses

Responses to youth missing from care operate across multiple system levels with interrelated responsibilities at the federal, state and local levels. Effective response depends not only on compliance with mandates, but also on coordination, consistent practice, and active oversight.

## Federal Level Mandates, Standards, and Infrastruture

Federal law establishes requirements for the timely reporting of youth missing from foster care. The Preventing Sex Trafficking and Strengthening Families Act requires state child welfare agencies to notify both law enforcement and the National Center for Missing & Exploited Children (NCMEC) within 24 hours of learning that a youth is missing from care. In parallel, 34 U.S.C. § 41308 directs law enforcement agencies to notify NCMEC of every report involving a missing youth from foster care. Together, these provisions are intended to ensure a rapid system-wide notification and coordinated response to locate missing youth.

With these standards in place, federal agencies also support implementation through technical assistance, model protocols, and funding opportunities aimed at improving reporting compliance, trafficking prevention, and system-wide coordination. These resources provide a framework for state and local agencies but rely on effective state-level operationalization.

There are also standards for reporting missing incidents to the Adoption and Foster Care Analysis and Reporting System (AFCARS) and the National Crime Information Center (NCIC) which could serve as the foundation for data collection and monitoring of the issue. However, inconsistent definitions and reporting practices across states limit the comparability and completeness of national data, contributing to gaps in prevalence estimates and trend analysis.

## State and Local Level: Policy Implementation and Practice

States translate the federal mandates into operational policies, specifying timelines, verification procedures, and reporting mechanisms. These policies define how frontline staff should respond when a youth is missing and how information is shared between agencies.

Some state and local agencies may employ a range of practice tools and response protocols to support adherence to the policies as well as timely and consistent response, including:

- Centralizing intake or hotline systems that trigger immediate notifications.
- Structuring search protocols and coordination with law enforcement.
- Trafficking screening tools and safety assessments.
- Debriefing interviews and service planning following a youth's return.

However, despite formal policies and procedures, practice varies widely across jurisdictions. Common challenges include:

- Inquiring about agency policies and response protocols.
- Issuing standing orders requiring immediate reporting, documentation, and follow-up actions.
- Monitoring agency compliance through regular case review.

## Court Role: Oversight, Prevention, and System Accountability

Courts play a critical role in ensuring that child welfare agencies comply with missing-from-care requirements. Judicial oversight may include:

- Inquiring about agency policies and response protocols.
- Issuing standing orders requiring immediate reporting, documentation, and follow-up actions.
- Monitoring agency compliance through regular case review.

Courts can also help reduce the likelihood of a youth going missing by promoting stability and addressing known risk factors, including:

- Prioritizing kinship and sibling placements when appropriate.
- Requiring risk assessments and Commercial Sexual Exploitation of Children (CSEC) screenings for youth identified as high risk.
- Encouraging placement decisions that account for safety, connection, and developmental needs.

Following a youth's return, courts can support recovery and system improvement by:

- Ensuring access to trauma-informed services and reviewing placement safety.
- Examining the circumstances surrounding the period during which the youth was missing from care.
- Requesting periodic (e.g., quarterly) reports on missing-from-care cases and patterns to identify trends, gaps, and opportunities for systemic improvement.

## Recommendations

Judges can play a proactive role in preventing youth from going missing and supporting recovery upon return by:

- **Encouraging youth voices:** Invite youth to participate meaningfully in hearings, ask about their placement experience, and ensure they feel heard. This helps identify early signs of dissatisfaction or risk factors for leaving care.
- **Considering placement:** Prioritize stability by approving placements that minimize disruption. Whenever possible, favor kinship care and sibling placements, as it may increase the likelihood of being pulled to those meaningful relationships or a setting more that feels normal to them.
- **Screening and assessing risk:** Require CSEC screening and trauma-informed assessments immediately after a youth returns from being missing. This ensures timely identification of exploitation risks and access to appropriate services.
- **Reporting oversight:** Request regular reports from agencies on missing-from-care cases and patterns, and issue standing orders for immediate reporting and follow-up actions.

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# Case Study: West Virginia

While federal law establishes clear requirements for reporting youth missing from care to law enforcement and the National Center for Missing & Exploited Children (NCMEC), states have flexibility in how these requirements are operationalized in practice. This case study highlights West Virginia's approach to responding to youth missing from care, with particular attention to how policy, centralized reporting, and a dedicated Child Locator Unit (CLU) work together to support compliance, coordination, and youth safety.

This case study also draws on a review of West Virginia child welfare policies governing runaway, missing, or abducted children; policies governing the CLU; publicly available annual reports and administrative materials, and a semi-structured interview with the CLU staff. These sources were analyzed to understand how responsibilities are defined in policy, how responses unfold in practice, and how the system tracks and monitors missing-from-care cases.

## System Context and Policies

West Virginia has been focused on understanding and preventing youth from going missing from care since 2019, when the Court Improvement Program (CIP) launched its "Missing from Care" initiative to collect statewide data and youth perspectives. Through interviews and analysis, the CIP identified common reasons youth run, such as unsafe or chaotic placements, fear of consequences, and desire for normalcy, and highlighted prevention strategies like improved communication and family engagement.

In 2020, the state passed House Bill 4415, further establishing procedures for reporting, documentation, verification, and follow-up. The legislation formalized processes for coordination across child welfare, law enforcement, and centralized intake, and supported the creation of mechanisms to promote timely information-sharing and accountability. As part of this effort, the state established both a Missing and Endangered Child Advisory System and a dedicated CLU within the former Department of Health and Human Resources.

The CLU plays a central role in operationalizing the state's response. Rather than assuming primary case responsibility, the CLU provides specialized support to child welfare professionals by verifying required reports, tracking missing-from-care cases statewide, assisting with risk assessment, and supporting locating efforts in collaboration with law enforcement and community partners. This structure allows continuity and expertise while preserving accountability at the case level.

Together, federal requirements, state policy, and the implementation of House Bill 4415 shape a coordinated system response designed to promote consistency, timely action, andsafety when youth go missing from care.

## Roles and Responsibilities Across the System

West Virginia's approach relies on clearly delineated roles across multiple actors:

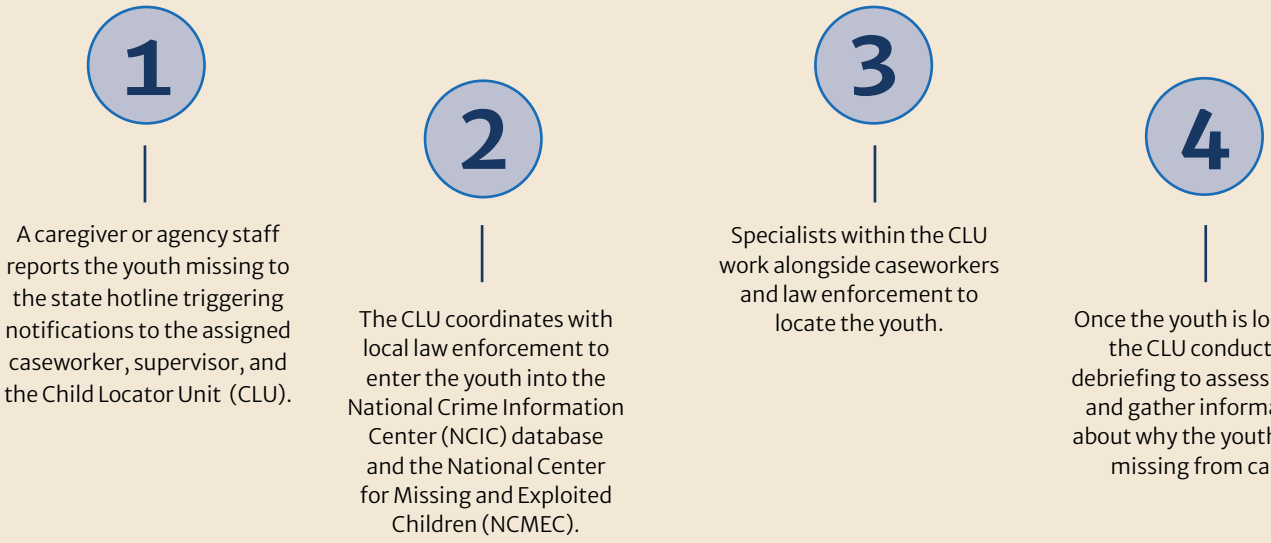
- **Caregivers and placement providers** are responsible for identifying when a youth is missing and initiating notification.
- **Child welfare case workers** retain primary responsibility for the youth, ensuring immediate law enforcement notification, documenting the incident in the youth welfare information system, and coordinating return and follow-up services.
- **Centralized Intake** serves as a single reporting hub, collecting required information and distributing notifications to relevant staff, supervisors, and leadership.
- **Law enforcement** enters missing children into the National Crime Information Center (NCIC) and assists with recovery efforts.
- **The CLU** provides specialized support by verifying required reports, tracking missing-from-care cases statewide, assessing risk, and assisting with locating efforts.

This structure creates multiple checkpoints intended to reduce delays, prevent missed reports, and reinforce accountability across the system.

## Process and Workflow

In practice, when a caregiver or county caseworker knows that a youth is missing from care (runs away, wanders away, or cannot be located), they call the statewide hotline and begin the process.

***Figure 1.*** Process overview for locating youth missing from care.




After law enforcement is notified and the youth is entered into NCIC, the caseworker reports the missing youth to Centralized Intake, triggering system-wide notifications and documentation requirements. The caseworker completes required entries in the comprehensive child welfare information system (CCWIS), while the CLU verifies that both NCIC and NCMEC reporting have occurred.

The CLU also assesses whether the youth meet the criteria for being considered "missing and endangered," based on factors such as age, medical or behavioral health needs, and known safety risks. Youth meeting these criteria, as well as those missing for more than a specified period, are assigned to a child locator to support active search efforts. These efforts may include coordination with law enforcement, outreach to family members and known contacts, and engagement with national partners.

When a youth is located, law enforcement and child welfare staff coordinate the youth's return to care or placement in a safe setting. Required notifications are made to close out NCIC and NCMEC reports, and the youth's return is documented. Post-return activities may include debriefing, screening for trafficking or exploitation, and reassessing the youth's placement and service needs.

## Strengths and Challenges

A notable strength of West Virginia's approach is its structured process and systematic data collection and transparency. The CLU process, as described above, is not limited to initial response; it extends through recovery and reintegration. The team collaborates with law enforcement, courts, and national partners to locate youth and ensure safe return. Even if reporting delays occur, the CLU remains committed to collecting complete data and conducting post-return interviews, reinforcing accountability, and using lessons learned to strengthen future responses. For a detailed checklist of policy elements and how each appears in West Virginia's framework, see Appendix A, page 9.

Since its inception, the CLU has collected and publicly reported data on youth missing from care by producing annual reports that document trends, demographics, and outcomes. These reports also include findings from the CLU's structured debriefing interviews with youth who have been missing for six or more hours or who have experienced repeated incidents of missing from care . The interviews capture critical information about precipitating factors, experiences while missing, and potential prevention strategies. These data inform both case-level responses and statewide reporting.

In addition, the CLU partners with the Marshall University Center of Excellence (COE) for Recovery to conduct an independent, annual analysis of Child and Adolescent Needs and Strengths (CANS) assessments completed within six months of a youth's return to care. This analysis identifies trends in the assessed needs of youth who go missing from care. Preliminary findings suggest that the youth who go missing most frequently are those with the lowest assessed needs.

These findings align with other analyses, including a latent class analysis of residential placements and a youth debriefing survey data, which indicates that some youth may be placed in residential settings when community-based prevention services may have been sufficient. Taken together, the findings may suggest that certain youth may be placed in restrictive or residential settings even though less intensive, community-based supports might have been more appropriate.

The CLU uses these findings to identify broad prevention opportunities and share them with partners, including the Court Improvement Program (CIP). These findings are used to support policy discussions, placement decision-making, and cross-system strategies aimed at reducing unnecessary residential placement and preventing youth from going missing from care.

Despite these strengths, interviewees identified persistent challenges related to communication, consistency, and training. Variability across counties, particularly in court involvement, law enforcement practices, and timelines for NCIC entry, can delay responses and complicate coordination. High caseloads, staff turnover, and gaps in training (exacerbated by temporary removal of mandatory online training) contribute to inconsistent implementation of protocols. The CLU staff also noted challenges in receiving timely updates from case workers and partners once a youth has been located.

Collaboration emerged as both a challenge and a promising practice. The CLU maintains a strong and improving partnership with NCMEC, which has significantly enhanced information sharing and responsiveness in recent years. However, collaboration with courts has diminished over time, with limited judicial engagement in missing-from-care cases in recent years. Staff also reported that many youths are missing while staying with known family or friends, which aligns with reported reasons for leaving care in many instances and may be addressed by finding opportunities for more family engagement as a prevention measure.

Finally, respondents emphasized that prevention requires attention to youth experience and system conditions, not just response protocols. Youth frequently report feeling "not normal" in care, constrained by placement rules and policies, and in some cases placed for reasons perceived as unnecessary (e.g., truancy). Interviewees identified improved communication, consistent statewide training, integration of automated technology (such as automatic NCMEC referrals), and greater emphasis on normalcy and youth voice as critical opportunities to reduce the risk of youth going missing and to strengthen system responses when it occurs.

## Conclusion

West Virginia's approach demonstrates how research-driven insights and legislative action can translate into a structured, statewide response to youth missing from care. The state has created a system that emphasizes accountability, collaboration, youth safety, and youth input. While challenges with consistency, communication, and prevention remain, the framework offers a strong foundation for continuous improvement through data-driven strategies, technology integration, and sustained attention to youth voice and normalcy.

## APPENDIX A
## Policy Checklist: Key Components of West Virginia Foster Care and Child Locator Policies for Youth Missing from Care

The following policy checklist evaluates whether West Virginia's Department of Human Services' Foster Care Policy and Child Locator Unit Policy includes the key components typically expected in a well-established and practical framework. Each item reflects an element that supports consistent, coordinated, and safety-focused responses when a child's whereabouts become unknown. While the policy contains strong structural components such as clear definitions, assigned stakeholder roles, and mandated timelines, it also shows areas where guidance is less developed. This checklist helps highlight these strengths and gaps by comparing the policy against best practice expectations.

| POLICY ELEMENT | IS IT PRESENT IN THE POLICIES? | NOTES |
|---|---|---|
| **Provides a clear policy definition of "missing from care."** | Yes | The policy defines "missing child" and "missing and endangered child", and outlines procedures for reporting and tracking such cases. It also references the "Missing from Care" screen in the CCWIS system, indicating a formal designation within the agency's data system. |
| **Specifies the various roles/responsibilities of stakeholders in responding to youth missing from care.** | Yes | The policy clearly outlines the roles of:<br>• Child Welfare Worker<br>• Child Locator<br>• Centralized Intake<br>• Social Services Manager<br>• Law Enforcement<br>• Cabinet Secretary<br>Each role has defined responsibilities in reporting, searching, documenting, and responding to missing youth. |
| **Sets timelines for notification and response.** | Yes | The policy includes specific timelines such as:<br>• Reporting to Centralized Intake immediately after law enforcement contact.<br>• Following-up within one business day by the Child Locator Unit.<br>• Initiating search efforts after 48 hours of youth being missing.<br>• Issuing advisory requests within 48 hours for endangered youth. |
| **Requires data tracking and reporting.** | Yes | The policy mandates:<br>• Using the Runaway Reporting Tool (Google Form).<br>• Documenting in the CCWIS system.<br>• Maintaining a Missing from Care Tracking Log.<br>• Debriefing interviews with summaries documented in CCWIS. |

| POLICY ELEMENT | IS IT PRESENT IN THE POLICIES? | NOTES |
|---|---|---|
| **Includes prevention services and/or provision of aftercare services.** | Partially | While the policy does not explicitly outline a structured prevention or aftercare program, it does mention:<br>• Debriefing interviews to understand why youth ran and to identify strategies to prevent future incidents.<br>• Communicating a youth's interests (e.g., placement changes or family contact) to MDTs or courts to support safe return.<br>• Continuing contact and service offers for youth who age out on runaway status. |
| **Includes mechanisms for monitoring compliance and responding to lack of compliance.** | Partially | The policy includes follow-up responsibilities (e.g., Child Locator Unit verifying steps taken by district offices), but it does not explicitly describe enforcement mechanisms or consequences for non-compliance. |
| **Describes the role of the Court.** | Indirectly | The court's role in the Child Locator Unit Policy May 2025 is indirect but meaningful. While the policy does not assign formal responsibilities to the court, it acknowledges the court as a key stakeholder in the recovery and reintegration of missing youth. Specifically:<br>• Debriefing interviews conducted after a youth is located may result in summaries that are shared with the court to inform future decisions and service planning.<br>• Communicating a youth's expressed interest in placement changes or family contact to the court of jurisdiction, including through initiation of a Multidisciplinary Treatment Team (MDT) meeting to identify options that support their safe return.<br>• Dismissing court jurisdiction for youth who age out while on runaway status, thereby concluding formal court oversight.<br>Overall, the court is viewed as a collaborative partner in addressing the underlying causes of runaway behavior and facilitating appropriate responses once youth are located. |

The National Center for Juvenile Justice (NCJJ) is a non-profit organization that conducts research on a broad range of juvenile justice topics and provides technical assistance to the field. NCJJ is the research division of the National Council of Juvenile and Family Court Judges (NCJFCJ).

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